

Irina Malenko

Soviética

Part 2. Belfast

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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 "flourishing" Europe, and you will see that it's not truth. The Soviet man is alive and well today! He doesn't measure life by money and personal success. He is compassionate; he lives in work and struggle...

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my Irish comrade T.P. Ennis (1947-2008)

Irina Malenko (October 2012)

***"I believe you and I love you so much, comrades!
Do you not understand me? "
(Choe In Su "Kim Jong Il, The People's Leader")***

¹ Our day will come! (Irish)

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 10. SLEEPING IN A HAMMOCK	4
CHAPTER 11. THE OLD WARRIOR WHO KNOWS NOT THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE	69
CHAPTER 12. IN THE MIDST OF THE SILLY SEASON	115
CHAPTER 13. I AM SOVIETICA!	178
CHAPTER 14. OOH-AH, UP THE RA!	274
CHAPTER 15. "SOMEBODY WOULD LIKE TO TALK TO YOU"	310
CHAPTER 16. PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT TASK	338
CHAPTER 17. I WANT TO BE IN THE SOVIET UNION	365
CHAPTER 18. "AN ALMOST MARRIED MAN"	415
CHAPTER 19. THE CHANGE OF FATE	469

Chapter 10. Sleeping in a hammock

*“Who kindly comes to every home
From a well-known children's book of old?
No scientist, no poet noble,
But won the hearts of all the world?
He's got astounding acclaim,
What is his name? Tell us his name!?”*
(“Buratino²'s Song”)

...Before my trip home for Lisa's birthday in the summer of 1999, I wrote a letter to an address in Dublin, which I found in the semi-legal Sinn Fein's newspaper. That letter contained a question how could I join their party. At that time it didn't bring any privileges, any elective posts in the Dail³, Stormont⁴ or the European Parliament. On the contrary, the party was still so persecuted that it could hardly be ranked as legal. Therefore I also did not advertise my intentions (and, of course, I did not tell Geoffrey, who looked as if he was getting diarrhea after only one mention of “*the boys*”⁵).

I received a very strange reply informing me that I could join the ranks of “Sinn Fein's Friends Abroad”. There was a special emphasis on financial support: it looked like these “friends abroad” were far from poor. Comrades, that's lovely, but I am not abroad! I am here! So I wrote to them again, but I didn't receive any reply to my second letter at all. I was not surprised: obviously, people in their position don't trust strangers. But my desire to learn more about them had not decreased, and not because of I was seeking some adventure. My life has already had more than enough “adventures” at that stage! I was just looking for a real comradeship. I wanted that feeling of comradeship, a feeling of belonging to a community. I had also gathered up so much anger during these years that only a person who himself knew the value of life could understand me. As I have already said, we shared the same enemies, especially after Yugoslavia⁶.

Yugoslavia became for me like crossing the Rubicon, after which my life had changed and I could not return to conventional living. I could no longer live a life where one cares only about oneself and one's family, a life of an animal that drags the bits and pieces that it gathered into its hole and doesn't give a damn about what else is happening around it. Many of my acquaintances do not understand this: they think that my “interest in politics”, as they call it, is just some ordinary hobby, like collecting stamps, something that can be turned off as the hot water supply in our house during the summer. They do not understand that for me there is no way back after Yugoslavia and all that followed it; and not because I wanted it to be so. I would gladly not think about all that garbage which is officially called “*freedom*”, “*market values*” and “*democracy*”, that hangs

² “Adventures of Buratino” by A. Tolstoy – Russian version of Pinocchio book

³ Irish Parliament

⁴ Local Parliament in Northern Ireland

⁵ The boys – a common name for the IRA volunteers among Northern Irish Catholic population

⁶ NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999

around the neck of the whole planet, like a rope's stranglehold. For me it what I am engaged in, is not "politics"; it is a struggle against all evil and injustice which are called "politics", do you understand? Joan of Arc once said: "If I don't do it, who will?" ... I cannot "stay clean" when there is so much mess around. Even if that dirt doesn't touch me personally yet.

When the ruins in Belgrade were still smoking, I decided to go to a Republican celebration of the anniversary of the unfinished Irish revolution: the Easter revolt of 1916 that had been suppressed by the British. Supporters of Sinn Fein are called the Irish Republicans (not to confuse them with the Republicans in America!).

At that time I had not been to any demonstration for at least ten years. And I had never been to a demonstration that was advertised on leaflets glued to the street walls in town. It was from these leaflets that I learnt, that one of the leaders of this party (I will call him simply Leader, for short) would be present at that demonstration. Of course, I saw him on Irish television and his name was very familiar for me, but this knowledge originated long ago in my childhood. On TV they usually showed him being viciously attacked by journalists after any explosion, which *the boys* had produced, but he refused to condemn those explosions, with amazing patience explaining why they had been carried out.

– What an attractive man! – my mum said when she first saw him on TV in Dublin, – Such a serious, thoughtful face... There is some sort of magnetism in him.

I remembered her words, and now I could acquire the autograph of this attractive man full of magnetism for her: I had just bought and read his autobiography, for a better understanding of life in the North.

The book gave me a painful impression. I could not even imagine that not that far from Dublin so many Irish people were still living in such inhumane conditions. And most of the Dubliners, who have got such a cosy life under their "Celtic Tiger", did not even think about their brothers' suffering! Moreover, it seemed that no one on Earth cared about them, and when they rose up to defend their rights, "*the international community*" – that is, NATO's variation of our "*all progressive humanity*"⁷ – condemned them in a chorus of "public scorn": "One, two: (all together) Shame on you! "

There was a bright spring sun shining that day, almost like Irish summer. Near the Dublin General Post Office – a historic building, where once the Easter risers fought (traces of bullets are still visible on its walls) – a decent-sized crowd had gathered, and it seemed to me that all the people in this crowd knew each other. Not far from there one could see some people busy reading newspapers: those on official business to keep an eye on such events.

I expected that the Leader would make his speech right away; that's what I understood from the leaflets. But he wasn't here; instead of him there was an amateur performance, which in the USSR we would have called "a literary-musical compilation". I was

⁷ "All progressive humanity" was a very common term in the USSR

impressed by one actor, who imitated one of the leaders of the Easter Rising: he even looked like that man. It was strange that the anniversary of the Rising was not an official holiday: after all, it could be considered the event from which the independent Irish State began. The fact that the anniversary was not officially celebrated confirmed to me that this State was still not as independent as it tried to appear.

The official part was over rather quickly, but the parade had just begun: from the centre of Dublin the gathering intended to march to Glasnevin, in the north of the city, where Republican heroes were buried. With inner excitement I walked in their crowd for the first time.

If I say that it was similar to our Soviet May Day or Revolution Day demonstrations then I will act against my conscience. No, it was not. At our demonstrations there was a celebratory atmosphere, but this one was covered in the spirit of harsh militancy. This was emphasized by the music, to the sounds of which we marched: flutes and drums gave this event the atmosphere which was typical only for the North of Ireland. One could feel that those people had nothing to celebrate, except for their own strength.

It was in the midst of these people that I felt for the first time such a feeling of concord, of closeness which I had never felt in all my years abroad, in any of the other capitalist countries, – the feeling of real friendship, not one where one drinks coffee together or shops together. Of course, they weren't my comrades yet, they didn't even know me. But I felt that these people would not betray and that they could be relied upon: somebody who was one of them was like a member of one big united family.

I looked at them, and it sounded in my head:

*“Leaden bullets in shower,
Woes in store for our land.
We have shouldered the burden
Of great hardship, my friend.*

*Right about us the civil war ablaze,
And we fight day and night.
In the field paths are many,
Only true one is right.*

*Don't you say, oh my mother,
That your lot is accursed,
Through tumultuous Russia
I am urging my horse.*

*And the red star shines over our fates
Not by chance in this war,
And to it we will swear
By our lives, evermore.*

*Raven black, stop your circling
O'er the steppe full of dole.
We are going to live on
For eternity whole!*

*If the thunder again strikes in the skies,
Casting fiery blades,
Say a word or just whisper,
And we'll come to your aid.”⁸*

The Leader was already waiting for us at the cemetery in Glasnevin. And again, it was the first time that I saw with my own eyes a very different attitude of people towards a politician. There was something very warm, almost intimate in the air when his people saw him. It was something very protective, from any external harm. For these people he was “ours”, “our guy”.

I had missed this feeling so much in the past years. I missed people on whom I could rely no less than on myself. I missed being with people with whom I shared the same ideals. I missed leaders whom you could follow both through water and fire. I looked at them and I envied this crowd, in a good way.

As it is customary, the bodyguards were surrounding the Leader, but it was obvious that they were ordinary people, not professionals. When he finished his speech, it seemed as if the whole crowd rushed to him at once. Everyone wanted to tap him on the shoulder, to tell him something. He had a good memory for names and knew how to speak with people. He was very patient and so each person who spoke to him, had a feeling that they were the Leader’s best friend, even after only a conversation of five minutes. He obviously had a talent for such things.

Seeing the pressure of the crowd, I became even frightened and decided that I was highly unlikely to get an autograph for my mother. But then suddenly I was overcome by a strange feeling: the same as before jumping into the water in a swimming pool from a diving board. Without even thinking of why I was doing it, I breathed deeply and suddenly ducked under the arms of the guards who surrounded the Leader, so suddenly that even they were scared. Luckily, there was nothing in my hands except for his book. I handed him the book with a pen. The bodyguards were fighting off the pressing crowd, and I bent down to his ear and asked him:

– Tell me, please, can I join Sinn Fein if I’m not Irish, but I do live here?

He looked up at me quickly with his brown eyes behind thick glasses.

⁸ Title song of the film “Elusive Avengers” (USSR) - Soviet popular movie (1966) about the Civil War in Russia

– If you live here, then of course you can. It does not matter if you are Irish or not. – He gave me back the book.

Now I had someone to refer to, I thought, if they continue not to reply to my letters. And I did want to become one of these people. I hadn't had any real comrades for a long time. I hadn't had the opportunity to be such a comrade myself to anybody for a long time.

I had completely forgotten that I had obtained an autograph just for my mother. Instead I felt that I finally found something connecting Ireland with my Soviet Union! This was the link that was missing in my life. The sad smile of that long-haired IRA volunteer Bobby Sands from our Soviet newspapers again stood in front of my eyes... A man who was a hero in my country and a terrorist for its enemies. And that this was a real enemy, I already had the opportunity to discover by myself, in real life: not only from reading books and leading articles of our Soviet "Pravda" newspaper. I was convinced by their bombs thrown on the peaceful Sudan, Afghanistan and Yugoslavia. By how happy they were to see our suffering and the destruction of our people, with the help of their best friends in our country: the reformers who had gone much too far from the CPSU. The ones who all their life had strenuously tried "to put on a red jacket", and now they cried out: "Please take that red jacket off me!"⁹...

And when I returned to Ireland after a holiday (I do not want even to think about how hard it was to say yet another goodbye to Lisa!), the first thing I did was to write another letter to the Sinn Fein office.

It cannot be that they won't answer this time. Now that He himself had told me that it was possible for me to join them!

... By autumn I had finally moved to the North.

Geoffrey rejoiced and mentally was already planning ahead. He needed to pass this year's practice, so, if he finds a place in Belfast, then rather than searching for a room there (Danny was already quite fed up with him by the end of last summer!), he'd better suggest moving in with me (he would pay me for the room, of course! At least, as soon as he would start getting his grant) And then he could travel to Belfast every morning.

He dreamed about it so much that he did not even notice that I was moving heavy furniture around on my own. It had taken him about forty minutes to realize it and to offer to help me to move a wardrobe and some chairs. "Poor girl, moving such heavy things on her own!" – was written all over his uncomplicated face. "Luckily, she has me!"

The house was great! There was such a beautiful view of the mountains, and there was plenty of room in the yard for a barbeque and to park three motorcycles – Danny's, Paul's and the one he would get.

⁹ A reference to Yeltsin's words "stop seeing me as a communist", while in fact he himself had chosen to make a career in the Communist party.

– Do you know what I dream about when I see these mountains? – Geoffrey asked with a dreamy expression.

I looked at him ironically.

– I do,- I said, unexpectedly to him. – You are dreaming of leaving the house at dawn when the mist clears, of climbing the mountain and of paragliding from the top! Did I guess right?

Geoffrey was impressed.

– How did you know? – He asked.

– I know you well enough, not just to guess that, but also to know that you will never do it and it will remain a dream for the rest of your life. Just like a trip on a motorcycle around the North, building a house from natural stones, and the reunification of Ireland – if it were up to people like you to decide it! Thank God that there are other people in the world, not only the Oblomovs¹⁰.

Of course, Geoffrey did not know who Oblomov was, but anyway, he was offended. How did I dare, not just to guess his dream, but also to destroy it with my sneers, with my cold confidence that he would never do anything to realize it? He was about to open his mouth to argue with me, when suddenly the inside of his nose started to itch, and he sneezed loudly. After sneezing about ten times in a row, we both realized that he had the flu.

It took me three days to get him back on his feet: after all, I was a graduate nurse, although a civil defence one. (Geoffrey boasted about it to all his friends, to whom he had introduced me as “the girl from the city where they make Kalashnikov’s”, not to mention that my surname was Kalashnikova too! After that, his friends began to respect him as if he himself held this gun in his hands, if only once in his life). Unfortunately, by Christmas I myself fell ill with the flu which I contracted from him.

To be honest, Geoffrey did not really want to nurse me for the rest of the holidays, to stand there ready with medicines and a thermometer. But that was OK; the main thing was that there was a TV set in the house. When it came to Christmas dinner and cake he conveniently got them from his mother, including a piece for me. It was good that his mother lived just across the road; Zhenya found a really good place to settle! Geoffrey still watched television until the morning, and every time I made an occasional appearance in the kitchen (to get a glass of water), he praised me and told me how clever I had been to find this house in such a suitable location..

I had been very patient with Geoffrey for a long time, but on New Year’s Eve, it finally came to an explosion. I told Geoffrey everything I thought of him. I even quoted an Irish song that he secretly liked to listen to (with headphones on, of course, so that no one

¹⁰ Oblomov – hero of a novel by I. Goncharov, famous for his dreamy laziness

could hear it): “*And Ireland, our country would be free long ago if all her sons were rebels, as Henry Munro*¹¹!”

– What do you know about Henry Munro? He was a Protestant, by the way! And do you know how he died? On the scaffold! So, is that what I am lacking to be a hero in your eyes?

Geoffrey was astonished, because a lot of what I had thought of him he did not even suspect. For example, that he was a lazybones. Or that it was because of people like him, because of their indifference to everything, that Ireland was still not united. How could I say this? In fact, didn't I know how dear the idea of united Ireland was to him? He even asked me once to buy him an Irish tricolor in Dublin, which still lies under his pillow in his hostel room. Every time, when he makes the bed, he pulls that tricolor out, admires it and dreams of a better future. Did I not know this? Is it his fault that none of the politicians could be trusted?

But I did not listen to him. When I got angry, many English words seemed to evaporate from my head, and my Eastern European accent became so strong... just like Anna Kournikova's accent! It seems that's what Geoffrey thought, when I painfully tried to translate into English Gorky's immortal lines about the stupid penguin, cowardly hiding its fat body in the rocks¹².

Dreams caused by the sound of my accent captured him so much that at first he did not even realize that by a fat penguin I meant him! Well, what a comparison!

Geoffrey slammed the door desperately. He did not want to listen to my words about him. He did not want to think if there was any the truth in them, even in proportion. He just did not, and that was enough! It was a holiday, after all. He just wanted to have a good time. What's wrong with that? Why does everything always need to be linked with politics?

The street was already getting dark. The public transport stopped working. I was upstairs coughing heavily. My temperature was close to 40. But Geoffrey did not feel guilty because after all, he had not forced me to look after him when he was ill! “Now let her lie alone there over the holidays, if she is such an insidious snake!” He will show me a penguin!

¹¹ Henry Munro (1758 – 1798) was a [United Irishman](#) born in [Lisburn, County Down](#). Munro was a linen draper, senior [freemason](#) and popular [raconteur](#) who became leader of the United Irish organisation in Down following the arrest of its leader Rev. William Steel Jackson on June 5. After the battle of [Ballynahinch](#) Munro was betrayed and captured, and was ordered to be [hanged](#) and decapitated before his own door. The sentence was carried out June 16 1798

¹² Maxim Gorky's “The Song of Stormy Petrel”, a short piece of revolutionary literature written in [1901](#) (“*The stupid penguin cowardly hides blubber in the rocks... only the proud stormy petrel soars bold and free over the grey sea froth!*”)

Without hesitation, Geoffrey picked up his backpack and ran out of my house. He was glad that at least, he had a place to stay. Of course, he was upset, he had planned to watch “Star Trek” on TV tonight and his plans have been completely cancelled; his mother would surely want to watch something else! – But he was too angry.

One millennium ended and a new one started...

This was the first time in my life that I could not even stay awake for New Year: I was feeling so bad that I took a lot of antipyretic and fell asleep at 9 o’clock in the evening. And was there any sense in staying up by the Christmas tree all night long on your own? I did not regret the parting with Geoffrey: I knew it would happen sooner or later. But, of course, I did not really want to spend the holidays on my own. Nevertheless, I could no longer stand this empty-headed creature near me and that was that: I have spoken my mind...

Despite the lack of regret about what happened, when I woke up the next morning, I felt bad in my heart: we have a saying that the way you meet the New Year will be also the way you spend it... Does this mean that for the whole new millennium I will just sleep and be sick?

In addition, the following evening I had to go back to Dublin to work. The fact was that I still had not completely moved to the North: I had not been able to find work in the North and therefore I continued to work in Dublin and came to my new house only for the weekends.

This situation was not pleasant: my mother and Lisa were going to join me in March, now I that had my own place where I could bring them (I was very proud of that), and most importantly I had got permission for permanent residence for my mum. This was after a Professor of Law at Trinity College (that’s how far I had to go in search of justice!) found me a European law article on the status of relatives of EEA citizens. I was happy to wipe Mr. Casey’s nose with this law article. But if things did not work out and everything stayed as it was, I would see my mother and Lisa only on weekends.

In September I left my rather comfortable basement in Dublin: firstly, because it was too expensive to pay for two dwellings, and secondly because I began to feel uncomfortable there. From time to time the landlady’s guests in the house blocked up the toilet pipes, and then the sewage flooded my modest garden, with the smell remaining there for a long time; the smell did not disappear even after the pipes had been cleaned. Also, I lived without tenancy rights after the renewal of my tenancy agreement and I felt this increasingly. When I was away, the landlord sometimes entered my flat, and he did not even bother to hide his actions from me. His excuse, he would say, was to see if everything was OK. In Soviet times, they did not do such breach of privacy even in a student hostel. I did not like his uninvited visits: could not he come when I was at home? I really could not stand it and remembering his English origin, I had picked up some Sinn Fein posters in the street and hung them on my bathroom door. After that his visits ceased quickly....

... In September, Geoffrey helped me move my things to the North; I rented a car for this, but I did not have a driver's license at the time, so he was the one who did the driving. For the first few months I slept on a mattress on the floor: I did not have my own furniture. I remember well Halloween night: the wind howled down the chimney, the rain lashed at the windows, and the neighbouring children knocked at the door, dressed up as monsters...

The move was a gradual process: bit by bit furniture appeared, even though it was second-hand, and I found a new job too, although unfortunately, just as before, it was located in Dublin. If you remember, I hated my previous company so much that I vowed not to return once I'd obtained a mortgage. The couple of weeks between the two jobs were filled with great nervous tension, but soon I started to work as a technical support agent in a well-known company that produced printers and copiers.

But new problems appeared such as where to live for the whole work week? I did not need much; I only needed a place with a bed and somewhere to take a shower. To pay for both a flat in Dublin and a house in the North was far too expensive for me, as I have already said. To travel every day from the North would be physically impossible (I would not get to work before 10 or even 11 o'clock in the morning). I tried to sleep in a hostel for a couple of weeks: in a room that was like a barracks with bunk beds, which was clean enough and with quite decent and interesting inhabitants (mostly young foreigners, traveling around the country), but it was impossible to sleep there: people came and went as they liked, as was natural in such a place. People banged the doors right next to your head, banged heavy backpacks; put the light on at any hour of the night, snored so loudly that the windows shook, and so on. It had its advantages: staying there was cheaper than renting an apartment, but it too was not without expense. I could not stand such a lifestyle for more than two weeks. I gave up and moved into a very small room, the cheapest I could find. This room was in a house with one of my new colleagues, a Frenchman who had just married a Chinese woman from Malaysia. The room was in a good new house, not too far from work (on foot about 40 minutes, or 15 minutes by bus). I actually just slept there, trying not to cook in the kitchen, and did not even sit in the living room, to avoid unnecessary expenses, such as paying for the cable TV. The Frenchman and his new wife did not know about my situation, and probably thought that I was just a miser. But I had no desire anymore to let anyone else know about my life. Life in this "free world" is just like being arrested in the American films: "Anything you say, can and will be used against you". If you show some weakness, nobody will help you; they would rather finish you off. People with problems (such as a disabled child) – this is just a "liability" here, nothing more.

I was very glad that I had managed to find a new job in just two weeks, but I was working now just to pay my bills and not for my own professional satisfaction. The company's office was huge, a real corporate realm, built specifically for this company in one of the Dublin suburbs, in the west of the city. It had an elegant dining room and a gym, different training courses and you could even acquire a new profession in the long term. But it was not the same as in my mother's Soviet factory: none of the townspeople,

not even relatives of the employees, could use this gym and other facilities. In this district of Dublin there was nothing except industrial parks and a huge shopping centre – the only “cultural” institution for the whole area, where local youth spent all their free time. Judging by the appearance and behaviour of these young people, one would say that the “Celtic Tiger” had passed them by...

We worked in shifts; the work was easy, our “team”, mainly people from the Netherlands, was OK. My new boss was Indonesian with a Dutch passport. He was given that job because he already had experience in team management: he had served in the Dutch army. And his working style was in accordance with this... My day began at 7 am, and I had no other choice but to walk to our industrial park: through the dark streets that were still unfamiliar to me, where I often stumbled on smouldering remains of cars stolen by local teenagers, which they set on fire after joy-riding. It was rather scary, and to dispel the fear, I began to sing aloud. “Bo por bai unda ko bo ke¹³”, “Warschawjanka¹⁴” and “Boldly, comrades, up!¹⁵” Often it was raining, and the wind would blow that rain straight into my face. My umbrella was often pulled out of my hands and turned inside out, no umbrella could survive in Dublin for longer than a couple months. In Holland, one could get to work by bike, but in Dublin there was such traffic (and the way the people drive!) that it was simply dangerous to your life. Also, there were no bicycle paths.

We worked under a huge glass roof, the walls were transparent, too, and all around there were green plants in pots, they even were going to install a huge fish tank. The huge office space was divided into sectors in accordance with the countries of Europe. Heated emotional conversations in Spanish were heard from one corner and slow, calm Finnish speech from another. I quickly made friends with some Italian girls, especially with a small girl called Adriana: with her glasses and sharp nose she made me think of Pinocchio, but she was still very pretty, this native of Turin. She was sharing a large Dublin house with her Italian friends and went to work driving her own little Fiat, which she took all the way from Italy. Naturally, when we met, I could not resist the old habit again – I tried to impress her with my knowledge of her country: Gianni Rodari, Adriano Celentano, Toto Cutugno, Ornella Muti¹⁶... Strange but true: I was the only one who talked about such things. The majority of the Irish people did not know anything at all about Italy (or any other countries, for that matter), except for lasagna and spaghetti Bolognese... Adriana was not so interested in Irish culture; she loved and knew classical music well, she read a lot of books and she came to Ireland only temporarily: to gain some experience to enable her to find a good job at home, where there was a strong competition for jobs.

That’s, in short, what my situation was like by the New Year.

My small northern town, which I saw only on weekends – so beautiful, so green during the summer – in winter completely died out. Most of the shops on Main Street were

¹³ “You can go wherever you want” (Papiamento) – from the song by “La Perfecta” band from Curaçao

¹⁴ Warschawjanka – famous Revolutionary song

¹⁵ Russian revolutionary song

¹⁶ Italian writer, singers and actress

closed for the winter. Incessant storms began on the sea. I have never seen any place in the world where a strong wind blew day and night for weeks – not in one particular direction, but it seemed in all directions at once. It felt as if the atmosphere above it was formed by some sort of bottomless drain. When it rained, it did not fall down from the skies, as in all other corners of the world, but horizontally: right in your face. No umbrella could stop it. Blue mountains that were just beyond the town worked as a natural barrier for both Southern Irish TV waves and for the clouds: the clouds would often hover over them for a long time. If it wasn't for these mountains, it would rain in town even more frequently.

Wet up to my ears, still sneezing and coughing (and inwardly swearing that I had to go anywhere at all in such a condition), that evening I got the last bus to Dublin (there were only 4 buses a day here!), already thinking how I would tell Adriana about my joyless holidays. Geoffrey did not even have enough conscience to at least bring me some aspirin. Pharmacies were closed and I had to ask my neighbors whom I did not know well yet for something to bring my temperature down...

When I reached Dublin, it was still raining, but less windy. It takes about 45 minutes from downtown to Clonsilla, depending on the amount of traffic jams in the city center. Nobody was at home when I arrived; only the dark windows greeted me. That was even better: I could go straight to bed without the whispering and muffled laughter that could usually be heard from behind the wall...

I opened the door, looking forward to crawling under a thick warm blanket. A letter for me lay on the table near the door: judging by the stamp it had arrived just before Christmas, when I headed to the North straight after work for the holidays... Letters seldom came to that address for me. Who was it from? I opened the envelope.

A small piece of paper with picture of the Sinn Fein's badge fell on my palm. Peter Connolly, the head of the local Party *cumann* (that's branch in Irish), informed me that they had received my letter (what, like 4 months after it had been posted?) and asked me to phone him to arrange a meeting...

I felt dizzy and my heart began to beat faster. I could hardly believe that it had really happened. With excitement I dialled Peter's number straight away, without even closing the door: strike while the iron is hot.

He answered the phone immediately, as if he was waiting for my call.

– Good evening! Yes, of course, let's meet today... it's too late, how about tomorrow? At 8:00? I'll pick you up, okay?

Do I have to say that I couldn't sleep after this? I spent half the night tossing and turning under a warm blanket, trying to imagine what they were like: these fighters for the liberation of their country whom I didn't know...

The next day also, all my thoughts were about that future meeting. I could not share with anyone my expectations associated with this meeting: to understand what I felt, you would have had to live my life. I did not even tell Adriana how the holidays were. It wasn't that important at all now.

...The closer it came to 8 pm, the more my heart pounded. As if I had a presentiment that this event would change my life forever.

Peter arrived exactly at 8 pm: so unusual for the typical Irish flexible attitude to time. My neighbors, the newlywed couple, exchanged a meaningful look: they understood in their own way the white Ford's appearance in front of our house, with a male driver whom I joined. Well, everyone judges others by their own standards...

Peter Connolly was born and bred in Dublin in a working-class family. Short, dark haired and blue eyed, he resembled a teddy bear.

– Let's go to my place, – he said – Our *cumann* has already gathered there. We'll have a chat, you will tell us about yourself and we will tell you what we are doing...

Apparently, Peter did not live far away from me. His wife Deirdre was very nice, but a little bit rough, like almost all Irish women. She was also a party activist and his right hand aid. I quickly learned from the conversations that this pair took on almost all the party work of that branch themselves. Apart from them the branch consisted of a few young people – almost teenagers (two of them were brothers, refugees from the North), a taxi driver and a bus driver. Peter had been recently fired from his job for trying to organize a union in his workplace. “The first whip is for the instigator,” says a Russian proverb.... Deirdre was temporarily the only bread-winner in their big family, but she did not reproach him even once. She worked in a bookmaker's office.

The meeting began. We were drinking strong tea brewed in the Irish fashion: with milk, and Peter and Deidre's three children, who apparently were allowed from an early age to get used to the political activities of their parents, were running around us.

For me it was a novelty to hear about the life of the local people, and what their problems were: because I was one of the foreign workers, with almost no daily contacts with the locals. Especially with the local working class and the unemployed, of which in this area there were many: because our Irish colleagues at work came from very different social strata. Migrant workers like myself took up almost entire housing estates in Clonsilla (many affluent Irish bought second homes here as an investment and housed us in these houses, so that we paid their mortgages for them) – and yet, we did not come in contact with the local residents, we lived there as if in a parallel dimension. Except for our landlords, of course, but even them we only saw when they came to collect the rent. We did not even know about the attempts of our Irish neighbours to create unions in the workplace: our own employers (mostly U.S. companies) from the first day of our employment encouraged us to believe that in Ireland even to talk about a union was a taboo. When we had problems at work, if several people agreed to talk to the employer

together about their grievances, the employer only spoke to each of us individually, even when we insisted for him to accept us as a group...

Local residents were suffering from the rampant drug trade in the area; the dealers often came right to the gates of local primary schools. They also suffered from carjacking and other local forms of hooliganism that was rooted out in Stalin's USSR by secondary school children themselves. But in Ireland there were no followers of Timur¹⁷, and everybody was out for himself. Except for Sinn Fein members who, it seemed, lived by the motto "One for all and all for one!" They were the only ones who did care how people lived.

The police would respond to the calls from west Dublin with reluctance. Now, if something happened somewhere in Ballsbridge or Dalkey¹⁸... But here – who cares! So what if one slum hood beat up another or stole his car? Aren't they supposed to live like this, after all? You are only looking for troubles if you intervene. That seemed to be the Gardai¹⁹'s attitude, and the desperate people had no choice but to seek assistance from Sinn Fein.

My new friends discussed the feasibility of using "the Belfast Method" in west Dublin. In Dublin, too many areas were completely out of any social control, and increasingly the people's voices were heard to say that it was time "to deal with the hoods the Belfast way." That was when I heard about this for the first time

So, how do the residents of some areas of Belfast deal with their local hoods and drug dealers in a practical absence of police involvement? The methods that they employed were, let's say, unorthodox: this is a severe place to live! But it was the only thing of which hooligans and dealers were really afraid.

... This happened in the heart of Belfast, in the middle of broad daylight on Friday afternoon. 38-year-old Paul Daly parked his brand-new blue "Peugeot" in front of the house of a relative on Stephen Street,²⁰ which at that hour was full of people doing their shopping for the weekend. Daly was accompanied by his girlfriend and 11-year-old daughter. When at 3:55 he left the house, armed men in masks rushed him from all sides... Local residents heard a dozen of shots and a desperate woman's scream.

... Daly's body, full of bullets holes, was left lying beside the open door of his car. His girlfriend and daughter were not even injured.

¹⁷ Hero of Arkady Gaidar's book "Timur and His Squad"(1940) The Timurite movement or Timur movement (Тимуровское движение) was an altruistic volunteer youth movement in the Soviet Union promoted by mass youth organizations of Little Octobrists and Young Pioneers. The participants in the movement were called Timurites. The idea of the movement was borrowed from the popular novel for youth *Timur and His Squad* by Arkady Gaidar. The youngster Timur and his squad clandestinely did good deeds: helped the families of the Red Army soldiers and combated the local gang of young hooligans headed by Mishka Kvakin.

¹⁸ Affluent suburbs of Dublin

¹⁹ Gardai Siochana – Irish police force (meaning "Guardians of Peace" in Irish)

²⁰ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/6069848.stm

The murder of Paul Daly was the second murder of some of the biggest drug dealers in Northern Ireland in 2 weeks. Another drug dealer, Hansr O’Kane, of whom residents of Derry had been complaining for a long time, was killed in a similar way²¹, right at the doorstep of his house. There had previously been an attempt on his life, so he had installed a very powerful house alarm, transforming his house into a real fortress. But it did not help him. His murder was well planned: those who executed him in the name of the community were aware of his every step... Nobody came to help O’Kane when he was left lying on the ground, badly wounded. Even his own relative, who ran out of the house hearing his screaming, waited until he stopped breathing before calling the ambulance...

Northern Ireland newspapers were full of similar reports nearly every day:

“... A drug dealer shot through six times.” “... Jim Lismore, the father of two, was shot through both hands, feet and elbows during a paramilitary style attack...”

Jim Lismore, as we see, was lucky; the vigilantes decided to spare his life. Apparently, his crimes against the community were not as severe as those that of O’Kane and Daly.

Who executes these criminals on behalf of the community and why is it useless to contact the police in Northern Ireland if you are being harassed by the local hoods, drug dealers, hijackers and car arsonists?

... When a gang of loyalist thugs once again attacked the homes of inhabitants on Bombay Street – in the Catholic parts of Belfast along the local “Peace Line”, a kind of local “Berlin Wall” separating the two communities from each other – the local residents called the police, as any sane person in any normal country would do. However, the police arrived at the place of the incident only when the thugs had already long fled the scene of their crime, even though the site was nearby. In response to questions about why they did not come straight away, the chief “polizei”²² of West Belfast said that his officers could not come earlier because... “they were on their tea break!” I’m not kidding! He said this without even blinking.

Therefore, if somebody in the North makes your life miserable, for example, some local thug smashes your windows, throws paint-bombs at the walls of your house etc. after you commented on his behaviour – you first need to figure out is he a Catholic or a Protestant. In the South, where such a religious-political division doesn’t exist, it does not really matter.

– In the North it is even very important, Peter explained to me, for this to be sorted out you’ll have to talk to *the Boys*. But they only work with their own in order to avoid unnecessary clashes. If it is a Catholic thug, you need to ask our boys. If he is a Protestant – the Loyalists... It really helps! No one wants to end up with a bullet in his knee... In

²¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/1289208.stm

²² Policeman (German)

most cases, after even the first warning by *the boys* –they will not listen to any excuses; they’ll just say, “Hey you, leave this house alone. If you don’t, we know where to find you” – and your “soulmate” will be all meek.

The effectiveness and simplicity of their method was amazing.

So this was where I first heard that the IRA actually works in their community as the “people’s militia”. Foreigners usually associate this organization with bombs, explosions, Kalashnikovs, and the like. And I was proudly told that even in the poorest districts of Derry, where unemployment often reached 70% (!), there were virtually no drug addicts and no drug trafficking at that time. Thanks to the “guys,” – the IRA volunteers.

If someone starts to sell drugs, steal cars, vandalize property in the area, their first move is to call him up for a warning conversation. If he continues, he’ll be beaten with baseball bats, often with nails stuck into them... They’ll break his legs. Depending on the severity of the crime, the next stage could be a shot in each knee – so that the offender could be lame for life, and everybody would be able to see from a distance whom are they dealing with. If a whole family behaves asocial and prevents their neighbours from living peacefully (this happens too), people will organize a march on their house, set up pickets around it – and eventually force them to leave the area. If all this does not help, the offender will receive an official warning letter from the IRA: to leave the country within 24 hours. If he does not obey that, no one will guarantee his life. Usually, they prefer not to tempt fate and leave immediately. Finally, there is an extreme form of punishment: the highest grade of social protection, the death penalty...

Local residents warmly welcome this initiative as they believe that in the absence of a proper police force the “people’s militia” is necessary as a guardian of peace in the area....

Weeping mothers of thugs and drug dealers periodically appear on Northern Irish television. “My boy did nothing wrong! He is such a nice kid!” – they usually say into the camera, while their “little darling” stares at you from the screen from his hospital bed with his angel eyes, with bullet holes in both knees and bruised all over...

“... Well, I bet he didn’t!” – grins a Northern Irish TV viewer. “We know this kind of guy only too well! He was torturing the whole area for half a year. Finally got what he deserved...”

Paramilitaries often call the ambulance in advance, even before the shooting. On average Northern Irish ambulances in Belfast alone get about 6 such calls per week. A person who is called up for punishment knows what fate awaits him in the hands of people’s vigilantes, and he often gets drunk beforehand, in order to be not so frightened... Wounds depend on for how long the vigilantes want to nail the punished to the bed – and to crutches. The most frightening punishment is considered to be what they call a “crucifixion” – which includes shooting of the palms of both hands, the feet and knees. There is also the “50: 50” – one shot in the back, where the offender has only a 50%

chance that he will be able to walk afterwards. “Barbeque mix” – shots in the knees, elbows and shins... Mostly bullets from 22 calibre handguns are used for these shots. If this happens at close range, it often results in amputation of the limbs...

... Under bourgeois “freedom” and “democracy”, as is well-known, criminals and offenders always have “human rights” (that is, if their crimes are not directed against the authorities). But their victims are far from having such rights! Or, at least they have much fewer rights than the perpetrators... That is exactly what this Northern Irish folk initiative – of those who despair for their life – is trying to change.

“This is just an extreme reaction of the people to the fact that there are asocial elements among them for whom social norms do not exist.... Asocial behaviour demoralizes the community, but “punishment beatings” are not the solution to these problems... Problems cannot be solved as long as social alternatives are not found, until complex social and economic problems are resolved, as well as the issues around the functioning of the police” – stressed the Leader when he talked about this.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t within the power of the “people’s militia” to change the social and economic situation of their community: for that, its political wing was fighting. Well, so what then, do you just sit with your hands folded, chanting nice slogans like the Trotskyists, and wait for the revolution to fall from the sky? These people have tried as best they could to secure a semblance of decent life for the vast majority of the population of their working quarters.

A leader of the loyalist paramilitaries, Billy Hutchinson, also emphasized that to deal with *hoods* really should have been the work of the police. It is another thing that the police weren’t really doing it.... “If you are the leader of the local paramilitaries, who have always defended their people, and a woman comes to you and says that she has been raped, and someone else says that his house was robbed, the paramilitaries, of course, are going to say: “We’ll sort them out” and believe me, they will! The police won’t deal with it, being afraid to break the “human rights” of criminals. So it is best to outsource it to the paramilitaries!

It was a very different time from now. A time when Sinn Fein activists in the Republic of Ireland were automatically blacklisted, fired at the earliest opportunity from their work, haunted everywhere by the secret services; and on the streets old grannies, after being fed with establishment newspapers, called them “child killers”. That’s what Peter and Deirdre Connolly had been through. By the time of the first party meeting in my life, they already have been in the ranks of Sinn Fein for 11 years, throughout the most difficult time for the party. “Sometimes you would be sitting at home, cradling your baby, and under the window a police informant would be lying and listening”, – Deirdre told me. Modern bimbos of both sexes who seem to have been admitted into the party ranks just for decoration, or maybe because they did not ask too many questions – those who know how to make beautiful speeches about human rights so well and are most concerned at

how to look better on TV – they have not the slightest idea about those times. Even I have experienced only just a tiny bit of those times...

This does not mean that someone asked me to pick up a baseball bat or a gun and go out with him “on the road”: the party had many other pressing issues to deal with. Almost completely blocked in the Irish media (at one time there was even a special law prohibiting the Irish media from giving voice to any representative of the Irish Republicans), the party has sought a way to convey to people what it really stands for. The words “socialist republic” in its program were almost anathema in deeply conservative Catholic Ireland. But Peter knew what he was talking about, and none of the priests could deceive him as to what socialism is really all about....

We had to bring leaflets around the quarter explaining the party’s program and reporting on its activities and local initiatives. Peter and Deirdre published a local newsletter all by themselves. Our task was to sell the party newspaper. And in Dublin both of these tasks involved some risk –the stigma, in the first place, and the fact that you would be blacklisted, just like Peter was himself. But in some places you might have even get a smack on the neck.

Peter and Deirdre with their modest forces conducted a survey in the neighbourhood: what were the locals truly concerned about and what action they should take on this. No “establishment” was ever interested in this, except for maybe a month before the next elections. On the weekends Peter organized and conducted discos for local children: to keep them away from drug dealers. He organized a sports club for them at the local abandoned church. And he did all this not because it was his” job” – it was a calling from his heart. Before I had only read about such selfless and sincere service to the people in capitalist Europe in books. And even then, it was in our Soviet books...

Do I need to explain to you how inspired I felt in the company of such people? They questioned me about my past and my opinions: without the slightest pressure, in a very friendly way. And I was unanimously accepted to join the local *cumann*. That evening I flew home as on wings!

Meeting these new friends was the only outlet in my life. We met once a week, and I eagerly waited for Peter to pick me up. Those were the happiest moments for me: when he was coming for me and when he was driving me back home after the meetings. It was just a total of half an hour a week, but we had time to talk about everything: about the North, about the IRA, about the international situation, about Ken Livingstone, about the Soviet Union... In between those two conversations – on the way to the meeting and on the way back – I was leafleting and canvassing in the company of my new comrades, under cover of dark nights...

... Shortly before mum and Lisa were about to come to live with me I got a call from an employment agency that still had my details in their database.

– I have a great position for you! – the recruiter suavely told me.

In general, I was quite content with my job at that time, and so I talked to her with little enthusiasm. The only thing that interested me was to find a job closer to my house in the North! The position which she offered me wasn't any closer to the North – on the contrary, the office of the bank that was seeking a credit controller with knowledge of Dutch was right in the heart of the city, closer to my old apartment in Rathmines. But that job had a different advantage: it was a night shift position! I wouldn't need any place to spend the night in Dublin (and during the day I could go home and sleep, so I thought). And – absolutely wonderful – it had a work schedule that you would work 7 nights for 9 hours per night, and then you would have 7 days off. It was hard to believe in such luck. This meant that every second week I would be able to be home with my family. The salary offered was even higher than my salary at that time.

– But I have no financial experience! – I said honestly.

– Oh, that doesn't matter! If they'll take you, they'll teach you everything.

So I decided to try my luck. I wasn't especially hoping for anything and therefore behaved naturally in a strange role-playing game on the phone, in which an unseen client eagerly tried to convince me to allow her to spend more money than was limit of her credit card. But no matter how she screamed at me (by the way, she did it very naturally!), over the years I have hardened on the phone to such a degree that it did not work on me. I have developed an elephant hide against all curses. And I politely but firmly declined her request, just as my role required.

– Well? – the recruiter who coached me for this role asked me after my interview (although I'm sure she was listening to our conversation too).

– Where did you find such a talented actress for the role of the client? – was the only thing I asked.

– Well, it is really some actress... – the staff responded with weird smiles. Why they had such a reaction I only realized later.

Perhaps it was because I was not particularly trying hard that the interview went so well. And I was offered the position.

There were just 3 weeks left before Lisa and mum's arrival, and my finances sang love songs²³, as they say – after purchasing three airplane tickets (I was going to pick them up as mum alone wouldn't be able to handle Lisa on the journey). And I decided to take a desperate step: to work those three weeks in both places: in one place during the night and in the other during the day....

Of course, I could not do it for the first week because the bank wasn't going to train its new employees at night. I had to call in sick at my work number for that week. I went out of the house as on the prowl in the morning so that my French neighbor wouldn't blurt out to anyone that I was not really sick....

The training went on with some fun, and here I finally met that mysterious actress face to face! It was Margaret from Australia: a healthy coarse aunt who laughed in a loud bass (among bank employees there was a rumour that she was a transsexual: which almost all of us began to believe when she had sent herself a bouquet of red roses at the office on Valentine's Day). She really was an extraordinary person, if only because she taught us about banking, while she herself did not have any special education in this field. In Melbourne she had had a small restaurant which went bankrupt (which already shows how she handled her own money, right?). After this she left with her longing dreams of entrepreneurship and went to look for a job in a local bank .. They quickly assessed her acting ability and made her responsible – not for finances, but for training of the new staff. She was training us for a job in which she herself had not worked a single day...

Once again, life put me face to face with the Dutch. My co-worker was a Dutch Indonesian called Ingrid: one of those Indonesians who claim to be more Dutch than the Dutch themselves. If I recalled my ex-husband from time to time, Ingrid did not talk about anything else but hers. Her ex-husband was Irish, she once lived here, and now she had returned to this country, as she expressed it, “to wipe his nose.”

– Let him envy where I work!

Indeed, the bank's name was so famous that quite a few idiots were jealous of us. At work, we ate free lunches: the leftovers from management, cooled off and already hard delicatessen. We were promised that within six months we would have the right to take a loan from the bank. For now they allowed us to use a credit card, with a small credit limit.

During the training, I learnt a lot for myself what was useful from a purely practical point of view. For example, what do the banks pay attention to while processing the applications for credit cards? There was an entire defined scoring system: so many points for living at the same address for more than 3 years, so many for owning your house, and so on. Very useful to know when you apply for a loan or a credit card yourself – even from another bank! Or that if a customer who has taken a bank loan went to another country, the bank is virtually powerless to actually recover the money: international processes would cost it an arm and a leg, so it is easier and cheaper to simply write off

²³ Russian expression – “finansy poyut romansy” – “finances sing romances”, meaning money problems

the debt as a loss, of course, if it is not millions. Clients do not know that, and the bank struggles to intimidate them to pay: sending them letters, spending hours on the phone. But in fact it is powerless: I saw with my own eyes every night how my colleague phoned up a client in Australia, trying to intimidate him, after he emigrated taking with him 30,000 pounds of a loan. The client each time found new excuses and openly took the bank by the nose. My colleague dialled his number every night again with a sigh, just because she was supposed to do it. She intimidated him languidly, without enthusiasm. You could feel that she herself was already fed up with doing it. In my opinion, both sides realized that the bank money's was gone for good. If I were in the client's place, I would have just changed my phone number. Listening to her conversations with him, I did not feel sorry for the bank, because I saw how much profit it was making from other clients...

To forgive temporary spending beyond the budget limits was allowed for those who could be classified as "big spenders". Such a client could be forgiven even for delays in paying the bills, if he paid them, albeit with a delay, but regularly. We were told basically that we should tremble in admiration for customers who spend our annual salary at once on purchases in a wine shop. When we were told about these customers, we were automatically expected to show this admiration. But for me, such waste of money and showing off could not produce anything but disgust; also, I am not accustomed to tremble for anyone (except, perhaps, for someone I was much in love with!). "We are not slaves, slaves are not we²⁴", remember? To talk to somebody politely and to tremble in fake admiration are two quite different things.

After working at the bank I find it funny to read on the Internet how some compatriots complain that no bank would give them a loan when they had nothing to eat, but all the banks were vying to offer loans to them as soon as they found a well-paid job. A bank is not a charitable institution. It gives something only because it hopes to get back even more from you. That's all that interests the bank. Again, as that Jamaican gangster from the movie "Dancehall Queen" said: "*When I make an investment, I want to see returns*". What you have nothing to eat, it's your difficulties. This is not the Soviet Union with its mutual-aid funds. A man has never been and will never be a friend, comrade and brother to another man under this system. Otherwise, this system simply cannot exist.

Working the night shift has its own specifics: although you get a lot fewer calls, they call you at night when there are problems with payments by cards, mainly in some seedy places (such as a brothel). Many customers in this case are also "tipsy", and you need outstanding nerves in order not to lose your temper with them. You can learn many interesting things about the customers, looking at the computer to see how they spend their money. That would be an ideal place of work for our marriage scammers! Because from the bank computer you can find out, among other things, not only the client's finances, but also if he is married or not, and his address and phone number... Isn't it a good plot for a Hollywood thriller?

²⁴ Phrase from the 1920s ABC books to teach illiterate adults during the alphabetisation campaign in the USSR

The training period passed quickly, and we immediately started to work. On the night shift there is no one to ask something, except for other colleagues (there were only three: one on the English line, one on the French line, and myself); the boss isn't around either. Only in extreme cases – if it is about a very large sum, and you are not sure whether to authorise it or not – were you allowed to make a phone call to the mobile phone of the on-duty manager and wake him up for advice.

The first week I was most struck by the fact that our English-speaking colleague – a young Irish woman who was highly appreciated at work for her *real English accent* (she was born and grew up in an Irish family in England), – worked the night shift, when she was seven months pregnant! In the Soviet Union labour laws prohibited pregnant women from working on night shifts. When she went home by car in the morning (she lived quite far away from Dublin, in Kildare), her eyes were literally closed from tiredness. It was a miracle that she didn't crash somewhere on her way home!

We worked from 9:30 pm to 7 am, with a break of half an hour. At 11 o'clock we ordered a take-out dinner at a Chinese restaurant – with delivery to the office. Until 2 o'clock it was still bearable, but after that you felt gradually growing prostration, to such extent that you'd try anything, just in order not to fall asleep: one browsed the Internet, although it was not encouraged in the bank, walked around the office in circles looking out of the window, drank a lot of instant coffee from the machine... There were very few calls, but sleeping, of course, was not allowed. However, all depended on how much we trusted each other: another woman on the English line, for example, knowing that I and my colleague, the Belgian Placide, would not squeal on her, brought a sleeping bag to work, spread it out between the tables and fell asleep on the floor with her headphones on, in case a call came through. This woman also had another effective means of staying awake: singing. She could sing for hours the Irish folk song "Carrickfergus": long and sad. Unfortunately, she knew only the first line – "*I wish I was in Carrickfergus...*" and repeated it until we went blue in the face! (The day shift was even worse: according to Ingrid, there was an atmosphere of total surveillance and squealing: about who went to the toilet how many times, who dared to read a newspaper between the calls, etc....)

After a while I also started to bring a pillow with me: just in case. Placide kept himself awake by phoning his friends in Chile at the bank's expense and chatting with them for hours! It couldn't be that the bank didn't know about it: they certainly got astronomical phone bills! But Placide got away with it: it was very hard to find French speakers for this job in Dublin.

The worst thing we had to do was overtime: if one of our colleagues from the morning shift was late, we had to stay on the phone until they showed up, while consciousness was literally leaving you, that's how sleepy you were... This overtime wasn't paid either.

I do not know how I survived those two weeks at 2 jobs. You were paid two salaries, but you slept less than 3 hours a day... Right from the night shift I took a bus across the city to my other job; having finished there, I galloped home where I slept for 3 hours to the

minute, like Stirlitz²⁵, then jumped up and ran to the bus – again for the whole night... But at least, I earned back the money that I spent on those plane tickets...

I only could relax a bit when I started a free week at the bank: after 7 working nights. For some reason, the bank's shifts were not Monday through Friday, but Wednesday to Tuesday, so that to get proper sleep even on the weekend was impossible: on my working Saturday, I went home to the North, but I still had to wait an hour for a bus at the bus station, trying not to fall asleep, which was almost beyond human power. I nearly had to hold my eyes open with my hands!. As soon as I got on the bus, I fell like into some black hole and I nearly missed the stop where I had to change buses in order to get home... I could barely walk home from my bus station, staggering slightly like a drunk. Once inside, I fell like a block on a mattress and slept till five in the evening. At six my bus back to Dublin was leaving, and I managed to get to the office just over half an hour before my next night shift. Sunday was even worse, because the first bus left for the North only at 9:30 am....

So, the following Tuesday was a real treat for me! As soon as I got home to Dublin after the working day in job number one, I immediately fell asleep without undressing and slept until the next morning (and even then I was only able to get up with the help of an alarm clock!). After this working just one shift seemed to me simply like paradise.

But on Wednesday, I couldn't have a proper rest after work: I had to go with my colleagues from my work number one to a meeting with the Dutch engineers who came to repair our equipment and invited our whole department in the evening for a dinner in the city centre, in a small restaurant which for some reason was called "Odessa". Even though there was nothing Odessa-like there at all.. Probably it was just a beautiful word for them. I really do not like corporate events: in my opinion, the fun that reigns there is forced, and the most unpleasant thing is to look at your colleagues when they get drunk and start to do foolish things. After that, it is very difficult to take them seriously at work. By that time instead of one boss – the former Indonesian-Dutch army corporal – there were already two bosses in our department; never before have I seen such situation where there was not one team leader but two in a department! Of course, that didn't do any good. Marlies, as our second team leader was called, had a totally different style of leadership than that of our first team leader, and the employees immediately began to use it: if any of the team leaders made any comments on their work, they referred to the instructions given by the other team leader. The atmosphere in the department became increasingly unmanageable.

But it was not possible to avoid this dinner: on this, both team leaders have agreed...

I had my party meeting that same evening, and I had already missed one because I had worked the night shift the week before and I did not want to miss this one. But that wasn't up to me. To put it mildly, the team leaders would not have understood if I had told them that I had a Sinn Fein meeting instead of that dinner.... So I decided that I

²⁵ Hero of a famous Soviet WWII espionage film, "17 moments of spring," who was able to sleep for exactly 20 minutes and to wake up then without any alarm clock.

would sneak out quietly immediately after dinner. Just when they would all be “in the right condition” and would not even notice that I had disappeared. I told Peter that I might be late and explained what was happening.

– No problem, I’ll give you a lift from town! – He suggested, and I was very glad, because if I would have waited for the bus, I think I would have managed to arrive only towards the end of the meeting. So, that’s what we agreed.

The Dutch engineers who came to our office made a good impression on me: not only by their professionalism but also by their friendly attitude toward us, who were just beginners in this printer-copier business. They explained clearly and detailed to us even fairly complex things. And some of them apparently even had a sense of humour! Perhaps, this is how Ireland has influenced them...

But not for nothing, apparently, do men say “what’s on a sober man’s mind is on a drunken man’s tongue”... Over dinner everyone, of course, got drunk, and the Dutch decided that so far from home they could show a bit of their true selves. Two of them – a tall man called Joost and a short man called Henk – began to chat with me and to overload me with compliments on my knowledge of the Dutch language. I, frankly, was accustomed to the fact that I was good at it and did not quite understand why they were so surprised by it. So I told them that:

– What’s so surprising about it? I lived in your country for almost eight years... In this time, one could learn to speak even Chinese fluently!

– I wouldn’t say so, Zhenya! – said Henk, laying his hand on my shoulder and breathing alcohol fumes into my face. – We have plenty of allochthonen²⁶ who have lived in Holland for 20 years and still do not know a word of Dutch!

I remembered a friend of mine, a refugee from Sierra Leone, who even stopped trying to speak Dutch – after for several years all his attempts to speak Dutch were invariably answered in English – and said nothing.

– You are just one of us! – They began to reassure me unexpectedly. I just raised my eyebrows at such a statement. Interesting, why did they think so? You should just drink less, guys! – Why did you leave Holland at all?

I did not want to hurt them by a detailed story about how I felt back in their country – at the end of the day, they seemed to be normal guys who did not do anything wrong. And I only said that I had left after a divorce because I didn’t feel like staying there after that.

– Was your ex a Dutchman? Or a Russian?

– He was Antillean, – I said. And then I saw how their faces changed. But it was not aimed at me; on the contrary, they began to sympathize with me passionately.

²⁶ Foreigners (Dutch)

-Ah, well then everything is clear... Zhenya, poor girl (*arm meisje*), how did you get into this? After all, you know, of course, *what we think of them...*

Yes, that's exactly what he said! And I felt so ashamed of my own suspicions back in Holland: Zhenya, maybe it is just your imagination that the Dutch are racists and that they discriminate Antilleans? After all, they never spoke about it openly... But "her premonitions did not deceive her..."²⁷

I felt sick when he said this. Poor Sonny! That's why I stayed with him for so long, even when our relations had reached a dead end: because to trust my personal problems to someone around me in Holland would mean to confirm their prejudices against all his people. As if a couple cannot simply not fit together, have too different characters, regardless of their nationality! And if I had to choose between that same Henk and Sonny, I would still have chosen the latter!

After this I just couldn't remain in their company. "*After all, you know what we think of them,*" still sounded in my ears. But you know what? I do not think that way about them: not even after what happened between me and Sonny! Do you understand? The fact was that whatever happened between me and him was our private matter in which I was not going to let any outsiders with their criticism and their pre-made conclusions! I had similar feelings about Vladimir Vysotsky: when he was abroad they tried to persuade him to publicly criticize our country, but he told them: "Don't you stick your noses into our business!"...

- I am just going out for a moment, - I said, and quietly walked out. As I expected, they were too drunk to notice my escape.

This conversation upset me so much that when Peter came to pick me up at Temple Bar, I told him everything.

- Hmm... It's disgusting! - He agreed. It was obvious that Peter took this to heart, especially when I told him about Lisa's illness. - Hey, could you write an article about racism - for our local news sheet? Many people here speak badly of migrants, without knowing really who you are and how you're feeling among us.

- Among you I feel just fine! - I exclaimed.

- Yes, maybe you do feel OK, but what about Nigerians, for example? Have you ever heard how so many of our Irish people speak of them?

- I heard, and quite often... for example, a taxi driver, when he asks you where are you from, and then he tells you, though you did not even ask his opinion: "We are not against migrants like you, but all these blacks..." And in what way do I essentially differ from them? Except for the skin colour? Because my culture is also quite different from yours...

- That's exactly what you should write about it...

From our discussion of racism, we somehow slowly moved to the situation in the North - because there, in fact, also colonial racism reigns: contrary to the opinion common in my country, this is not a religious conflict. It is religious only in form, but in its content the settlers have been granted a privileged position by the colonial authorities in comparison with the indigenous population. Quite similar to apartheid in South Africa or the Israel/Palestine situation.

²⁷ From a Soviet cartoon "A hare went out for a walk"

The political-social spectrum in Northern Ireland is divided (from right to left) into loyalists, unionists, nationalists and republicans. The first two groups are Protestants by religion, the latter two – Catholics. Unionists and nationalists are the moderate wings of their communities; loyalists and republicans – the radical ones. That’s it, in a nutshell.

Nobody calls the conflict between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East “religious”, although they too are representatives of different religions. Russian journalists who simply translate, cut and paste the news from the BBC website and call the Irish Republican “separatists”, do not seem to know the basic facts of history: that until the early 1920s, Ireland was always one single territory. Using the words of the American journalist John Conroy, who lived in the North for many – and the most dangerous! – years, “*at the end of World War II, Britain gave the Unionists a guarantee that the North would remain part of the United Kingdom for as long as the majority wants that.*” That sounds fair enough: if we forget that the British completely ignored the wishes of the majority of the population of Ireland, while creating this “state” for Ulster Unionists. This ensures them a *carte blanche*. They have no reason to negotiate with the Catholics or to share power with them. The Unionists have what they want, – no matter how they behave. When they “created “Ulster”, the British did not conduct any referendum among the people of Ireland to find out if they wanted this separation or not (looking at how the UK demands “freedom and democracy” for other countries, I really would like to say: “and these are the people who forbid me to pick my nose!”²⁸) The Protestant “majority” in Ulster is only about 20% of the population of the whole island. And those 20%, or at least many of them! – consider themselves to be “chosen the children of Israel by God.” With a logically following attitude to everyone else...

– Peter, your press here keeps speaking in such tone as if to be a Marxist or have any connection with Marxists is almost something “to be ashamed of.” And isn’t it something to be ashamed of to rob other nations for centuries, to orchestrate genocide of entire continents – America, Africa and Australia? I would like to see what would be left of today’s wealth of the UK, if we would force it to pay all it owes to the Africans who were sold into slavery “for their own good”, to “bloodthirsty” Indians who were killed and driven off their ancestral lands, so that they wouldn’t be “in the way” of the “the noble Anglo-Saxon gentlemen,” who came to bring “the light of civilization and peace,” or more simply, to fill their bottomless pockets! But no, just try to hint at this in today’s world of “equal opportunity”... In the 1970s or 80s none of us found it strange that somewhere in faraway countries, people were fighting for their freedom and a better life for their children . But now they are trying to convince us that this is a terrible sin to do, as if the world has suddenly become so good that there is nothing to fight for anymore, and there are no reasons to fight whatsoever... But if anything has really changed for most countries of the world over the past 10-15 years, it only got worse! And how can you consider the world to be “free” when people are dying of hunger, in which children have to work from the age of 5-6 years, a world where there are an increasing number of homeless and street children, the world in which people are forced to earn a living by selling their bodies? To force such a life upon millions of people is not considered a

²⁸ Phrase from a popular Russian anecdote

crime. As if all of this just happens naturally, and no one is to blame for it. But to rebel against such life and to sort out those who force it upon people turns out to be “a mortal sin”!

– Zhenya, did you read the book by Liz Curtis on British racism? No? You must read it! When I read it, I was thinking for a long time: whom does this sort of racism remind me of? And then I suddenly realized: no one else but the famous children’s favourite, that English teddy bear Winnie the Pooh! Remember his attempts to fool the bees, by pretending to be “a cloud, not a bear” in his hunt for honey, while he was so clearly visible to all from under the balloon? Do you remember his famous “It’s probably the wrong kind of bees”, after it becomes clear that they will not give up their own honey that they have made without a fight? And when it comes to honey, after this they apparently also have “the wrong one”! Aren’t this just “civilized” English colonialists of the 17, 18, 19, 20 or 21st century, stretching their greedy hands to other people’s wealth? For such a “respectable gentleman” the bees will always be guilty of protecting their honey – including Irish and Zimbabwean bees. You see, the bees are “the terrorists who have hurt the poor teddy”... After all, according to his logic, “why do the bees exist on Earth? In order to make honey. And why does the honey exist? In order for me to eat it”... Oh, Zhenya! We have such a small country; in theory, that they should have crushed us long ago, but we’re not giving up. If we had a jungle, as our Colombian comrades do, we would have shown them! But in our situation, unfortunately, a lot of things are very difficult. And yet, we have a piece of land in the North, where the Brits do not dare to show: South Armagh. If you have the chance, go there, look at it. This will open your eyes to many things...

How I regretted that by the time we had already reached his house!...

– Will you go with me to the meeting of our activists on Saturday? – Peter asked, – We will discuss how to prepare for the elections.

Of course, I gladly said “yes”!

... On Friday I had another pleasant event: the former “Boney M” singer Liz Mitchell came to Dublin for a concert. I was even surprised that it was so easy to buy tickets for this show – in accordance with our old Soviet habit, I bought two, and began looking for someone else to take along with me. My choice fell on that Italian girl, Adriana. Of course, Boney M had not meant to her what it meant to me, but at least she knew what they were!

... It was hard to believe that it was happening for real, even when Liz started to sing. And when she began to invite the public to dance with her on stage, I, shy as I am, who did not go to discos and dancehalls and generally hated all my life to be in the centre of attention, suddenly realized that if I would not do it now, I would regret it for the rest of my life. And feeling like flying, I rushed to the stage...

It wasn’t so scary once you were there. The main thing was that I was not forced to sing! Liz’s new band mate jumped at me, – the fellow who took the place of Bobby. I think his name was Tony. Of course, he wasn’t a match for Bobby, but in the audience and on stage there was such a wonderful atmosphere of all people singing together! I felt quite relaxed. He whirled me in something that reminded of *merengue* and I was surprised to

discover that I was actually able to dance it! Oh, you should know what we are capable of! Dancing, while Liz was singing, we started talking.

– You’re quite good at it! – Said Tony. – Are you Irish?

– No, I’m Russian.

– Oh! – He exclaimed – How is it that I did not guess straight away? Of course! You have the most beautiful women!

And then he added in Russian with a heavy accent:

– Ya tebya lublyu. Vyhadi za menia zamuzh!²⁹

What silly things they teach people in Moscow nowadays! His colleagues in the band smelled like beer: probably they had a pint of “Guinness” before the concert. One of them managed to compliment my outfit. Have you noticed that no woman will ever tell another, “You look good”: it’s always just “you have a beautiful dress?”...

Meanwhile, Liz had finished singing, and I went over to her. I wanted to say at least a few words to her about how much they meant to me. Hearing that I was born in the Soviet Union, Liz felt touched and started telling the audience about their famous journey there in 1978 and that they were personally invited by Brezhnev. She said it with pride. And then she kissed me on the nose: it turned out that she had such big lips that I even got a bit frightened.

I was in seventh heaven. That’s another dream came true! And poor Adriana meanwhile suffered somewhere at the end of the hall: as it turned out, she was tortured by migraine...

... That weekend I didn’t go to the North, because of the meeting which Peter took me to with him. For the first time I saw in real life many of those whose faces I have seen before only on television and on campaign posters pasted up around the city. One such person was a cheerful, bearded man who looked like a Russian gypsy. His name was Cathal, and he was extremely popular in the area where he lived, on the North side of the city, mainly because of his tireless fighting against drug dealers who made people’s lives in this area almost a living hell.

Seminar was being held on the subject of how to campaign for the elections. It was given by a professional American consultant. I was quite concerned about this, but I thought it over and decided not to give it too much importance.

– You must build bridges towards the voters during the election period... the woman in question stated.

– Actually, I am more of an expert on how to blow up the bridges.... – Cathal said thoughtfully amid general laughter.

There was one very unusual person whom I met there. A farmer called Frank Higgins. Frank is an Irish nugget. Years after our first meeting, if my phone rang and I held it to my ear for more than 20 minutes, managing only occasionally to insert “uh huh” and “yeah”, my Mum usually started walking around me nervously in circles, mumbling louder and louder:

²⁹ I love you. Will you marry me? (Russian)

– Who is it who stays on the phone so long? Of course, it's that old buck Frank again, no doubt about it!

I understood her annoyance, but I could not explain to her that I could not just hang up on him. He would have been offended. He was like a big baby. I had to gently suggest to him that dinner was burning on the cooker in my kitchen, that my phone battery was running out, that Lisa was throwing chairs at me in the stairwell, that an elderly member of the Northern Ireland Assembly had just knocked on my door (unfortunately once this happened to be true!)

Usually my hints reached Frank only after 10 minutes or so, and then he started to apologize for holding me on the phone for so long, he said goodbye to me about 20 times, but then he suddenly remembered something else and shouted like a hero in Sholom Aleichem's books: "I forgot the main thing!"

– Wait till I'll tell you...

And the conversation flared up again, and my mum walked around green with anger and ran into the bathroom, in order to avoid the temptation to throw something at me...

All this I can still get over. The most annoying is when he calls you on a mobile phone, because it is literally heating up in your hands so much that it burns your hands and ears. A battery, unable to withstand the powerful rush of words from "Kyavan" (as he calls his native Cavan in the local accent), immediately begins to beep, to warn you of the imminent interruption of the call...

... I met Frank at the same party meeting, where we were in the same workgroup. I was still recovering from seeing the leader without glasses for the first time in my life (he didn't look at all like on TV) when I was approached by a tall man who didn't look Irish, hobbling on one leg (when you meet a lame Republican, you immediately automatically think: "Gangster bullet!"³⁰). He was a little lop-eared, with a face that that could quite possibly allow him to pass for a Russian. Not just for a Russian, but even for our neighbour on the other side of the street, Uncle Ivan, who long ago accused my grandfather of hitting him on his back with a snow shovel!

You could smell that he was a farmer a mile away, and he was dressed like a typical gallant Irish middle age country villager: in a Donegal jumper with a V-neck under a Donegal tweed jacket and a hat. And he had that healthy, rural curiosity: he immediately saw that I was not local and went to inquire who I was.

Hearing that I was Russian, he clasped his hands in amazement and never moved away from me for the whole evening. Frank, as he introduced himself to me, really knocked me out with his right on the spot questions: about the construction of Magnitogorsk, which he once read about, and which completely amazed him when he was young. And when I started to tell him – frankly, in order to get rid of him, scaring him with my knowledge of the "exotics"! – how at one time my mother was afraid that I would go not to some green Ireland, but to the hot deserts of Chad, to my great surprise, he started talking about the civil war in Chad in the 1980s with knowledge of such details and names that I surrendered. Imagine hearing from a simple farmer from county Cavan that he knows the biography of Hissène Habré!

³⁰ Phrase from the Soviet comedy "Old men robbers," where a policeman appears on the screen with more and more bandages each time, always answering questions of what happened very briefly: "A gangster bullet!"

After our long intellectual conversation, he looked at me with sympathy, and his words expressed exactly what I had already begun to feel in this country:

– Poor girl! Your talents will be wasted here. They all (he nodded at the crowd of his brave comrades) have no idea where Chad is!

I must say that he was right. Except Ireland, the Basque country and South Africa, they really do not know much.

At parting, Frank handed me a piece of paper with his phone number and took my number in exchange. Of course, I was not going to call him. But just 3 hours after we had parted, my phone rang, and I heard his joyful voice with the Cavan accent:

– I found the city where you come from on the map!

In short, Frank is an eccentric. One of these Shukshin³¹ type “Crank”, without whom life would have been so boring. Only the Irish version. For a long time, I simply avoided him, as I already had enough of the Irish eccentricities, but he continued to phone me, even though it was fruitless. And perhaps I would have never discovered for myself what a gem of a human being was this strange but quite harmless man, if not for another big shock in my life.

I was fired (I’ll say more about that later). And they didn’t even tell me why. And I, in turn, couldn’t tell my mother about it: she would really explode with anger at me. But I really needed to talk to someone to such an extent that I felt like suffocating. But there was no one to call: I tried phoning everyone I could, but most people were simply not at home.... And then I came across Frank’s name in my address book....

He didn’t seem surprised at my call and gladly listened to all my sadness and concerns.

– I recently sent you a letter – he said to me. – Did you get it?

No, I had not received any letters. Moreover, he did not have my address! Questioning him carefully, I discovered that he sent me some vaguely fiery revolutionary pamphlet, in which I was described as his comrade in struggle, to the address printed on the envelope in which I had sent him a little book about Russia. I remembered where I sent that book from and broke out silently in a nervous laugh: now did I have to wonder why I was fired? Of course, the noble “soldier of the revolution” sent his ill-fated declaration of revolutionary feelings to my work address!

Despite the deplorable situation, I didn’t feel like crying: it was so funny. Of course, I never received that letter! But the conversation about Chad, Magnitogorsk, and rural Ireland had given me so much energy that I gathered courage and a week later found another job.

Frank and I have become real friends. I suspect that he had a bit more feelings for me than just that. But to his credit, unlike many of his comrades who were even much older than him, he never expressed it in words or, God forbid, in action!

– I think the world of you! – was his strongest expression of feelings.

Sometimes I found a bag of sweets on the doorknob of my Northern house with a note that he had “accidentally driven past” on the way to the grave of one of the Irish patriots in Downpatrick (Down is a good two hours drive from Cavan!). Sometimes he passionately told me that I was exactly the same age as he was, and that I was just born too late: we both had to be born if not before 1798, then certainly at least before 1916...

³¹ Vassily Shukshin (1929-1974)- Soviet writer, actor and film director, author mainly of short stories about country characters

1798 was a beloved subject of Frank. If you did not like the subject of your conversation with him and wanted to change it, it was enough to say only one sentence about the uprising of 1798 – and in return you would hear a fiery speech lasting for 2-3 hours, so that you could safely switch off and think about something else. The longer he talked, the more I was amazed at his truly encyclopaedic knowledge. For all that he remained a “man of the earth” – it was amazing to see how he managed to do so many things at the same time: he ran the road with a metal fence on top of his head, in order to close quickly the opening to a neighbouring field, then he ran to milk his cows, after which he would immediately jump into his car and rush to a local Sinn Fein meeting, then to Dublin, to the State Archives (to read documents on his favourite subject of rebellion or on the local history of county Cavan in the last century), then to do some renovation works on the Sinn Fein office in his home town (he had restored and decorated virtually the whole building there single-handedly!), then to the market to sell one of his cows...And so on...

Looking at Frank’s eccentricity, I assumed he was an old bachelor (what normal woman would tolerate such a life?). It turned out that in fact, this woman -his wife - really could not tolerate it for long... she moved back to England, where he had originally met her. Frank had worked in England, like many young Irish people in the 1970s, when there was no work back home: on building sites (according to him, all the British roads and tunnels are built by the fellows from Donegal) and as a taxi driver... He married late, to an Englishwoman who had a romantic vision of Irish republicanism. Alas, when confronted with the harsh reality of life on a small, isolated Irish farm, it soon became too much for her. Having given birth to 4 children within 5 years (their eldest daughter was named Eleanor – after Karl Marx’s daughter!), she soon took them all to England... Frank was very upset because of this, but he did not show it openly. He never said a bad word about his wife. He just remembered how they argued, after which he’d say to her in a loud voice:

– You rotten bourgeoisie! – And went into his fields...

Sometime in his youth, Frank had been in the ranks of the “army” (you know *which* army I mean!). His younger brother Philip had died untimely young, having poor health as a result of a hunger strike in Portlaoise prison that is almost forgotten now, and Frank still thinks about him every day.

– My brother – that would have been the man for you! – He never tires of repeating, not mentioning, however, that Philip was only two years his junior and 18 years older than me...

Listening to Frank, you’d begin to wonder whether he himself left the army, or he was “asked” to do so. For there is perhaps no man in all of Ireland, who cannot keep his mouth shut to such a degree! What sort of stories have I not heard from him! Stories about his many adventures in London: with the top point of the story being how police were chasing after him when he tried to photograph a tear gas plant. Stories about how farmers were making explosives from fertilizer. Tales of various characters, many of whom have passed away long ago (he was personally acquainted with Frank Stagg, who died in a British prison on hunger strike), about an escape from prison by our mutual friend Fionntan. He even once arranged for me to spend a night in one of those places

that are called “safe houses”): on a farm, where he once hid fugitive IRA volunteers! It was very interesting to listen to this house’s mistress, when she shared her memories with me.

But he could also blurt out over the phone things that I even I, with my very limited Soviet experience of clandestine affairs, would have never blurted out at all. Actually, the more I talked to him, the more he reminded me of the hero of Yuri Nikulin in “The Diamond Arm”³²: “A noodle! We’ll take this one out without any noise or dust!”

Frank was very fond of the times when I visited his native land: Cavan. He was glad to show it to strangers and knew literally everything about every hill. However, one had to be very patient with him: visiting Cavan, I was used to the fact that Frank might be an hour late to meet you and would come to meet me quite bedraggled. However, I could not bring myself to condemn him, when he was wiping sweat from his forehead, telling me that one of his cows just calved and he could not leave her in this state... In Cavan as well as throughout rural Ireland, people have different notions of time. If people tell you that something would take 15 minutes, it can take anywhere from half an hour to two hours. Fighting with this is like trying to swim upstream in a waterfall. You just have to get used to it.

Frank helped me to learn about rural Ireland the way you couldn’t learn through the windows of a tourist bus. It was with him that I ran across the field, driving his cattle to another one: I ended up smeared up to my ears with mud and discovered that heavy-looking cows could run at a speed of Olympic sprinters! I have visited rural houses where there are still no modern conveniences, that reminded me so much of the way I grew up myself. I met other Irish eccentrics, most of them old bachelors: for an Irish farmer, in contrast to our countrymen, would not marry until he would be sure that he could provide for a large family. For many, this process was delayed so much that they no longer wished to think of marriage.

Such local eccentrics in Cavan were all good friends with Frank: when he was in Dublin, they could go to his house (doors in rural Cavan are still left unlocked!) and enjoyed using his phone... He’d drive them into town for shopping, those of them who did not have their own transport, and it was taken for granted by them to such extent that it wouldn’t even come to their mind that he might refuse them: they just knew he wouldn’t. Frank’s selfless nature was soon discovered also by our former compatriots from Latvia and Lithuania, who appeared in this modest corner of Ireland as the labour force for the work that Irish, spoiled by the “Celtic Tiger,” no longer wanted to do. He had especially friendly feelings for a couple of Lithuanian women. A Lithuanian called Vida occupied about the same place as me in his life: the object of worship, although we were quite different. We both knew it and even once found out from each other that he had advised both of us to have a haircut: such a hairstyle would be more like his English wife used to have... Vida was laconic about Frank:

– What a wonderful man, what a good man! If I had a husband like this, I would have kicked him out, because he helps everyone, and I want it to be just for me...

Immigrants from Eastern Europe very much caught his imagination: that of a man who is not used to foreigners in his village but remembers very well what being an immigrant feels like. Frank got personally acquainted with nearly every new arrival. Secretly he

³² Famous Soviet comedy film (1969)

wanted to learn the Russian language as a means of communication with all of them. And he kept me going for hours on the phone, telling me in great detail all the problems experienced by Vida, Tamara, Valera, Yevgeny and Nina... Some of our mutual Irish friends were angry at him, saying that he allows us to use all his kindness. It is possible. But how could we refuse such a kind-hearted, old-fashioned care, which has nothing to do with the cynical American expression “there is no such a thing as a free lunch”? Poor Americans, they will never understand that there is such a thing, in Ireland, in county Cavan!

Of course, Frank also had his detractors. For example, he was “on the warpath,” with some local Sinn Fein women, so reminiscent of Bulgakov’s “woman dressed as a man.”³³ Especially with two local sisters, whom he accused of a drunken and depraved lifestyle. – Aine is a sexual predator! – He liked to repeat with disgust about one of them. Frank literally rejoiced when Aine was sent by Sinn Fein to America, expressing hope that she would remain there. It also led to friction between him and “the leadership”, who believed that women should be promoted to leading roles (but still only of secondary importance, by the way!) based not on their personal abilities, but purely on their gender. Only his incredible Irish stubbornness and that of those who shared his views had prevented Aine and her sister from being put forward as local candidates in parliamentary elections... Even if they were elected, all the work would still have to be done by the likes of him, as people like those two are only capable of travelling around giving fancy speeches.

Sometimes I was angry with him, but very rarely. Judge for yourself: would you not be offended if you had been promised that he would drive you to the airport, which was a 6-hour drive, and you waited and waited but he didn’t show up, so that you began to panic, called a taxi and paid for this trip as much as you would have paid for a plane ticket to Moscow? But it turned out that he came to your door just half an hour after that: because his “neighbour had asked him to bring some tiles from county Fermanagh”! But this is small stuff. By and large, Frank can always be relied upon. – You – that’s me! I was exactly the same at your age! – He liked to say to me. So you are warned about what kind of a nutcase you have to deal with when you deal with me! At least, according to Frank of Cavan...

... Being free from work at the bank for a week was just what I needed: I went home to Russia literally for just a couple of days to pick up my family once again. I was sure that now everything was going to be all right: I had already sorted out all the documents and had a decent place for them to live. It remained for me only to find a suitable school for Lisa (unlike my mother, I was at that stage already resigned to the idea that she would never be able to attend a regular school), and most importantly – a suitable, capable doctor!

I already tried to find out about the possibilities of treatment for Lisa in my small town: unlike the Soviet Union, where any needy person could very easily arrange for an appointment at the clinic for any specialist (surgeon, eye doctor, neurologist) and be seen by them on the very same day or at least within a couple of days, here you could get an

³³ From Mikhail Bulgakov’s “Heart of a Dog”

appointment with a specialist only through a referral from your GP, and even then, in many cases you'd have to wait for such appointment for many months – there was a long waiting list! The consultants weren't readily available in every city here, as they were in the USSR, but often only in one single hospital for the entire "province".

The local GP to whom I came to ask questions – an elderly granddad who, it seemed, did not even hear me and slept in his chair when I spoke to him – suddenly woke up and yelled at me when he realized that I was a migrant. The meaning of his rapid speech boiled down to "they all come here just to burden our hospitals." What compassion for sick children, what Hippocratic Oath! I do not know how I restrained myself from nailing him to the chair with his paperweight. It's precisely because of doctors like him that Lisa remained disabled for life...

My mum liked the new house; but, as usual, she expressed her approval in a very low-key way, in contrast to the manner in which she usually expressed her resentment of something...

I tried to think of everything when I bought the house: from the view from its windows to the proximity of shops and transport, from what the neighbours would be like to the distance from there to large cities. But most of all, of course, I was attracted by the healthy, clean air: from the sea or the mountains, depending on what part of town you were visiting. The town was 70 percent Catholic, but nobody minded Protestants living here too. For example, where I lived my neighbour on the right was a Catholic and the one on the left was a Protestant, and they got along very well. Yet most Protestants lived on the other end of town, at the foot of the mountain. It was immediately noticeable by how rich and splendid houses were on that side of town. "The border" ran across the bridge over a local mountain river, which crosses the Main Street at its very end, flowing into the sea. "Across the border" elderly Protestant couples walk slowly on the waterfront every morning with an air of importance about them (amazingly, I've learned to distinguish them even by their looks and the way they act!). The building of the local Masonic Lodge stood on "Catholic territory", but the Orange lodge was where it was supposed to be. In the Masonic Lodge, as usual, all the windows were tightly shut, so no one knew what was going on inside. "No windows, no doors, the room was full of people."³⁴

In summer the townsfolk brought in some children from Belarus, with the help of a local charity, "Children of Chernobyl", for two weeks. They were placed in families, which for that time strongly suppressed the Protestant-Catholic question, as the organization included both. Children liked the town: in Belarus there is no sea and no mountains, and the fact was they did not see anything else here: neither street battles with the police, typical for Northern Ireland, nor Orangemen parades. I really am eager to ask those who bring them here and for two weeks admire so much the local "high civilisation": tell me, have you ever lived in a country where barns and churches are flying paramilitary flags? Have you ever, on a sunny day on the coast, suddenly bumped into foreign soldiers lying in the bushes, aiming at someone invisible with a machine gun? Have you ever been in town for Easter festivities: everybody in their best clothes, with families, with children eating ice cream – when the APCs pass by, with a whole flock of the same foreign soldiers hanging from them, who are all targeting this crowd, these ice-cream eating children with their machine guns?

³⁴ Russian riddle about a cucumber

No? Then you don't yet know what it is like to live in Northern Ireland. Often I was haunted by a sense of unreality of what was happening around me. For example, on a hot summer day, mature low wheat plants of dark-gold colour are bent to the ground under the weight of the harvest. On the road a column of dark, massive machines moves towards me. "Combine harvesters!" – I think in accordance with my Soviet habits. And then I see that I was wrong: it's the same "armoured cars" again... It is through the local charity that I met the first local Protestant in my life: Ms. Wendy Adair. When Wendy was young, she probably looked very much like the late princess Diana. Just not so sad looking. Although she wasn't as spoilt as Diana was: Wendy began to work at the age of 14, as a secretary in a law office, after she lied about her age. Then she married a farmer and part-time butcher, who treated her quite like a pig... Wendy does not like to think about it, but she can open her soul to you, if she knows that you had a similar experience. Completely against the rules of society at the time when she was young, she dared to divorce him. Many years later she got married a second time. But her second husband was not much better than the first. Several years ago, Tommy became seriously ill and died, and Wendy became a widow. Not the merry one, but still quite cheerful. In terms of *joie de vivre*.

Wendy, the widow of the Orangeman, is a Free Presbyterian (she is proud of her church, because it is "the most progressive Presbyterian church", according to her!) and the representative of a community which was much less familiar to me when I arrived in the North of Ireland. She helped me to understand her community somewhat better. Not all the Presbyterian population of the North were such bigots as the Orangemen of Portadown: grown up, often even elderly men pretended to feel "poor and offended", comparing themselves... with 6-10 year-old Catholic girls from Ardoyne who aren't even allowed to go to their own school every morning by a crowd of Loyalist hooligans. In order to get rid of the fear and not to hear the dirty curses of the crowd, these babes sing pop songs together on their way to school and back... "Thank you for our happy childhood, dear Tony Blair!"³⁵ – that's what they might sing. The one who was going to fight Ben Laden all over the world but couldn't even provide a safe way to school for small children in his own jurisdiction! If Wendy heard my words, she would most probably not like them. Any "radical" word (though what is radical in providing a safe way to school for children in this "democratic" country, I don't know!) frightens her. She was really frightened when I angrily talked about the system of months-long waiting lists to see a specialist in a hospital since there was little money in the budget for healthcare. "But they always have money for bombing Yugoslavia and Iraq!" – I declared to Wendy and I saw that my words frightened her... This is the kind of democracy here. But of course, Wendy doesn't approve of the situation in Ardoyne. When I didn't personally know Northern Irish Protestants, I noticed that even in a crowd, they can be distinguished from Catholics by their reticence and shyness. Many of them are ashamed of the things that Loyalists do "in the name of the Protestant Church". But they are afraid to say anything aloud. The same is true for Wendy. Once she came to me, having returned from Belfast where she always goes with some unwillingness, and said: "Today I visited the *Bandit Country*!" The media in the North uses the phrase: "The Bandit Country" for the description of the republican South Armagh, rebellious to the British. I

³⁵ Reference to the Soviet song "Thank you for our happy childhood, our dear Motherland!"

was surprised and was going to ask Wendy what she did there, when she sighed and said to me: “On Shankill Road³⁶, I mean!” That is, among her own “colleagues by religion”. I got acquainted with Wendy accidentally, after I had placed an ad on a wall in a local supermarket that I give Russian lessons. It appeared that their charity was unsuccessfully looking for such a person for a long time, in order to translate children’s letters from Russian into English. When Wendy and Mary – who were both members of this group – came to me, they somehow inadvertently, but immediately told me that Mary was Catholic, and Wendy was Protestant. That time I didn’t even have furniture, and we had to sit on the floor on the mattress. Having looked around at my living conditions, Wendy immediately got down to business – though nobody asked her about it. And within a month my house was already jammed with second-hand but rather good furniture, which she got from her numerous friends. Soon Wendy became for me something of a “second mum” (while I had no family here with me) and she would even been a little proud herself, when somebody in a queue asked if we were mother and daughter. Wendy didn’t have her own children. Only a little doggie, of which I will write a bit further.

As a widow Wendy also appeared to be irreplaceable when I couldn’t cope with any man’s work in the house, such as installation of a washing machine or repairing of a gas cooker. Though it was awfully inconvenient for me to “exploit” her, and I tried to pay her back by doing something good too. I remember the time when Wendy had helped me to buy a washing machine. It was a small, but very interesting lesson for me about how complicated human relations were in this part of the world.

I had found an advertisement in the local newspaper about someone selling a second-hand washing machine for a reasonable price. I asked Wendy to help me, because without having a car it was impossible to take the washing machine from Belfast to my house.

She put on her glasses and attentively looked at the announcement in the newspaper.

– Now, let me find out, in what district it is! – she told to me, dialling the phone number.

– Hallo! We have read your advertisement about the washing machine. Is it really in good condition? Yes? Right... And in what area do you live? Right, OK I think, I know, where it is... *Excuse me, and what is your name?* Thank you. What would be the best way for us to get to your place? *Excuse me, and what is your surname?*

Having heard the surname of the owner of the laundry washer, Wendy lit up by such a mysterious, almost conspiratorial smile, and added:

– By the way, *my name is Mrs. Adair!*

The owner, judging by his name, his surname and his place of living, was “one of her own”, and she could go there “safely”. For me, this was not only strange and a little bit ridiculous to observe, but also quite sad. Is this really human life? And not only do people from Wendy’s church observe similar precautions, Mary with a nervous laughter told me that when she and her husband were students, she, as the true woman, always chose habitations in Belfast not by the district where it was situated (as any clever person would do), but... by whether there was beautiful furniture in the house. That constantly led to such situations when she and her husband had to barricade their doors at night, as the only Catholics in the estate, and to sit all night long, shivering after receiving menacing letters. Or else, having arrived at a new place, they had to assure everybody that their names were not Mary and Bernard, but Wendy and Alan: for masking!

³⁶ Shankill Road – staunch Loyalist area of West Belfast

But let us return to our washing machine. The young man selling it – with rather pleasant manners and face – was a carer for older people. Naturally, only among “his own” (very few people dare to cross the “border” here in this sense!). He lived in east Belfast, in that very “nest of vipers”. All windows in the surrounding houses were broken or boarded up, and numerous paramilitary flags of all colours were rising on a wind. The young man was going to move away from this area, and this washing machine was too big for his new kitchen. I remember how Wendy nudged me: look, what a good match it would be! But having sensed that I didn’t show a special enthusiasm for him (I reacted a bit like the character of an old film with Louis de Funes about rabbi Jacob, Mohammed Larbi Slimane when he was introduced to the red-haired Jewish beauty Hanna³⁷!), on the back way Wendy confidentially told me:

- Ach, he is such a lovely young man that he must be gay! Only gays can be so practical and pleasant! – and she laughed.

Wendy is a very active and cheerful person, – though frequently she probably just forces herself to get out of bed and move forward. In spite of the fact that she has had a hip transplant, and now has a prosthesis for a hip, and in general her health is not very good. But she does not think about it and constantly drags heavy bags of goods that her neighbours had donated for the Belorussian village. She is occupied, probably in at least ten charitable organizations, goes to various parties and lessons, always learning something new. She is a remarkable needlewoman and also makes her own jam every year, entirely not in a Western manner.

To my notion, Protestants seemed not just unsociable, but very serious and even gloomy people (for example, I heard that Ian Paisley even prohibited the parishioners from dancing quite innocent cowboy’s dances “Wall to Wall”, declaring that it would be a mortal sin!). But Wendy is a big giggler and even a prankster. Once she put an artificial mouse for her husband the Orangeman into his sugar bowl and then she laughed loudly with pleasure over his fright. She could easily declare, having come to you and seen that you had put in your garden a metal arch for creeping roses: “*Are you preparing for the 12th*³⁸?”

However, my reaction to some of her statements was ambiguous. For example, many years ago, during her summer holiday in Spain, – when she was a young beauty like Diana – one German vexed her with something and she straight-away declared to him: “At least we won the war!” Hearing such audacity, I even asked her again: “So who was that won the war, Wendy?”

How did we get on, how could we be friends: I with my sympathies for Sinners and she, the widow of an Orangeman? Very simple: using the wisdom of the Northern Irish people, we just didn’t speak to each other about certain things. I knew that I would offend her if I would began to speak about them, and she, though she was not informed enough of my political views, as most of the local people were not, did not like conversations about politics. Once she confidentially told me:

– Oh, I’m not sure about our local Assembly business, Zhenya! I think it is full of gangsters!

More than likely, Wendy meant ministers from Sinn Fein. I hastened to console her:

³⁷ French comedy “Les adventures de Rabbi Jacob”

³⁸ 12th of July – Orangemen’s day in Northern Ireland, commemoration of the battle of Boyne when they erect arches over streets

– That’s alright, Wendy, don’t worry! We have very much the same in Russia!
And then she said something that absolutely amazed me: what she really thought about David Trimble³⁹, for whose party her family by tradition voted for many generations:
– Trimble, at least, was not imprisoned... – she said, as if to say that he really deserved to be imprisoned, but the fact that he wasn’t meant that she would have to vote for him, by a principle of the “lesser” (according to the unionists point of view) evil.

Wendy never showed her contempt for the IRA (though it is impossible to imagine her voting for Sinn Fein in elections). In her opinion, “her own”, protestant paramilitaries “aren’t any better”. Once she even participated in a peace march of the housewives in Dublin, from which she was strongly dissuaded by her father who was afraid that something could happen to her “in that dreadful place” (though he had never been to Dublin).

Wendy has much in common with the Catholic women of her age here. For example, all of them like the same music and are mad about Daniel O’Donnell, Dominic Kirwan and Charlie Landsborough. Once I underwent a real torture: when Wendy started to show me a video with Charlie Landsborough with his monotonous (to my taste) country music and continued it till midnight ...

But, at the same time, she has something perhaps more refined in her nature, and looking at her and communicating with her, and then remembering Republican women from Belfast (many of them bring their children to school in the morning... in pyjamas because after that they come back home and go back to bed, and they are just too lazy to change their clothes again!), you understand, why the Leader in his early youth, using his not very Catholic surname, had flirted preferably with Protestant girls ...

The important thing is that after having communicated with Wendy, I really understood and could feel that her community really has a different culture, another set of values, another view of the past. This feeling was very strong when she showed me with pride medals received by her uncle in the First World War. For me – as well as for the majority of Irish – the First World War doesn’t mean anything. It doesn’t cause me any pride – though my own great-grandfather had participated in it too – and doesn’t bring up any feelings, except for pity for the senseless loss of lives in this imperialist war. For the Northern Irish protestant community, the First World War was the same as what the Second World War was for our country, it was “only yesterday” for the senior (and even for my) generations ...

The police for Wendy, as well as for all her community, means simply ordinary police. Not the hated semi-secret political police, as they are for the majority of the Catholic community. And it is difficult to blame her for it: after all, when dealing with her community they really do behave like ordinary police!

I had an opportunity to attend with Wendy a service in her Protestant church– though I, as an atheist, had no special enthusiasm, but I couldn’t refuse her because it was just before Christmas, and Wendy has just lost her main friend: her only dog has died...

Wendy’s face was bedewed with tears, but she was trying not to show it and asked me to go with her to church. How could I refuse? And though the Reverend, naturally, paid a great attention to me, thinking that he found the new parishioner, Wendy didn’t leave me in such an uncomfortable situation and strictly told him that I was only “a visitor”.

³⁹ David Trimble – leader of the Ulster Unionist Party at that time, Nobel Peace Prize winner

I had the same feeling of “something different”, unfamiliar when we were visiting her friend – a Protestant farmer woman, who had recently become a widow. The majority of them have relatives and strong family connections with Scotland and England. Till now. I think that it is a pity that the Northern Irish Protestants live so closed and don’t promote their own culture (for example, the Scottish dances!) for “broad masses”: because if you look just at the surface, it seems that the sole display of “culture” of northern Protestants are those aggressive Orangemen’s marches. Recently they began to talk about their own language – the so-called “Ulster-Scots”, though in reality very few people speak it. It is some kind of a local dialect of English which is much less common among them than the South African Afrikaans among Afrikaners. But even the fact that these people are developing something of their own is already laudable. After all, here they call themselves “British”, but during a trip to England, to their indignation, having heard their accent, the English call all of them “Irish” ...

But Wendy wouldn’t become indignant because of that. She clearly expressed the state of mind of many sane people from her community in this changing world: after a trip to London.

– I was standing and looking at a military orchestra near the Royal palace when it suddenly played some Irish tunes. And I felt such a pride for my native country: it is our music that is played! I am from there!

And in these simple words – though she possibly doesn’t suspect it herself – there is a testimony to the fact that the future Ireland, a united Ireland, will have quite a serious chance for peace and equality for all her citizens.

My mum and Wendy quickly became friends, even without speaking each other’s language. But the existence in a small town seemed to mum very boring ...

– At least, nature is beautiful here, – I said – After all, we did not come here to have a good time...

– Just stay away from your guerrillas here, – said mum, having seen the police stations surrounded by barbed wire with high towers and the military armoured cars. By our Soviet standards it all looked wild indeed. – In Dublin, that’s different, but here... please, don’t you mix with them!

We finally managed to put Lisa on a waiting list for a specialist, the most famous children’s neurologist here (another GP helped us with this, after seeing her). We were waiting for this appointment for almost half a year. I laid great hopes on him because this neurologist had worked both in London and even in Paris. But we just got the next disappointment. Nobody expected miracles from him, of course, but we wanted to receive at least a full diagnosis and the forecast for her future, plus any medications that could help.

The doctor was a small man, with a face rather like Donatas Banionis⁴⁰, but he wasn’t interested in patients in the slightest. “He just sits there, and money flows to him... loads of money!”⁴¹ – it seemed that this song had been written about him. Even in our post-perestroika Russia doctors were still paying – probably, out of habit! – more attention to the patient than he did: “Let’s try this one... And if it doesn’t help, try this one... you know, this herbal remedy also helps well...”

⁴⁰ Lithuanian actor famous in the USSR

⁴¹ One of the songs of Vladimir Vysotsky

The western doctors don't know anything about any herbal remedies. Moreover, they, like Arkady Raikin⁴²'s characters (from the humorous story) who were sewing buttons to a suit, have "narrow ps-lisation". That is, specialisation. For example, this doctor specialized only in epilepsy. So he could only make a diagnosis and prescribe a treatment for that.

– And what about restoration of speech, behaviour, any medicines for cerebral cortex activation? – My mum, who had studied every medical encyclopaedia and had visited all possible doctors with Lisa threw these questions and names of various medicines at him. He just smiled with a guilty smile and made helpless gestures: he had not even heard of any of these medicines, which were familiar to any qualified neurologist back in our country. Even their Latin names didn't mean anything to him: after all, this local "star" specialized only on in epilepsy, and all these medicines, even if they were for the brain, had no direct relation to his specialty... There were no experts here who would know how to treat not one, but all possible conditions of the human brain. Such is the quality of their "world class" education here.

I looked once again at his miserable face (he was a Catholic, and they were a minority among doctors), and I even felt sorry for him. Never mind, let him at least prescribe something for Lisa's epilepsy. And he could also send her for a scan. In the meantime, we would continue to search where to get her proper treatment.

He didn't want to do the scan and told us that it costs so much, what do you want it for, and so on... I had to put pressure on him, and eventually he surrendered...

... At night I was browsing the Internet at work and found there information about a Cuban medical neurologic centre. According to its description, it looked like a miracle, especially after all these western "experts". If only we could have brought Lisa there! The treatment there was naturally free of charge for Cubans and with a considerable discount for foreigners from the Third World countries. I didn't live in a Third World country, but in any case I haven't got enough money. I had neither relatives, nor acquaintances who could help me with such a sum of money. I sent an e-mail to Cuba explaining our situation and began to look forward to their answer

Life gradually settled down: one week I spent in Dublin, the following week – at home. If, of course, it is possible to consider this a normal life: a person who never worked on a night shift would probably think that it leaves you the possibility to do something for yourself in the afternoons. I had thought the same before I started to work. My internal clock got absolutely mixed up: I felt sleepy all day and all night, regardless of how many hours I could sleep during the daytime.

I don't have enough physical strength to go home every morning after the night shift, so I arranged with Adriana that I could sleep in her house during the day after work: on a sofa in the living room. All her housemates worked during the day, so I didn't disturb anybody. I only slept there: I didn't eat, wash or even watch TV there. In the morning I had breakfast on my way from work at the bus stop: pancakes with syrup and a cup of coffee. Then I get on a bus to Clonsilla and immediately fell asleep, even if I was wearing headphones with rather loud music on my CD player... It was really hard for me to wake up even at the route terminal. Without feeling ground under my feet, I slowly reached Adriana's house. It had an alarm system, and every time I was afraid that I would forget

⁴² Famous Soviet comedian

to turn it off. Then I tumbled onto the sofa and slept only till 4, so as not to disturb my ex-colleagues when they came back home from work. So from half past four till 9 p.m. I had to spend time somewhere, and I often got to work much earlier than I had to, especially when the weather was bad. In such cases I sat in the Bank for a long time, and that caused a lot of gossip.

During the weekend, when the Italian girls were home, I travelled to the North after my night shift. It was already warm, and I often slept at home in a hammock in my backyard after work. I was so tired that I didn't see or hear anything around me. I just wrapped myself in a blanket, inhaled fresh sea air and fell asleep – until the last bus back to Dublin. The hammock was slightly shaking in a wind ...

It was hard, but I tried to be strong. During my free week I tried to entertain mum and Lisa as much as possible; and soon we had gone all around the North as earlier we had gone all around the Southern part of the island. I remember the first time we visited Derry together: we were really surprised by the low prices at the local hotel (we were offered a magnificent suite with the TV and stereo-centre). Only when we had reached Derry, did we understand why it was so cheap: it was the day of the Apprentice Boys⁴³ Parade – the local Orangemen. Robust “boys” marched in the Catholic centre of the city, and the Catholic youth threw Molotov cocktails at them and at the police. Certainly, no normal person would go to Derry on such a day, and that caused the low price! My mum felt a burning desire to watch this riot:

– Wow! ... I have never seen anything like this! Take Lisa and go to the hotel, and I will stay here and watch...

It was impossible to dissuade her: mum just attached herself to a CNN group, pretending that she was with them ...

She came back to the hotel after an hour, and she was really impressed:

– If I tell anyone about it at home, they won't believe me!

At the same time, I was watching the riots on TV in the hotel room – live...

Sometimes I did something for myself: for example, I attended the week-long summer course in the Irish language in North Belfast, at the McCracken Summer School.

Unfortunately, however, it was during my work week at the bank; and I had to travel to Belfast from Dublin by train after my night shift, to spend all day there in a language class, and then go back to work. I only slept in the train on the road there and back.

This summer school annually opens its hospitable doors in North Belfast, in the local community centre in the New Lodge area, glorified in many Republican ballads. It is so named in honour of brother and sister McCracken, Henry Joy and Mary Ann, who had devoted their lives to the liberation of Ireland at the end of the 18th century. Here you could take an intensive course in the Irish language, Irish dances, music and songs, drama, hear lectures dedicated to the language and culture of both traditions of the North of Ireland: Irish and Ulster-Scottish. Irish is considered to be a very difficult language. However nothing is impossible for those who really want to learn it. There were people of the various ages, and not only from Belfast: many of them came from county Down,

⁴³ The **Apprentice Boys of Derry** is a [Protestant fraternal society](#) with a worldwide membership of over 80,000, founded in 1814. They are based in the city of [Derry, Northern Ireland](#). However, there are Clubs and branches across [Ireland](#), [Great Britain](#) and further afield. The Society aims to commemorate the 1689 [Siege of Derry](#) when [Catholic James II of England and Ireland and VII of Scotland](#) laid siege to the walled city which was at the time a Protestant stronghold. Apprentice Boys parades once regularly led to rioting in the city by Nationalist youths

Derry, Armagh and other cities. The atmosphere at this school was typically Irish: free and easy; after each 3 conversational lessons, there was a “singing lesson”, with learning Irish folk songs. At the end of the course international evenings were arranged, with the participation of representatives of all the ethnic minorities living in Belfast: Chinese, Hindus, Arabs, Africans – all of them took part.

– It is no secret that the Irish language is used nowadays much more often not in the West of Ireland – in Connemara as foreigners often think, but in the North, and in particular, in West and North Belfast where the relation to language is politicized, and its knowledge helps people to keep and emphasize their roots, traditions and history, – one of the school’s teachers told me. The Irish language was “beaten out” of us for almost 8 centuries. Parents forced children to learn English, because it was the only way to survive and make a career. Teachers at school gave to parents a wooden board and if the child spoke Irish at home, parents were supposed to punish them, marking every single Irish word he said on that board, and send them to school the next day with this board around their neck, to make everyone know about it... This way teachers at school punished them once more. Till now Irish people, even those who do want to learn Irish, have mixed feelings towards the language. Irish was the “language of the poor”, a “sign of backwardness”, and subconsciously many people, especially in the Irish Republic, are ashamed to use it till now. The fact that even Daniel O’Connell, “the Liberator” who helped Catholics to achieve emancipation in the last century, protested against the language and did not help to solve this problem. The Great Potato Famine, which wiped out more than one million Irish lives and caused mass emigration from the country, especially from its Western part, in the middle of the last century, became a real death blow for “Gaeltacht,” – areas of the country where people still spoke Irish. The revival of the Irish language as colloquial in Belfast was connected with the Civil Rights movement at the end of the 1960s. Many adults, who never knew the language, have started to study it. Unlike the Irish Republic where this language is studied at schools (though only in a passive form: they say that nothing is so pernicious for studying as those abstract, idealist methods which are applied there!), there were no such schools in the North. They started to be created on the initiative and with the help of money collected by parents of children. The State refused to finance them till the 1980s and even now gives rather limited support. The reasons for this is certainly political: after all, the Irish language became a kind of weapon of the Republican prisoners in Britain: they communicated with each other only in Irish, they arranged courses for beginners; many even began to write whole poems in Irish, for example, the Republican hero Bobby Sands who had learned the language all by himself ...

Listening to this story full of drama, I once again thought how unscrupulous people are in the former Soviet republics who assert today that Russia “suppressed” national cultures there and almost destroyed the local languages. How dare they say this! Already in the 1920s Soviet scientists developed writing for numerous nationalities of the USSR who didn’t have one during pre-revolutionary times. Many small languages were rescued from extinction. In all republics there were schools with studies in the local languages. Theatres (for example, the famous theatre in Lithuanian Panevėžys to which even Russians who knew absolutely no Lithuanian, wanted to get tickets), books, newspapers (I myself have a big collection of newspapers in almost all the Soviet languages, collected thanks to my pen friends across the country when I was at school). Each

republic had its own film studio – I wonder where the majority of them are today? Yes, unfortunately, many Russians who moved to other republics for work didn't learn the local languages, even though they lived there for a long time. But it is impossible to imagine Russian teachers beating Ukrainian school kids, for example, or hanging a board around their necks, for using a Ukrainian word, as was done by the “civilized” English in Ireland Not even in one's worst nightmare!

One time the Dublin leadership of the party organized a visit to Belfast for young party members, with an overnight stay in the Republican suburb of Poleglass. There were 10 young boys in the group, about 18 years old, and one woman – me...

Poleglass is not a place for people with weak nerves, as we were convinced that very evening. We were placed with families and then went to attend a lecture dedicated to Bobby Sands and his comrades. I was placed with a very hospitable family with many children; they were not prosperous, and their house actually had bare walls decorated with a family portrait together with the party leadership, but the woman of the house, a mother of 6, had a gold medallion with an engraving of the Leader's portrait around her neck. The children were urgently thrown on the top bunk, leaving the bottom for me. My imagination was most amazed by bars at the bottom of the ladder leading to the top floor: if Loyalist murderers were to rush into the house, you were supposed to quickly run as soon as they started to break down the front door, and to slam the bars behind you ... The whole house reminded one of an armoured train. Despite a tight financial situation, the lady of the house made such a plentiful supper for us that we could hardly eat it all. We were embarrassed that she was doing so much for us, and we collected some money among ourselves to reimburse her for her expenses ...

At that lecture I saw for the first time relatives of people who had died on hunger strike together with Bobby. One elderly woman, having heard where I came from, even embraced and kissed me! This lecture was in North Belfast – the most dangerous part of the city because here Catholic and Protestant streets were mixed together like pieces in a patchwork blanket. We were warned that we should strictly follow the given route: a Dublin accent could cost one's life here. Certainly, it didn't apply to me, but it didn't make me feel particularly safe either. We were returning to Poleglass at night, the car was rushing at great speed, and as we turned around a sharp bend, we saw suddenly two or three cars burning right in the middle of road. Our driver, who was probably used to such things, elegantly drove around them at the last minute.

- What is going on?

– *Hoods* hijack cars and set them on fire, and when the *peelers*⁴⁴ come, they throw bricks at them ...

When we approached the house where we were staying, it was already half past one, but nobody was sleeping. On the contrary, everybody ran out into the street and shouted something, someone climbed on a fence, someone pursued him ...

– What is going on here?

– That's the local hoods who just tried to hijack a car ...

– And does this happen here often?

– Aye, almost every day ...

Next morning during a parade in honour of Bobby Sands and his comrades, I heard for the first time that the IRA was going to admit outsiders into their bunkers to seal them up.

⁴⁴ Policemen

My Dublin companions had already been warned about it and were morally prepared (I remember one representative of the party's Leadership went around our places to calm us down and, having winked, conspiratorially added at the end of his speech – if he saw that he hadn't really convinced people – that nobody said that after sealing up the bunkers with old “gear” you couldn't get something much newer). I did not understand one thing back then yet – to whom was the Leadership lying: to their own people or to the British. But anyway, to lie and dodge, in my view, is unacceptable for people who claim to be revolutionaries. If you start to behave like that, it will be very difficult to get out of that habit.

Taught by the experience of my own country, disarmed “to prove our good will”, while none of our foes even thought of following our example, I was very worried because of this news. But my acquaintances just acted as if nothing has happened. They have been accustomed to believing every word of the leadership and never asked any questions, even for themselves. I probably could not be a good soldier, because before executing the order, I would want to understand it. Also, I want to have the right to ask questions. In such organizations, people are quickly expelled from membership for such things. I was introverted and sad after that news, because the arguments of my Dublin companions didn't calm me at all. They exchanged glances with each other, and both told me that I would be given some interesting work very soon because they needed such broadminded people as I.

– The Dublin Leadership has noticed you, and ...

I interrupted:

– Sorry, guys, but who is the Leadership?

They irresolutely exchanged glances:

– Well,... We are...

My God, I laughed so much! But, of course, not aloud.

Though I promised my mum to limit contacts with “guerrillas” to Dublin, it became more and more difficult for me to fulfil this promise. Because of the new work schedule I could not attend many meetings of my Dublin cell: I had no way to be there. Also, there were a lot of changes in the organization itself, and unfortunately not all these changes were positive...

In the spring, absolutely unexpectedly not only by me, but by all members of the Dublin organization, Peter and Deirdre wrote letters of resignation from the party, without any warning to anybody. It was a big shock for me – especially as it happened so suddenly. I remember how Peter brought me into the session of the party conference for the first time in my life, having told me that he had no time to be there himself. When I asked whether he would come to the afternoon sessions, he answered very evasively. In the evening, after the conference, he and Deirdre danced together with all the participants in a Republican “disco” as if nothing had happened. And the next day a stranger informed me about their voluntary resignation... Most people expressed their regrets about it: “Perhaps they will still change their minds” – And soon nobody spoke about them anymore. As if they were never in the party, though it survived through the most difficult years thanks to people like Peter and Deirdre. It was a pity that they explained nothing to us and kept it a secret. Later Peter told me why they left. It was unpleasant and difficult for him to talk

about it. He had devoted more than 10 of his 30 years to the party. He realised before many others what the party was turning to: it wasn't in tune with his ideals.

– If Bobby Sands could just see this.... Is that what he gave his life for? To abandon the idea of nationalization of the banks (“nobody will allow us to do this”)? To disarm in return for a promise to let us live under the auspices of the local British government – work which the British could stop any time at their will (looking forward, I can say that that's exactly what they did, I even lost count how many times during my life in Ireland!) Our party was unique, not like all the other Irish parties. But now.... Once we disarm, no one will even negotiate with us!

Having experienced Gorbachev's unilateral disarmament, I could not disagree with Peter. Alas, the old expression “if you want peace, be ready for war,” is just as valid today... Peter did not try to persuade me to follow his example. And I didn't know enough myself yet to make such decisions. Anyway, it is not a kindergarten: to join today and quit tomorrow! But emotionally I was no longer bonded to Dublin, and I applied for “a transfer”: to transfer my membership to a Cumann at the new place of my residence...

My new comrades soon called at my door. They turned out to be two tall handsome guys in long coats out of season; one was a dark-looking man with a hooked nose and an earring in one ear, which made him look like a pirate.

I did not tell my mother who they were, so she wouldn't be upset. But she guessed.

After reading my reference letter that I brought from Dublin (which stated that I “served this Cumann with distinction”), the “pirate,” who had a Protestant name of Alan, sighed with relief and said confidentially:

– It's good that you already joined in Dublin, otherwise if you had come to us here... we are supposed to check a person, but how can we check you?

That same evening, my new friends invited me to the celebration of the early release from prison of a local IRA volunteer (just around that time they were released on license, that is, provided that they would not carry out any new actions), on the basis of the Peace agreements).

The celebration was held high up in the mountains. So high that in this village even the mobile phones were not working. Along its main street clouds flew thoughtfully; at first I mistook them for fog. It was one of those Republican villages into which the police and the army do not set their foot. The celebration was held in the building of the local GAA⁴⁵ club that looked like a big hangar. It was so full of smoke that it seemed you could hang an axe in the air there⁴⁶. No one in our Dublin cell was a smoker; but here, by contrast, it seems that there wasn't anybody who wasn't smoking...

The local hero whose release we were celebrating was called Joe. The atmosphere was indescribable: from time to time it seemed to me that all this was happening in some film shoot in which I had accidentally landed. In the hall there were gathered not only Joe's numerous relatives (including his fiancée, who had waited for him for 8 years, and his

⁴⁵ Gaelic Football Association (in Ireland, both South and North)

⁴⁶ Russian expression for smelly air

two brothers, but also members of the “RA”, as it is abbreviated), but virtually all the Republicans of the area. The “DJ” was also a former political prisoner. The musical part was assigned to the group “Justice” from the border town of Newry. When the crowd heard the sounds of the “SAM Song” – which, using the well-known tune of “Riders in the Sky”, glorified the RA’s new weapon (the rockets), the audience in the hall literally fell into ecstasy with the chorus:

Tiocfaidh Ar La,

Sing Up the RA!

SAM missiles

In the sky...

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's Super SAM!”

The people cheered in earnest, and when “Justice” played this song, everyone really thought that it was just about Joe:

“I spent eight years in the cages,

I had time to think and plan...

Although they locked away a boy,

I came out a man... “

People began to dance, often guys danced with guys, just putting their arms around each other’s shoulders, and occasionally throwing their right arm high. Everyone improvised as he could, but the mother of the hero was particularly zealous... She pounded with her large fist on the table. The music was so loud that you could not even talk to anyone.

“Ooh ah up the RA, say ooh ah up the RA!” – Roared and boomed from all sides.

These words are repeated in many Republican songs. Other expressions that constantly occur are the Republican cry: *Tiocfaidh Ar La*; (pronounced “Chucky ar la” which in Irish means “our day will come!”)

I was brought home in a car as full of passengers as sardines in a can. Everyone but the driver was tipsy. I sat in the middle of the back and on either side of me sat two: on the right and on the left one Republican was sitting in the other’s lap. The car rushed down the steep mountain road with a whistle in pitch darkness. I only had time to close my eyes as we went around the sharp bends. When we landed unscathed in town, where everyone had gone to sleep long ago, the hero of the evening, Joe – and he was our sober driver – pointed out to me at our local supermarket.

– You know, local Catholics are boycotting this store... a few years ago Prods from the neighbouring village brutally tortured and killed a Catholic teenager here in town. Then they came here to wash their car in the parking lot at this supermarket. And what do you think: when the peelers wanted to see the tapes from the shop’s security cameras, it appeared that someone from the store had already taken out all the tapes... So if you can do without this store, please do not go there. Okay?

Yes, after talking with people I was less and less inclined to feel any sort of “admiration” for customers who angrily demanded from you on the phone in the middle of the night to let some Dutch casino allow them to play the roulette wheel again with their credit card...

... The next morning, I was woken up by my alarmed mother.

– I told you to stay away from the partisans here! See, somebody already shot at your window!

Still half asleep and wondering what had happened, I went downstairs. In the middle of my living room window there really was a neat round hole in the glass. My sleep immediately faded away. And I felt uneasy in my stomach.

Then I looked out the window and started laughing like crazy, even though putting in a new window would probably cost us a fortune: in the field in front of the house a lonely teenager was playing golf. And lying in the grass under our window was one of his heavy white golf balls...

...At work on the completion of my training I had to pass a test on operating procedures, which I very seriously prepared for. I took it during my work time; that is, at night: the boss left the assignment for me on the table. I did my work honestly: what is the point of cheating, this isn't school, you have to work with your knowledge!

I had not been informed of my results for a long time, so long that I began to worry. And then they told me that I needed to retake it. I did not believe my ears. Had I flunked it? But I had tried so hard!...

What actually happened I learned only later from Placide, who was terribly curious and loved to pick up all the latest gossips of the bank: it turned out that Margaret, The Transsexual, having checked my work, insisted to our manager that I should retake it because... "all the answers were too correct. One could not pass the exam like that without cheating."

Do I need to explain how deeply I was hurt and offended! Not only because I was accused of cheating, not only because I had to retake the test, but most importantly: because they so underestimated my intelligence! Yes, Margaret, I do have a good memory. Not everyone in the world is a bankrupt "businessman" who is kept at work only for his acting abilities. What am I supposed to do, to pretend to be stupider than I really am in order to please you?

– Lordy, lordy, of course, I will retake it if I have to! – I said, quite angry. I was told that now I would have to come to the office for this in the afternoon – that is, in my own free time. Once again, I used up my free time when I came to retake it. To my surprise, this time there were almost twice as many questions, in the same hour and a half! And some of them covered material that was not part of our training or our duties, so how was I supposed to answer those? These were questions for other banking specialties! But Margaret was not in the office, and there was nobody to protest to. So I wrote under these questions that our training did not include this material. What else could I do?

After that, I again did not get the results for a long time. It was only when I insisted that they reluctantly told me that I passed. With such faces as if they were hoping that I hadn't...

Everything went on as usual, but I was left with quite a bad feeling. I tried not to show it: even though I really did not like the work, but from the practical point of view it suited me well. What else could I do? Again, to start working in Dublin during the day, not to see my loved ones for weeks and pay for a second accommodation? I came into the office on time, accurately fulfilled all my duties and asked no questions.

At night, our huge glass building facing the riverbank was empty. Besides the three of us, there were only two guards: one at the entrance and one in the underground garage. At the entrance was my compatriot Masha – a Russian girl who had a Georgian boyfriend.

Some sixth sense prompted me to stay away from her, although she quite insisted on meeting in our free time: her Gogi wanted this so much! And from time to time the security guard from the garage made the rounds of the building, making sure everything was okay. He felt that we were bored, and sometimes he stayed to chat with us. He showed us some family photos. He himself was a Scot, married to a Mongolian; he once worked in Mongolia and still went there regularly. He told us that there were just four Mongolians in Ireland at that time. And now Mongolians clean offices in the Irish capital, all of them with a university education. And the Irish women who did this work before were fired – because, you know, they actually would like to receive a more or less decent salary for their work...

One summer evening I went to work as usual, spread out my belongings on the desk and turned on the computer. When I started to check my email, I saw a message from Adriana. I was a bit surprised because I had just seen her that day, three hours before: she was somehow quite embarrassed by the fact that I saw her in the company of my former colleague – a Dutch guy named Marco, although I did not care that they walked down the street together. Why would she suddenly write me e-mails? After all, she has my phone number, if she had something to talk to me about.

In her email Adriana asked me to return her house key, indicating that I could no longer sleep on their couch in the afternoons. Well, it was her right, even if it was because of Marko, with whom she planned to lie on that couch instead of letting me lie there, while her neighbours did not see them – but why could she not have told me this in person? And at least a couple of days in advance? Would that be so difficult? And where am I going to sleep now, after this night shift? The next morning, there were Orangemen parades across the North, and due to this I could not be reach home until just 2-3 hours before my bus back....

I had a sleeping bag with me. After the shift I went a couple of floors above: these offices were not yet occupied. But sleeping on the floor in the office was too risky: someone could find me there. Then I went to the disabled toilet on the same floor, which was longer and wider than an ordinary one, so that there would be enough place for a wheelchair. There were such toilets on each floor: there couldn't be that many people with disabilities in the whole building. I laid my sleeping bag on the floor, since it was clean, slammed the door and turned off the light...

I was so tired that I slept there very well, sound like a baby. I didn't even have any dreams. I left the building only when the day shift ended, had dinner in the city – and as if nothing had happened, appeared back at my workplace at the appointed hour...

That's how I became "working homeless". No, not exactly a vagabond – a man with no fixed abode, because my abode was in fact quite fixed.... Sometimes I changed floors. On the weekend when there was nobody working in the offices on the other floors, I even dared to sleep there: on the floor under the tables. When, after having worked the last day of my work week, I went to the bus station with a sense of relief early in the morning, I came across the Dublin homeless, sleeping soundly on the steps of plush offices in the financial quarter. Now I sympathized with them twice as much as before! It used to be that I did not understand how people could sleep so soundly God knows where and in any weather, but now I knew...

That's how my workdays went by... Once on my short break between working at night and sleeping in the toilet during the day, during a stroll I ran into one of the Sinn Fein

activists – a professional union worker named Alice. We had met at a conference, and she remembered me. We got to talking, and I told her about my situation; not counting, of course, on any help, I just wanted to get it off my chest. Alice was horrified and immediately offered to let me sleep at her house during the day. Republicans still do have very different notions of mutual assistance and friendship than the average capitalist consumer: almost the same as Soviet ones!

She lived near the city centre, in the quarter that was cleaned of drug dealers thanks to the efforts of Cathal whom you already heard of: the detonator of the bridges. Someone told me that Alice had been a Trotskyite in the past. With me she never mentioned the name of Lev Davidovich⁴⁷. But she often warned me about communicating with “Stickies” – members or former members of the Official IRA and the Irish Workers’ Party. Alice was an ardent feminist. I considered myself to be a feminist – that is until I met real feminists. When I saw how she treated her husband, who taught journalism at a college, I even felt sorry for him. It was easy to control such a gentle man, of course. She should have tried to stay married to my Sonny!

Alice took good care of me. She even took me with her family to the theatre once when I had a free evening (of course, I really wanted to go home right after work, but out of respect for her, I decided to stay in Dublin a bit longer for the occasion). It was a play about working class life in Belfast in different generations: a very sombre, serious story. The famous West Belfast singer Terry O’Neill played a major role in it, whom my Irish-speaking friends called in Irish – Turlach. He really sang like a nightingale. When at the end of the play the actors began to sing “The Internationale” – in Irish, to my complete surprise, Alice stood up and sang it too – though in English, – shaking her fist in the air. Then I too, picked up this song familiar since childhood, whose text was published every year on the back of the first sheet of our tear-off calendars. Only, of course, in Russian!... After the show we were approached by a young man wearing spectacles whom I did not know.

– Ach, Kieran! – Alice was delighted – I did not even know that you had returned from South Africa!

– Well, I just came back today... I was going to see you today, but there was no time. I’m very tired. It’s probably the jet lag... but I’ll go home, anyway. Right now, after the show.

– Are you driving?

– Yes, of course.

Using this opportunity, Alice immediately asked him if he wouldn’t mind giving me a lift to the North: I was already late for my last bus. Kieran immediately and readily agreed; my town was almost on his way. He lived in Antrim. I tactfully did not ask my new comrade what he was doing in South Africa. In Republican circles, one doesn’t ask such things. Besides, he would probably come up with some nice story about his need to share experiences of peace and reconciliation with the South Africans in the townships...

Kieran Cassidy was a plumber by profession: there are very few intellectuals and “white collar” workers among the Republicans, but plenty of plumbers and joiners, welders and electricians, construction workers and taxi drivers. Catholics have traditionally been prevented from joining the ranks of intelligentsia: by the whole local system of education and work (when all the questionnaires and CV’s have to indicate one’s religious affiliation, and even if you do not wish to specify it, the employer “*reserves the right to*

⁴⁷ Trotsky’s first name and patronymic

determine to which community you belong based on circumstantial evidence “(for example, by the name of your primary school!). I felt that he was a shy man. Nevertheless, I quickly managed to get him to talk: one of the advantages I acquired in Ireland was something I learned from my work on the phones – to talk easily and naturally to complete strangers. For me it was a great achievement if you consider that I was even afraid to go to the supermarket alone until the age of 14. And now I was enjoying my new skills to the fullest!

By the time he started to drive, Kieran has already begun to tell me how he was suing the state for compensation because of the torture he was subjected to during his arrest. Fortunately, he didn't describe the torture in detail, but he said that he would go up to the European Court if necessary. And I felt that he really would. Then the conversation somewhat stalled: because he had tried, due to his same shyness, to speak to me in propaganda terms. But I quickly turned it into a lively conversation, especially after seeing that he was nodding and about to fall asleep at the steering wheel. I chose a win-win topic that I used with all my foreign friends: Soviet political jokes. Of course, there are some jokes that can't be translated, or those for which you need to know the names of the people that they are about, but I had already formed my own translated repertoire: the most important thing was not to tell these jokes twice to the same person!

Have you noticed how dramatically this genre has died out in Russia today? Good new jokes are practically absent. Alterations of jokes that existed in Soviet times look pathetic and clumsy under the new situation. One would think that now there is a sea of material for such anecdotes: “market democracy” produced plenty of figures well worthy of the pen of Saltykov-Shchedrin⁴⁸! But no. With anecdotes it doesn't seem to go well. I think the point is that life has changed from rather funny to quite nasty. This life doesn't inspire joking. About Stalin's time people sometimes say: “There was a cult, but there was also the Personality!” The same can be said about Soviet jokes: “There were lots of anecdotes about life, but then there was also Life!”

I do not remember that I was ever afraid to tell jokes. Naturally, you should know when it was acceptable, and when it wasn't. I'm talking about during Brezhnev's time. We did not consider telling these jokes to be anti-Soviet. Only a stranger – a real or spiritual one, could think so. The existence of political jokes was a sign of anti-Soviet sentiment only for “enemy voices”⁴⁹. And in reality, it was a friendly criticism. I do not know what they meant to their authors, but this is how we felt about these jokes. Unfriendly towards the USSR foreigners (there were many, though certainly not all) did come to us full of prejudices about Soviet life – and they persistently searched everywhere for evidence of their beliefs. If they didn't find what they expected, they were very upset and began to assert that it was just hidden from them. They now act the same way in other socialist countries: they look for slums and beggars. For some reason, they are not interested in the slums of Haiti, or in Ethiopia “freed from Red terror”, or in the “new” South Africa – although there you don't even have to search hard for such things, they are all around you...

I remember how my first boyfriend, Ethiopian Said, was very surprised when I took him to the cinema to watch our Soviet comedy “Ivan Vasilyevich Changes His Occupation”: there many of the shortcomings of our life were mercilessly mocked. In particular, he was

⁴⁸ The most famous political satirist writer of pre-revolutionary Russia (XIX century)

⁴⁹ Western radio stations

surprised when the screen showed a black-market dealer in the store – apparently, his petty mind seriously believed that in the Soviet Union they’d give you *20 years imprisonment with confiscation of property* for a show like this... He came out of the cinema so amazed that suddenly, for no apparent reason, he said to me:

– I am no longer Said. Call me Ivan Petrovich now.

One of my favourite old jokes is about how they revived Lenin. He walked around Moscow, looked at the streets and on the third day he was gone. They looked and looked for him, but he could not be found. Then they revived Felix Dzerzhinsky, who was asked to help find Lenin. Felix remembered an old safe house, went there, found a note on the table: “*Dear Felix! Please do not look for me. I am in Switzerland. We must start all over again.*”

Of course, we used to laugh at this; but today this joke has a very different meaning. And now, it’s not just an anecdote, but the way it really is...

Kieran liked the jokes. It put him on the same wavelength with me surprisingly easily; I did not even have to explain anything! Kieran finally woke up, shook his head and told me an Irish joke:

– An IRA man comes to the gates of heaven, where St. Peter meets him. He looks at him and says, “I do not think that you can go in there, my son...” To which the IRA man replies: “I don’t have to go in. It’s you who has 20 minutes to get everybody out...”

I laughed almost like the hare in the “Just you wait!” cartoon⁵⁰ when he was in a room with crooked mirrors... Kieran looked at my reaction and also laughed. So much that we almost crashed into a pole. The rest of the way we shared jokes and laughed – up to having hiccups.

I was glad to keep him from falling asleep at the wheel. When we drove to my house and I thanked him and wanted to leave, he suddenly asked:

– Hey, do you mind if I stay overnight? I’m so tired of flying that I will just not make it to Antrim now...

It was only about an hour and a half to Antrim, but I did not argue. If a man said he was tired, so he was. Besides, I never had real freedom fighters staying in my house overnight.

– Mum, – I said to my mother at the door – This is Kieran Cassidy. He just returned from South Africa and is very tired. He’ll sleep the night in the “box” room (as we called our smallest bedroom), and tomorrow he will go on.

Mum looked at me in astonishment but said nothing. She realized that life with me has to be like with Pachkulya Pestrenki of the books about Dunno⁵¹, one of whose rules was not to be surprised by anything (the other rule was “never to wash,” but this mum would not have gone for even for me!)

Kieran went to bed, and mum just looked at him and shook her head – as if to say, “We do not need such Kierans.” I was surprised: I did not even look at it from this point of view! What did she imagine?

⁵⁰ Most popular Soviet cartoon for children, analogous to “Tom & Jerry”

⁵¹ “Adventures of Dunno” by Nikolay Nosov, famous Soviet children’s book

... In the morning we both went around the house on tiptoes. We even took Lisa into the kitchen when she woke up, so that she would not wake him (Lisa woke up early, and you could not explain to her that she should keep quiet). It was already almost noon, but Kieran was still asleep. We no longer tried to stop Lisa from walking around the house, even though she made some noise, but he was still asleep.... I already worried whether he was alive, but I felt somehow uneasy about knocking on his door. For a half day we toiled so, until he finally came downstairs and said, as if nothing had happened:

– Would you mind if I had breakfast?

Of course, we fed him, even though it was already more like lunch.

Kieran thanked us warmly for our hospitality and off he went...

.... After about a week I received the long-awaited response from Cuba. By post, not by e-mail, as I had expected. The clinic sent me some more detailed information about what they are doing, and I understood from the first glance at this prospectus: this is exactly what Lisa needed! If even the Cubans could not make her better, at least everything would be clear to us... True, the clinic could not make decisions on the financial issues itself, but the doctors advised me to appeal to higher authorities, for example, to the Cuban Ministry of Health. But in any case, at least now I had a goal!

I was so deep in my dreams about Lisa's treatment, that I did not notice that Placide was glancing over my shoulder:

– Oh, what have you got there? Very beautiful stamps...

I explained.

– Cuba? – His face was drawn, and for a moment he reminded me of the expression of horror on the face of Princess Avdotya in Alexei Tolstoy's book "Peter the Great": "*Oh, how you scared me, my dear, what a horror – to Paris... Sure, it must be rotten there!*"⁵²

I always laugh when I see such a reaction to Cuba. Cuba, which we back at home all know so well and have always loved; Cuba that in my childhood was a big part of our lives – well, what can be terrible about it? But I forgot where I was working...

Three days later, when I went to work as usual, two of our managers were already waiting for me in the office (probably out of fear that one wouldn't be enough to deal with me, if I suddenly showed resistance). They told me that I was fired, without any explanation. They asked me to gather my belongings and surrender my work pass.

One of them, a gentleman nice enough to deal with who always treated me well, clearly felt uncomfortable. I, stunned by this news like a fish stunned by poacher's dynamite, was collecting my stuff, as if on autopilot, thought about what I should do now and how I was to support my family and pay all the bills (I would rather have died than to confess these thoughts to him!). He stood behind me and mumbled something about the fact that they will still pay me for a month in advance, so that they were not really throwing me out to fend for myself, and then he said suddenly:

– Would you like me to give you some advice for the future? – But then he became afraid of his own words and quickly blurted out: – No, I suppose, I better not...

Such is "freedom of speech" over here...

Of course, a person who is going to get medical treatment for her child in "authoritarian" Cuba, plus receives letters about the construction of Magnitogorsk and the civil war in

⁵² Alexei Tolstoy "Peter the First" [You have Peter the Great in the text. You don't need a footnote if it is in the text.]

Chad, from a village in county Cavan (by the way, who allowed them to open mail that was addressed to me by name, even if at my work address?) – it is a truly explosive combination. A compote of toxic agents: *sarin, tabun and Zaman mixed together with mustard gas*. Such people should be definitely kept away from American banks, regardless of their professional qualities...

I tried to imagine Placide's facial expression when he was reporting to them on me – with all the nonsense that he certainly was accompanying it with. And despite everything, I could hardly restrain myself from laughing. How many idiots are there in this world! The manager looked at me with astonishment. My “explosiveness” was now quite obvious to him. So much that he even personally escorted me to the door.

– You take good care, Mr. Jones! – I told him when I said farewell, giving him my bank badge.

I walked out of the building, free as a bird. It was so late that it was already impossible to get home, and I decided already that I was not going to tell my mother about the dismissal. Why should she worry if she couldn't do anything about it? I would just tell her that I took some leave, and then I'll look for a job. In the North. For any job.

That's right, but what do I do right now? I didn't want to disturb Alice: I was already sleeping at her place during the day. I fumbled in my notebook and found a counsellor's business card: the bank was paying for up to five consultations for us with a psychologist-consultant if we had some psychological difficulties. (I should advise Placide to use this service, for apparently he needed it even worse than I.) The phone number that they gave us was active 24 hours a day. Why not try it? After all, they talk about it so much in Russia now: how it supposedly helps. After every terrorist attack or any other disaster you can read in the media: “the relatives of the victims were provided for by psychologists...” In such tone as if they were doing these relatives a great favour.

Much to my surprise, the psychologist was free, as they say in the commercials “right now”. Judging by her voice, she was even bored. Her office was in an old church, near the Dublin Port and not far from my former job.

– You can come now, I'll wait! – She said kindly. And so, I went...

I had no idea that right behind Dublin's Financial Centre there were such slums! And I had a feeling that these people were living here for generations, for everyone seemed to know each other until the seventh generation. Although it was evening, the streets were full of people of both sexes and all ages. Being an outsider, I was looked at cautiously and not always in a friendly manner by dozens of eyes. I went through the area as the gauntlet, though no one said a word to me.

I had to circle around the church twice before I found the front door. The psychologist was a pretty little woman. I did not complain to her about the dismissal since my former employer was still paying for this session. Instead, I told her the story of my marriage to Sonny, of our divorce and of Lisa's illness: because, to tell you the truth, I have never fully recovered psychologically after all of this. I told my story to several people; men say that it should become easier when you share your grief with others, but it did not get any easier. Well, maybe just for a couple of hours, but no more. So, perhaps, at least talking to a professional would help?

I finished my story and was looking forward to her advice. She listened to me holding her breath: as if my story was not about a human life, but some Mexican TV soap opera, and this reaction was, I thought, not very professional, but like that of an ordinary person in the street. But maybe my impressions were wrong?

– You are telling me about all this so calmly, – she said at last. – Don’t you hate him? I thought about it for a moment. Do I hate Sonny? No, not at all. I was sorry about what had happened, and most of all, I regretted that he did not understand me. I know that I could not continue to tolerate such treatment. But I know that I also contributed to the discord in our relations. After all, it takes two to tango. The main problem was that at least I tried to admit my part in this, but Sonny didn’t admit his – oh no... And that’s what I told her.

She raised her eyebrows in surprise and made a long speech, the substance of which was that I would not feel better until I began to hate him.

– You have absolutely every right to hate your ex-husband! – she said with fervour. And it became absolutely clear to me that this woman undoubtedly had some deep unresolved psychological issues in her own life...

– Perhaps I do. But I do not hate him, – I said.

Hatred can be constructive only if you have to break out of a vicious circle. It is like a rocket fuel to make the breakthrough. In all other cases it just eats you from within. The moment when I needed to hate him – in order to change things – had long passed.

But the “expert” insisted on her opinion. And that was all she could offer me? Was that her recipe for peace of mind? But the world has plenty of global villains who really do deserve to be hated – and a good whipping as well! And I, for some reason, should waste my negative energy on a single poor soul, a guy with a hidden colonial inferiority complex?

As you wish, but I do not believe that “experts and professionals” of the market model can help anyone. And this personal experience only strengthened my belief. It’s just a common money-making exercise: if not from your money personally, then from your employer or from the State that provided these services, since when something disastrous happened to your loved ones, it is quite often the State’s fault.

My feelings were hurt by the very idea that this person was listening to me just because he or she got paid for it. Think about it. In fact, he or she doesn’t really care about you at all. He or she does not sympathize with all his/her heart with you as a close person, a friend, or even just somebody who has been through similar experiences. He or she does not have any human feelings for you. He/she thinks only of his/her pay check. What’s the sense of pouring out your soul to such a person? And how can he/she help anyone – in any situation, – since it is a person who is deeply and very professionally *indifferent*? The only one whose words and advice could help me would be a person who would take my story to heart and not just see it as some entertainment, like Lusya, the secretary at my mum’s work, who used to read in the Literary Gazette only court chronicles⁵³.

Help from a “professional” reminds me very much of holiday greetings cards with pre-printed texts introduced to us from the West: for all the occasions of life, where you use someone else’s expressions to assure those you love that they are the only ones for you, of the uniqueness of your feelings. If that is really so, don’t you see how insulting it is to them that you were not even able to find your own words for them, from your heart? Or

⁵³ The only Soviet newspaper that published such things

could you not find time to write something personal? For me, such cards with printed messages like “love me as much as I love you” are vile, emasculating human feelings and relationships.

Similarly, I feel offended to see on the package of some cereal my once favourite Olympic champion. I do not want to buy this product after that. If that’s how this champion has to earn a living, I only feel sorry for him, like for a prostitute who has fallen into the clutches of a pimp. In fact, this is also prostitution: selling yourself. Never mind that many would be ready to pay for it. There are things that no money can replace, if for sake of this money you have to give up elementary human dignity, you are lost as a human being.

I came out of that psychologist’s office with an even greater sense that I had landed in the Stone Age; that’s what this “civilized world” really is in the field of human relations. The West reminded me more and more of the Mongol-Tatar yoke: a huge advantage over surrounding nations in military terms, while a huge backwardness in comparison with them culturally.

It was rather warm, and I decided to just wait for the first bus on the embankment of the River Liffey, in a secluded spot, so that no one would see me. All railway stations and bus stations in the Irish capital at that time closed for the night, passenger trains did not run at night at all. This was not Soviet Voroshilovgrad.

I soon found a spot and sat down on the stairs, wrapped tightly in my Aran jumper: that’s when it came in handy! I’ll sleep when I’ll get home. I’ll tell my mum that I took some days off at work...

Memories of my break-up with Sonny flooded my head again.

...I’ve already mentioned that Sonny did not even meet me at the airport when I flew back from Moscow. Instead, I was met by a Dutch Customs female officer: at that time wild stories were circulating in the West about Russian uranium smugglers. The polonium case had not yet taken place.

– Open your suitcase, please! – the Customs woman asked me, looking at my documents. I opened the locks. With a deeply strained face she buried herself in my books, tapes with Russian pop music (I’ve never listened to our pop music in the Soviet era, but now the nostalgia got hold of me badly), boxes of Russian chocolates (proper ones, exuding sweet aroma around the whole Schiphol airport, not those miserable Western sweets that make me think of poo-coloured “Kinder Surprise⁵⁴”) and *nevalyashka*⁵⁵ dolls. Suddenly cried out, as if I was concealing at least a live snake in my suitcase:

– What is this?!

I looked. She brought the effeminate and trembling finger of one hand to her nose with an expression of horror, while pointing with the finger of the other hand at the *taranka*⁵⁶ wrapped in a plastic bag.

We managed to avoid a diplomatic incident. The customs woman ran to wash her hands. And the taranka was allowed – after careful consideration – into the “free world”...

⁵⁴ Well-known brand of German chocolate; in Russia this name is used sarcastically for diarrhoea of children

⁵⁵ Russian Roly-Poly toy

⁵⁶ Russian dry salted fish

I told Sonny about it: he had become hooked on taranka in Russia, and I was carrying it for him, but he did not even smile. And after the incident with Hans Kloss (see earlier) he didn't talk to me at all for a few days.

Something irreparable happened between us during that trip to Russia: as if we got to an intersection and began to go off in different directions. Sonny blamed exclusively Volodya Zelinsky for that, and I in vain protested that there was still never anything between me and Volodya. For Sonny, even to admire Jeff Goldblum in "Jurassic Park" was a betrayal.

And for me at that time, as I said, Volodya just became the personification of the entire Soviet life. What my people's life could have been like but ceased to be (and it did not even matter that he himself turned out to be not quite a true Soviet man after perestroika years). But symbolism is too high a spiritual material for an ordinary Westerner's mind. It is only in the East that every detail has its own symbolic meaning...

Sonny successfully defended his diploma thesis... and became unemployed. Electrical Engineers were nowhere required. At least, certainly not West Indian ones. Every day he studied the newspapers in search of job advertisements, he sent out more than a dozen job application letters: even for not quite the right positions, but to no avail. It also did not add either to his confidence, or to his good mood...

I continued to study – and work part-time, since now he could babysit Liza too and I did not always have to bring her to Tilburg. On my return from Russia, of course, I did not even try to apply for a place in my old "McDonald's". To find another permanent part-time job was not possible, and I continued to study and take odd temporary jobs: mostly packing something in different plants, from sponges (they even asked me to translate the packaging into Russian – only, of course, free of charge!) to biscuits and toiletry sets...

There for the first time I met the Dutch "working class": women who worked as packers. They were very rough, all smoked like retired soldiers; they were worn out, pale women who loved filthy jokes, and absolutely didn't think about their own lives and even less about the lives of others. They didn't have time or energy for this. They lived by the day, all for the current moment. They were afraid that we, the temps, the contract workers, would take their place, since we were called when there was a lot of work and sent home when there was little: sometimes the employment agency's staff would come right to the conveyor belt, pointing a finger at us, "You, you and you... for you there is no work today. Come back tomorrow. "

Usually such unlucky ones included my new Indonesian friend Ingeborg: she too had a "victim-like" facial expression. Why did she work at all, if those who lived on the dole were allowed to retain only 25% of their earnings? Because she was up to her neck in debts. Every time she tried to earn more, worked hard with all her force, begged for extra hours, – but at the end of the month most of this hard-earned money was deducted from her benefits. When I last saw her, she already had lost her apartment and was wandering from place to place, renting just a small room from a private landlord.

...The conveyor belt with packets of biscuits was moving with such speed that it wore our fingers until they bled. The only thing that was nice at the biscuit factory was the sweet smell. The most enjoyable of all my jobs at that period was decorating cakes with fruit. It

was mainly Arab girls who worked there. We spent the whole day in the refrigerator with temperature of about -10 C, and by lunch time we all got blue from cold...

Every time you'd come to the office of a temporary employment agency, if you were told that there was a vacancy for tomorrow – no matter what kind! – your heart beat happily in your chest. Hooray! And they told you about these vacancies with the air of such importance as if it was a position of professor in some university.

Once I almost got a permanent job! True, the money offered was miserable, and the boss made mocking arrogant comments about the “smelly” (naturally, after such long journeys!) Russian long-haul truck driver with whom I would have to work, but the main thing was that if I had taken this job, it would have given me the opportunity to “gain experience” (without experience here one don't get any job, anywhere at all; and how, may I ask you, were you supposed to gain experience if no one would give you a job without it?). I learned of this job by chance: a Russian woman who was married to a Dutch policeman told me of it. Her son had worked in that position, but to the anger of his boss, he found himself a better place in another company.... And the boss needed a replacement quickly.

I had to make plans, but Sonny basically forbade me to work, under the pretext that I “deserved better.” But it was not about what I deserved: all of us have to start somewhere! We still desperately needed money. He spoke as if I was at least a Princess of Orange and worked exclusively for my own pleasure! Then for the first time we had a falling out in earnest. But he was adamant. And if some of you say that I should simply not have listened to him and did my own thing: have you even been in a foreign country, looking after a small child, without blood relatives, without close friends and without any possibility of arranging a place in kindergarten? I was bound hand and foot. Maybe that's exactly what Sonny needed us to have a baby for?

Sonny sat without a job himself for a whole year. He even tried to settle for some company selling encyclopaedias in the street: every morning he went to the train station with a heavy bag, and then returned in the evening, with still just as heavy a bag. I was angry at him because he engaged in such nonsense, not giving me the opportunity to enrol in a relatively normal, permanent job: all this trade in encyclopaedias and “Herbalife” was no better than our AO “MMM”⁵⁷.

During this miserable trade, he met a fellow countryman, Wensley, a businessman exporter who yet again went bankrupt. Wensley was a cheerful but not very bright young man. I was getting angry:

– Here they are, your role models! “Your own business”, “your own business”... It would be better for both of you just to look for a normal job!

Wensley often argued with me about which system was better; though he did not scream hysterically, like my English friend, who claimed that we “lived under a military dictatorship”, but his knowledge of our system was of about the same level. I immediately told him authoritatively that I, unlike him, have the right to compare: I've lived under both systems, but he did not. Sonny wistfully listened to our arguments, then broke his silence and said to Wensley quite bitterly:

⁵⁷ Infamous Russian Ponzi Scheme company - see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MMM_\(Ponzi_scheme_company\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MMM_(Ponzi_scheme_company)) - was a Russian company that perpetrated one of the world's largest Ponzi schemes of all time, in the 1990s.[1][2] By different estimates from 5 to 40 million people lost up to \$10 billion. The exact figures are not known even to the founders.

– Listen, you leave her alone with this! You are not going to change her mind, and I am already sick of listening to you both...

When this “work” was also over, Sonny became depressed. He was sitting at his PC until late, “*shooting Russians*⁵⁸”, and then lay in bed until noon. With me, he spoke very little, and I could not get a word out of him. But I saw that he was not well. No matter how I tried to talk with him, asking him to share his burden, his state of mind with me, he was silent. And then suddenly he would break down, explode, and plates and chairs would fly around the house. It was a disgusting spectacle for a grown man to behave this way.

On the weekends he took me and Lisa for a stroll in the city: to look in the shop windows. I hate this “window-shopping”: if I need something, I just go and buy it and if I cannot afford it, I’ll wait; but to go without any reason, just to tease yourself by the storefronts...

Still, that became our sole entertainment.

Sonny often did not take the pram into the city, even though I told him that Lisa was still small and would get tired, and then he would have to carry her back in his arms. Often that’s exactly how it turned out, and then he’d get angry and walk away, leaving us in the middle of the street. He increasingly began to talk to me through clenched teeth.

With all this in mind, I felt worse and worse. And as others seek oblivion in alcohol or drugs, I started looking for it in purchases. No, not in the shops. We had very little money, so I started buying on credit: mostly clothes from catalogues. It started back in the first years of my life in the Netherlands: when I had almost nothing to wear, but there was also no money to buy any clothes and buying on credit was the only option that was both possible and necessary for me. Gradually I became addicted to this process – as a Canadian professional ice-hockey player is addicted to having chewing gum in his mouth. That was my only – but almost fatal – weakness in the capitalist world. It simply did not register with me that I was charged exorbitant interest rates. After all, my only experience of buying on credit until then was when my mum bought a colour TV during the Soviet era, when small payments were automatically deducted from her paycheck at work every month. Without any interest at all! Sonny tried to explain to me what a debt hole I was getting myself into, but I did not fully understand. Would they really offer me credit if they were not sure that I would be able to afford it? – I thought naively. Besides, getting a parcel in the post for a short time created the feeling that someone sent you a gift, that someone was thinking about you and wanted to do something nice for you.... There was something magical in the process of receiving parcels; the only thing that brightened your dull life where every day was like another, without any light at the end of the tunnel, in the future. It was a pleasure to wait for this parcel: because there was nothing else to wait for...

When I first came to the capitalist world, I was confused by glaring signs in the shop windows: “Sale! ***% discount!” For a while I really thought it was some kind of unique, once in a year sale, which was about to end and would not happen again, and so we needed to hurry with our purchases. But after a while I noticed that the sales didn’t ever stop: all year round. Moreover, the lower price was an ordinary lie, because these things very often did not even cost as much as their alleged original price to start with. It was only a recommended retail price. They say that “seasonal sale” – this perpetual module of capitalist society, does not exist. In fact, prices are first intentionally highly overstated, and then they pretended that they did you a big favour by lowering them to

⁵⁸ In a computer game

more or less reasonable level. If something is sold under the slogan “Two for the price of one,” in reality it just means that the price of both items is included in this price of one. If something is suddenly being sold really cheap, then it is most probably spoiled or is about to expire. If you are offered a “free gift” when buying something, it is generally something of such low quality that you can just “paint it and throw it away”⁵⁹ – or that the price of this present is also included in the price of your purchase itself, so that there isn’t really anything free at all. All these vulgar publicity stunts, trying to get customers to believe that almost every week there is a radically new version of a product or that washes “25% cleaner” (I wonder what are the units of measuring of this same “cleaner?”), or includes some completely new substance, with a name, totally made up: “the more beautiful and foreign it sounds, the sooner the buyers will believe it!” It reminds me of an anecdote in which a soldier was told to paint a missile. He did and then, out of boredom, he threw his empty bucket of paint onto missile’s top. “What’s that?” – a major asked his strict, pointing at the bucket. “A *Synchrophasotron*⁶⁰, Comrade Major,”- soldier was quick to make up the reply. “I see myself that it’s the *synchrotron*. Why it is not painted?”....

You become a manic buyer only under one condition: when you have nothing else in your life. Well, and then it happens as with all junkies: *that will be the very last jacket that I will buy –that’s it!* I managed to stop doing this from time to time, even for relatively long breaks, but as soon as my depression struck again, I once again indulged in it... After Sonny told me not to work, I generally lost all interest in fighting this disease. There was just nothing else out there in life for me. Just emptiness. I was not able to answer the question, what did I need it for. Sometimes I imagined myself in some of these new dresses: back at home, at the velodrome or in the theatre... and that was it. What’s more, I could not understand why the debts that I personally made should be passed on to Sonny: was I perhaps underage? Or inept? I was an adult, my own person, and even if I got into debt, what did he have to do with it: after all, I bought things for myself and did not ask him? Dutch legislation, which made husband and wife share the debts made during their life together equally, seemed to me a medieval barbarity. It is the same as it was until very recently in some European countries: if a married woman wanted to open a bank account of her own, she needed her husband’s permission to do so! Well, can you believe in such savagery? And the very same people shout about some women wearing a veil! What about the fact that after a divorce in the Netherlands one spouse must support the other financially for 12 years? Is that other spouse perhaps a helpless infant?

In short, Sonny was angry at me for these purchases and here he was totally and unequivocally right. But the feeling of uselessness and hopelessness of spending my whole life in this capitalist tomb – just because he wanted to! – had already brought me to the point that if I did not buy some dresses, I would probably have started drinking hard...

⁵⁹ Russian expression for low quality goods

⁶⁰ The **Synchrophasotron** was a [synchrotron](#)-based particle accelerator for protons at the [Joint Institute for Nuclear Research](#) in [Dubna](#) that was operational from 1957[1] - 2003.[2] It was designed and constructed under supervision of [Vladimir Veksler](#), who had invented the [synchrotron](#) in independence to [Edwin McMillan](#).

I tried to escape into something else. To make life have at least a certain incentive. For example, I love to travel. I scraped money for one- or two-day visits to neighbouring countries by bus, but Sonny did not want to go with me. With difficulty, I managed to get him to go once to Wallonia and once to Luxembourg. In Wallonia, Dinant impressed me immensely: a small beautiful town on the banks of a river, with a huge rock above it, with a majestic castle on top of that rock... It was the end of November, there was snow everywhere, and the waiter in a local cafe did not know a word of Dutch, although it is officially a bilingual country. In Luxembourg, I was no less shocked by the fact that the cook in the hotel where we were staying prepared our dinner for the second day from the remnants of what he had given us the day before! They were also apparently “successful businessmen” in a family hotel business!

But Sonny was afraid to go to Germany or France: “they are racists there.” No matter how much I asked him...

Then our cycling hero, comrade Zelinsky threw in some additional problems: he wanted to travel to Holland to buy a foreign car. I sent him an invitation, although Sonny barely hid his discontent. We were about to go to the airport to meet him when my mum phoned and said that at the last moment he had changed his mind. I felt betrayed: first he so desperately needed an invitation, then he just “changed his mind” and did not even phone to apologize! Sonny saw that I was upset and interpreted it in his own way...

But I really became sad and depressed. To such an extent that I began to wonder seriously, if Volodya’s mum had not slipped some potion into my tea, when we had visited them, since she regretted so much that I didn’t become her daughter-in-law. Because I never in my life had experienced such a feeling: as if something was tearing my soul to shreds, such feelings of strong longing I didn’t know exactly for what... That summer I made my first attempt to escape from Sonny. One day he tried to strangle me in front of Lisa: ostensibly because I had put teaspoons after the washing to dry together with tablespoons. Lisa screamed terribly, we clung to each other, and he pulled her out of my hands and shouted:

– Let go of the child!

This phrase he often said in general. For example, “Leave this stupid child alone and come to me...”

I also remember how she once ran up to me, so proud that she had learned how to put on her shoes by herself, and he saw that they were put on the wrong foot (really, who at that age so desperately needs to know which is right, and which is left?) He forcefully stamped on her little foot with his huge boot:

– It’s the wrong foot, you stupid!

Everything inside me just froze.

– Are you crazy? – I screamed, grabbing the little girl into my arms who became hysterical with crying. Señor Arturo sat next to us but did not say a word about the whole scene...

Against this background, it was a mere trifle that they put earrings on her when she was only a year old without even informing me of this. When I asked why, they only said: “None of your business. That’s how it should be.”

I just could not go on like this. If something happened only to me, I would probably just continue to suffer, but he began to treat her like this, and it was impossible to endure.

There was no place to hide from him, so I went home to my mum. After all, she had once gone to her own parents too, away from my father, and they accepted her. She should understand my situation. But Sonny began to send me faxes to Russia, to make calls, even to cry, saying that he loved me... And my mum almost kicked me out of the house: – It will be better for you in Holland! You won't be able to live here anyway. I had nowhere else to go... I had to return.

Any woman who had been in my situation can tell you how long it lasts, such promises of “becoming a different person...”

I almost ceased to feel like a human being, you know, over these years. There was almost nothing left of myself. I was there just to turn on the washing machine or clean the house and cook dinner... and you know yourself, for what else. No matter what I spoke to him about, everything was immediately declared to be “nonsense”, and I was gagged. Whatever I cooked was never tasty enough for his refined tastes, and eventually plates began to fly around the house. Sometimes I'd go home not knowing in what mood he would be when I came in. If I had to expect these “flying saucers”⁶¹ yet again. Just as in the film “The gendarme and the aliens”⁶²... I was so glad when in the weekend he went to his mother! Those were perhaps the best days of our marriage.

Afterwards hopelessness in all respects, of both where I lived and the future, struck me with such force that it was the first and hopefully the last time in my life that I started to think seriously about suicide. But I must have loved myself too much for this: to make such decision, I had at first to do something so bad that I would hate myself. Despising myself so much that I would simply have no other choice. And it was then that I arranged to meet – through an ad in a tabloid – a Dutchman who was engaged in “erotic” photography.

The only positive thing I can say about that fellow is that he was in no rush at the first meeting and just explained his occupation and fees to me. It was very risky to even talk to such a person, but I was feeling so bad then that it was all the same for me.

- Different types of girls pose for my photos, – he said, – of course, I can keep a secret. Some girls do it in secret from their parents because they need money. There are some married women too. There are single mothers. There are those who just try it and then start to cry and say that they cannot do it. I am not interested in this, – he waved with his hand in the direction of my breasts – This I can take pictures of at any beach. I am interested in what you have between your legs. That's good. 100 guilders for a picture. Of course, such things you can't decide on the spot. I'll call you next week; then you can tell me what you have in mind.

This conversation sobered me properly. He had not even finished his speech, and I already knew that I would never, ever go for that. And that meant I would continue to live, because only if I did this, I would have begun to hate myself so much that I would really be able to kill myself.

⁶¹ Russian term for UFO

⁶² French comedy with Louis de Funès

The first thing I did when I returned home after this conversation was to change the phone number. But anyway, this story cost me a good friend in Holland, a girl who was completely atypical for the Netherlands. My university friend Femke grew up in a family of alcoholics and suffered a lot in her childhood: that's why she was not typical of Dutch "strict" morals. She studied the Russian language, was mad about Volodya Politov of the group of "Nana"⁶³ and believed that "Russian men are very romantic": once during her trip to Moscow, a trader at the market, hearing that she was Dutch, stuck his knife in the stall, got down on one knee and proposed his hand and heart to her...

That vile man from the Hague saw me with her and then came to her to look for me. He did not tell her what he needed me for and did not reveal his occupation, but she guessed with a sixth sense that it was something disgusting. After that, without even letting me explain what was actually happening, in one fell swoop Femke forever wiped me out of her life. She now lives somewhere in England: just like me, she was not able to accept Dutch "norms and values" for herself. But I never managed to re-establish contact with her, not even through our mutual friends...

"What the hell is going on?" – I said to myself the next day. "Why should I have to do bad things and then commit suicide? Didn't Phileas Fogg from the Australian cartoon "80 Days Around the World"⁶⁴ say that "there is always a way to save the day?" It was one of my favourite cartoons. It was usually shown on TV during our New Year's vacation...

I went to our university and told the whole story to our dean (except, of course, for my thoughts of suicide). She was a very intelligent, sharp little woman whom I first met when I came to apply for admission to the university. She was Jewish and a born and bred Amsterdam woman. How she survived the war, I do not know, but it was inconvenient to ask. She really took my situation to heart. She scolded me in a motherly fashion for the credit trap that I had gotten myself into. She found a charitable organization that paid my debts. And I signed up for a student flat, so that Lisa and I would have somewhere to go... Now I just had to wait for my turn on the waiting list.

I still remember this woman now, almost with tears in my eyes. Where would we be now if it were not for her...?

Then the self-declared Russian Israeli (or Israeli Russian, I do not know which is more correct) again appeared in my life. The one whom I met in my Dutch class, during my first year in Enschede. The very one who did not want to work at the poultry farm because "*there are only Turks there,*" and she was "*a Dutchman's wife*". The one named Shurochka.

Shurochka at that time was also divorcing her husband: not like me, just by thinking about it, but the way it should be done, properly. She already actually filed for divorce, while hiding from her husband with her newborn daughter in a monastery in Maastricht, and now she has an apartment and even – the object of her pride! – has a new guy, a

⁶³ Russian boy band famous in the 1990s

⁶⁴ This cartoon was very popular in the USSR in the 1980s.

Russian asylum seeker. In her own words, “I met a guy. It is not a big love, either for him, or for me. But when you sit home all alone at night, you almost begin to howl... “ Well, first of all, Shurochka, you were not alone: was your baby an inanimate object? And secondly, there are cases when it is better to be alone than with “just anyone.” And Vovan was clearly such a case. No wonder Shurochka’s mother took such a dislike to him at first sight when she came to visit them from Israel during the summer. She just knew perfectly well what kind of guy he was. But for Shurochka, he was probably something exotic, since when she was leaving Israel there were still probably not so many guys like that there, and she automatically felt that if a person speaks the same language, then he must be something close...

In September, they came to Rotterdam by car, and I asked her to take out of Rotterdam and keep some of my things for a while because I was going to leave Sonny, just because I had nowhere to go. Shurochka readily agreed. She was proud of what Vovan could fix with his hands and of the way he handled money: they had immediately got a car, albeit a second-hand one, and then TV and the rest followed... While her previous sad sack Bas started his own business in his own country three times – and all three times gone bankrupt, getting into deeper and deeper debt... In the end he could not resist: one must somehow feed one’s wife and child? Bas began selling drugs. And soon he started using them too... That was the beginning of the strife. Bas periodically threatened her – of course, with the same things as Sonny was threatening me! – “I will file for divorce, and you will be thrown out of the country and not finish your studies.” But when it came to divorce, naturally, he would not agree to that. He only continued to torment her. So Shurochka left him and moved out.

Of course, it was a human tragedy – again, by the way, confirming that it maybe is better just to stay where you are. (In Israel, they both had a good job, and they never quarrelled). I do not know how I would have behaved in a similar situation: would I try to pull the person I loved out of the swamp or would I have dropped him and run away, because you can only help those who want to be helped. And when a child is involved as well... You have to think primarily about what is best for the child.

So I do not presume to judge Shurochka for her divorce, although she has claimed that Bas was the only one in her life, her only real love. I do not undertake to judge her either for the way she behaved after that. Only for the fact that her actions affected the lives of other people, and especially that of her own daughter...

The first thing that struck me when I came to see them for the weekend after a while, to pick up my belongings (when Lisa and I got temporarily that apartment from the university), was the language that she used in the apartment. I have not heard such refined cursing even when working in the vegetable store.

– Shurka⁶⁵ didn’t even know proper Russian language until I met her! – Bragged her boyfriend: a bearded fellow with a beer belly, from the city of Volzhsky. His brother also hung around in the apartment: judging by his lexicon, he was a repeat offender. And there were also some more shady characters of both sexes who were hoping to obtain refugee status in the Netherlands.

Vovan was looking after 9-month old Lyusenka, Shurochka’s baby daughter, while she was working. I would not let such fellow even look after my cat. Suffice it to say that he affectionately styled this lovely blonde baby “Jewish mug.” Shurochka smiled sweetly,

⁶⁵ Rude form of her name in Russian

but didn't say anything: what if he suddenly left her and went away? Who would then buy her TV sets and hold her tight at night?

While I was gathering my things from Shurochka's basement, I missed the last train. I had to call home to say that I would stay in Maastricht until morning. Sonny knew I was visiting a friend (he remembered Shurochka from Enschede) and reacted to this news calmly.

Shurochka meanwhile fried a whole frying pan of potatoes with mushrooms and sour cream: just as they do back at home. I was eating and pouring my soul out to her about my life. Vovan was listening, and from time to time poured me a glass of gin and tonic. I was very upset: both by what I had seen back home in Russia during the summer and by the impending relocation from Sonny. And so, I swallowed this gin and tonic without even looking.

By the end of dinner I felt something strange. All around me what was happening in reality seemed like in a dream. I heard my own voice as if from outside, as if through cotton wool in my ears. Shurochka for some reason pulled me into the bathroom, pushed me into the shower and tried to undress me. Vovan stood at the door and apparently wasn't going anywhere. At first I thought that I had just drunk too much, but then I realized that something was wrong here. I could see everything that was happening, but for some reason I couldn't do anything. Fortunately, at this point I felt very sick: it was a blessing in disguise. A full pan of fried potatoes with mushrooms and *clonidine*⁶⁶ then escaped to freedom. And although I was physically ill for a long time, mentally my strength came back to me. Shurochka ran to the kitchen for a cloth.

– Get you out of here – I said quietly to that creature (I could not speak loud even if I wanted to) – Otherwise tomorrow you will fly out of Holland as a cork out of a bottle. He pretended he did not understand what I meant, but walked away.

I was barely able to reach the couch that was given to me to sleep on. The “sweet couple” lay down on another couch in the same room and started to copulate, as if I wasn't even there. And I threw up again....

Secretly, I hope that Shurochka's mum will read these lines someday...

The next morning I had a splitting headache. I wanted nothing more than to get out of that house and never to see Shurochka again, while I just ignored Vovan as if he were an empty space, Shurochka I found hard to face. However, for her it was also difficult. She sat in the kitchen, red as a lobster. But she didn't even think apologizing.

– I thought we were going to have some fun together, to have a good time... – and she looked up at me with her arrogant, colourless eyes.

I looked at her with an annihilating look:

– Who calls this “a good time”? The Israelis or is it in the new Russians' dialect?

If I needed a man, I would find one without your help, my dear. I didn't ask you for it, did I? In what dump did you find and pick up this miracle of nature of yours? You'd better think about what he will do to your child when she grows up a bit.

⁶⁶ **Clonidine** is a sympatholytic medication used to treat medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, some pain conditions, [ADHD](#) and anxiety/panic disorder. It is classified as a centrally acting [α2 adrenergic agonist](#). Often used as a rape drug in Russia.

I haven't loathed anybody so much for a long time.

That very day Yitzhak Rabin was shot in Israel.

When I was sitting in the train on my way back, still barely overcoming continuing attacks of nausea, listening on the radio to the details of that successful attempt on the prime minister of Shurochka's country, I was quite certain that this was the same *punishment from above*, like the one almost 10 years ago: the Challenger explosion. But this time the heavenly powers weren't angry with me; they were angry with Shurochka...

- If people become like you after a divorce – I said to her at parting – then I would rather stay with my husband.

And I did.

...I came back home at half past eleven in the morning, told to my mother that I had several days off work and went outside, to make up for lost sleep in my hammock, after a sleepless night on the Dublin embankment.

Chapter 11. The old warrior who knows not the language of love.

“- Do you have time to notice beautiful women?

- Yes, I do. But only to notice. Nothing more. And I bitterly regret it.

(Viktor Chernomyrdin, Russian ex-Prime-Minister)

The whole week after this I mooned around and thought only about one thing: how not to let the news of my dismissal out to mother. At first when Alice knew about my dismissal she got fired up the way it should be for a good trade union activist. She took over my problems and began to write official letters to my employer, though I warned her from the start that it would hardly lead to a real result. As in all American companies in Dublin trade unions in this bank were practically outlawed, and so none of us was a trade union member. I proved to be right and Alice, who was standing up so zealously for me, grew cool towards this matter quickly and suddenly, the way it is quite typical for an average Irish person. It even stopped surprising me here. It would if I had suddenly met an Irishman or woman, who seriously meant what he or she was saying or pushed the matter through.

I was unemployed for more than a fortnight. It was a blessing in disguise: now I had time to seek a job in the North as well as there being necessity in it. But all this would not have been of use if by that time the economic conditions had not emerged, so allowing vacancies requiring language skills, to at last reach this, the most prehistoric and wild corner of Western Europe. Its ruling stratum treats all non-English speaking people with a deep suspicion, and all foreign sounding languages are taken for Irish... Heaven only knows what would happen if it took place now, in the period of economic recession, when unemployment figures are snowballing.

There was an antediluvian solidarity in job matters in the North, though a separate one on both sides: only those who were known were chosen (or at least your parents had to be familiar to them), and both unionists and “sinners⁶⁷” had the same “sin”. Professional competence really had no importance. Even when a vacancy was advertised in the newspaper it often was a mere formality. People came for the interview, because the employer had to hold it by law, in reality it was decided in advance, who would be hired.

Of course I had nothing to do with any of the two categories. It was unpleasant to feel like a circus clown, who was called only to fill the interlude to entertain the public and to stare at. I had to experience it both in the protestant Ballynahinch⁶⁸ and in the republican West Belfast. Then I was tired of wasting my time and moral forces. And I began to inquire beforehand through the familiar “sinners”, if there was already an intended applicant to the declared vacancy. It took place in 100% of cases. There was nobody among the Protestants, whom I could ask, though the century-long traditions of the

⁶⁷ Irish Republicans, members of Sinn Fein

⁶⁸ Town in county Down

Masonic lodges left in that case even less doubts.

I was lucky because there were no people in either category, who knew Dutch. Otherwise I wouldn't have a cat's chance to take even this very unpretentious position.

During the interview my typing speed was measured. It was 55 words per minute. Even I was surprised at it. My new company was a private initiative of local businessmen- a "Mighty Handful"⁶⁹ of both religions. They discovered a «hole» in the service market and created a company that was in charge not of their own clients' calls, but of different companies' e-mails from various countries. In other words, it was an electronic outsourcing company. And they made the first recruitment of linguists in the history of their company. The salary was 6,000 pounds per year less than in my previous position. It was almost the same as my first job in Dublin, when I lived alone and paid only for a room, not for a whole house. I was scared, when I thought how the three of us would survive on such a low income. But at this moment I didn't have any chance, even such work in Belfast was fortuitous.

A new company wanted to show that it differed from the others in Northern Ireland. And we were the mannequins in its window. There was no work for linguists yet, we were taken *prospectively*. For now it was proposed that we would answer English language e-mails.

All in all I worked with a multitude of companies in different Western countries and almost all of them had one thing in common,- an unhealthy atmosphere, where you have to prove how you are better than others, what you can do for the sake of the company, etc. Where you are forced to look around in order not to be stabbed in the back and to smile till your cheekbones' ache, instead of just doing your own work. So in fact you don't have much time for work. In such an atmosphere you always have internal exertion, which negatively affects your productivity. Here something was always held back, somebody always reported to the bosses about somebody on the sly and you always had to pretend that you liked to be here very much and to exclaim aloud about it from time to time. Of course, they can say that among the colleagues in Russia there were squealers, too. And probably they're right. But this beadledom was exceptionally voluntary. As a rule neither colleagues, nor the smarter bosses liked bootlickers. But here it wasn't a voluntary deed, but a kind of compulsory mass-produced ritual. For me it was repugnant to the very roots of my being. Working hard isn't enough here, it also takes bobbing at the table and raising your hand: "*What a wonderful company we have! How lucky I am!*" Damn it...!

By the way, my familiar Irishwoman, who works in Cuba, says that since she arrived

⁶⁹ "Mighty Handful"- The Five, also known as The Mighty Handful, The Mighty Five, or The Mighty Coterie, refers to a circle of [composers](#) who met in [Saint Petersburg, Russia](#), in the years 1856–1870: [Mily Balakirev](#) (the leader), [César Cui](#), [Modest Mussorgsky](#), [Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov](#) and [Alexander Borodin](#). The group had the aim of producing a specifically Russian kind of art music, rather than one that imitated older European music or relied on European-style conservatory training. In a sense, they were a branch of the [Romantic Nationalist](#) movement in Russia, sharing similar artistic goals with the [Abramtsevo Colony](#) and [Russian Revival](#). Here this term is used in a sense of a group of local people united for a mutual goal.

there, her health had much improved Not only because of the remarkable Cuban medical care, but also because the atmosphere at her work is different. For example, when she manages to make a good report, her Cuban colleagues don't envy her, but they are sincerely glad for her. After living in a "civilized" world she couldn't get accustomed to this for a long time. And she was touched to tears.

In my new company one was always supposed to play in something as a child and pretend at the same time to blow these "bubbles" with pleasure. It was named "*fun working environment*". You know, when you are over 30 and a disabled child is waiting for you at home, the last thing you want to do is to hump on one leg at work.

The time for training came. We were divided into future working groups, which were named by different colours. Our group was incidently named after my favourite colour – purple, we were *The Purple Team*. Then we were told to think up some cheerful mottoes and to paint them in the workroom's walls. I very much wanted to suggest "*Proletarians of the world unite!*", but I bit my tongue.

Then we were asked to introduce ourselves to our group members in a funny way. What could I say that was funny about me? I glanced over the lecture room with estimation and I imparted to my new colleagues that I was keen on Jamaican dancing in dance-hall style, expecting a few men to give a whistle. But I forgot where I was, the local unionists didn't know any dances, except the cowboy "line dancing" and the local Irish, in accordance, nothing except the Riverdance⁷⁰.

For a whole fortnight we did these silly things. And at last we were sent to the city on half a day, where we had to find *a hidden treasure* according to a given plan. It was meant for our unity and improvement of "team spirit". The only thing these games improved in me was a wish to find a good job quicker and to leave these overgrown children playing with each other, since they obviously hadn't passed kindergarten age yet.

The treasure was found to be a bottle of whisky. Our plumbers would quite agree with them about it, unlike the Dutch ones. I'll remember for life how Sonny's guest -a Dutch plumber- circled around our kitchen in Rotterdam, muttering under his breath: "a Monday morning...a morning of Monday"

- What does he want? – I asked Sonny with a puzzled look.
- You idiot! – Cried Sonny hastily, - Of course, he wants coffee!...

My new job had a very complicated timetable – there were three shifts, but the shifts were irregular: from 7:30 till 4, from 13:00 till 21:30 and a night one was from 21:00 till 7:30. The night shift was longer than the day one, so the timetable was so complicated

⁷⁰ *Riverdance* is a [theatrical](#) show consisting of traditional [Irish stepdancing](#), known for its rapid leg movements while body and arms are kept largely stationary. It originated as an interval performance during the [1994 Eurovision Song Contest](#), a moment that is considered a significant watershed in Irish culture *Riverdance* is, in summary form, the story of the Irish culture and of the Irish immigration to America.

that I won't repeat it. I'll only say that our days off could fall on any day of a week. After several days on a night shift there were not two, but three days off. On the whole, the timetable repeated itself once every seven weeks! I didn't have any problems with the first shift and a night shift, though I had ones with a second shift: the last bus to my town left at 8:20 p.m... I had to lie and said I had a car in order to be taken for the job, but what else could I do? It was good that one colleague lived half an hour from me. He was so kind giving me a lift home. But what would I do, if he was on vacation or ill?

It turned out to be more intensive to answer e-messages, than to answer calls, because they were received constantly. It reminded me of work on the conveyor. According to this your work was estimated in exactly the same way, by quantity of answered e-messages per hour. Quality control was on a selective basis by the hit-and-miss method. One of the most important points in it was how many spaces were used, for example, between the words "Sincerely yours" and your signature. It was obligatory to use two, not one and God forbid three. Some of us were overwhelmed by these numbers of spaces in combination with the need to produce a definite amount of answers per hour. We did not have time to properly read what the client had asked for and sent him an answer in the way of "*there is an elder-berry in the garden and an uncle in Kiev*"⁷¹. I faced similar problems later as a client.

Working in Ireland, it was very interesting to learn about the reverse side of a capitalistic service! For example, if you think that it is mentally strenuous and takes a lot of time for an employee to solve your problem, you are deeply mistaken. His efforts only centre on finding the most suitable commonplace pattern to answer your query. (All of them are written beforehand, all that is needed is to enter your name and to make the answer look like it's addressed to you personally and concerns you personally).

So we worked ourselves to the bone, at the same time they continued to entertain us, not realizing that this only distracted us and therefore constantly got on our nerves. Every Friday morning fresh buns were brought in at the expense of bosses. At once they required us to admit our company was the most generous in all Ulster...But when you worked overtime, this money was paid a month later than prescribed and asking for some of it to be paid with the same month' wages, in order to pay bills on time, was a taboo.

Probably after all this a lasting disguise to e-mails on the whole had grown in me, though I continued corresponding at home when I had free time. This way I entered the republican debating site, where I read more than I wrote and it was here that I got acquainted without seeing him, with the republican called Dermot. I can't say that I noticed him at first, quite the contrary. It came from him. When he discovered my exotic origin for these circles, it interested him exceedingly. According to him, he entered the site *to keep an eye on dissidents*, of course, not on ours, but on the republican ones⁷². Dermot pleasantly surprised me with knowledge of our history and of the world liberation revolutionary movement. He didn't need me to explain the difference between

⁷¹ Russian saying meaning that these 2 things have nothing to do with each other

⁷² Soviet dissidents were people whose aim was to undermine the Soviet system; Irish Republican dissidents are activists who against the political course of Sinn Fein, seeing it as a sell-out.

FRELIMO and PAIGC⁷³.

Soon, without seeing each other, we became friends so much, that I wrote to him between this and that that once I dreamt to meet African Che Guevara. *“Maybe at least here they hadn’t ‘dried up yet’- I joked. And I unexpectedly got a bit of a sad answer. My new friend complained that his appearance did not remind that of Che Guevara and added that I would probably be disappointed in him, if we met face to face. The tone of his letter reminded me of a wild animal’s, a sea marvel’s tone from ‘The Scarlet Flower⁷⁴’, when the heroine persuaded him to show himself to her. ‘Don’t ask and implore me, my fair mistress, beloved beauty to show you my nasty face, an ugly body. You got used to my voice. We live hand and glove, in harmony, almost never part and you love me for my unspeakable love. Seeing me, ugly and nasty, you’ll conceive a hatred for me, unfortunate wretch, banish me from your sight, but I’ll die living with a heavy heart apart from you’.* Our e-mails after this seemed to be *fiery ornate words* as in that fairy tale.

“Besides I’m married” – Dermot wrote. I didn’t expect him to take it so personally. I hurried to assure him that I didn’t have any intentions to interfere with his private life. “However, we can meet each other soon, if you want” – Dermot wrote shortly. “Will you attend the party conference in Dublin?”

Of course, I would. Indeed for the sake of this I had to swap shifts with my colleague and to work two shifts running in one day, though it was banned even by Western labour legislation. I got home more than half dead. Next day I stubbornly went to Dublin.

The conference lasted for two days. It was my first conference without Peter and Deirdre-thanks to them I had several acquaintances now, though my true friends, as they were, didn’t appear here. I didn’t know anybody among the Northerners properly, except those men from the same village, who took me to the mountains in the summer.

In due time Peter introduced me to “a budding genius” who was a member of one of the Dublin party branches. He was a blue-eyed, round, dark-haired man called Douglas, one of a few educated people in the range of the organization. Douglas was a historian, he spoke fluent Irish and he was born into an well-off family. The first thing he said was: “And I was in Moscow once...illegally, with an Arab passport. Indeed, I was only in the airport.”

I looked at him thoroughly, trying to imagine how somebody could take him for an Arab.

⁷³ FRELIMO - The Liberation Front of Mozambique, (FRELIMO) (Portuguese pronunciation: [fre'limu]), from the [Portuguese](#) Frente de Libertação de Moçambique, was a [liberation movement](#) which was founded in 1962 to fight for the independence of the [Portuguese Overseas Province of Mozambique](#). At its 3rd Congress, in February 1977, it became a Marxist-Leninist political party and its official name became the Frelimo Party (Partido Frelimo). PAIGC - The African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde ([Portuguese](#): Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde) or PAIGC is a [political party](#) that governed [Guinea-Bissau](#) from the independence of the then [Portuguese Guinea](#) in 1974, until the late 1990s, and from 2004 to 2005.

⁷⁴ *The Scarlet Flower*, also known as *The Little Scarlet Flower* or *The Little Red Flower*, is a Russian [folk tale](#) written by [Sergey Aksakov](#). It is an adaptation of traditional fairy tale [Beauty and the Beast](#).

I preferred not to ask what illegal activity he did there and where did he fly to after that – I had noticed already that when people begin to boast, it's better not to ask them about anything. They only wait to begin enhancing their reputation, indeed they are so brimming over, that they'll tell you everything later themselves. Running ahead, I wasn't mistaken.

I had a big beautiful Tula samovar⁷⁵ with me, which I wanted to present to the Leader. It was an isolated story what did it cost for me to carry it inward. The bodyguards were concerned about a possible attempt on his life, probably remembered that there was once such woman as Charlotte Corday⁷⁶ and they could not imagine what a samovar is. Though things settled. I wanted to let him know that at last I had joined the party and it was mostly thanks to his words. I asked Douglas to introduce me to him. He was inflated with pride at once – he was so glad to show himself a big wig. They were to sit together on the stage in the presidium.

- I'll tell him about you, - Douglas warned me. – And you keep your eyes open...when you see him walking down from the stage...

And I "kept my eyes open".

The speeches at the conference were very interesting, sharp and radical. It was a closed conference so you could speak without trying to be politically correct and without ceremony in words. While yet another feminist was trying to convince the audience to nominate a candidate on the gender basis, Douglas stooped to the Leader and whispered something to him. I completely disagreed with the speaker, though I'm a woman. Such feminism is related to a *cult of the First Lady*, which in itself is deeply insulting for women. Can't they make a good position in the world, without being somebody's wife or admitted to this place as a result of gender quotas? I was so boiling inwardly, nearly losing sight of Douglas and the Leader. Suddenly I saw his sharp and slightly derisive eyes on me. "*Now it's time – the czarina asks what do you want? – the Blacksmith said*"⁷⁷.

He went down sideways from the stage and we moved slowly along the column to meet each other.

We had a photo taken together. I gave him the samovar and explained what it is. I wanted to tell him so much. How I heard his name for the first time and watched Bloody Sunday almost before I could crawl. How I thought about how Bobby Sands died when I sat on the roof some May evening surrounded by lilac bushes. That we have about our common enemy. How it was very lonely to live without like-minded people for so many years.

⁷⁵ Samovar ([Russian](#): самовар), literally "self-boiler", is a heated metal container traditionally used to heat and boil water for tea in and around [Russia](#). The samovar was an important attribute of a Russian household and particularly well-suited to tea-drinking in a communal setting over a protracted time period. Tula samovar are the most famous in Russia.

⁷⁶ Marie-Anne Charlotte de Corday d'Armont (27 July 1768 – 17 July 1793), known to history as Charlotte Corday, was a figure of the [French Revolution](#). In 1793, she was executed under the [guillotine](#) for the assassination of revolutionary leader [Jean-Paul Marat](#)

⁷⁷ N. Gogol. Night Before Christmas.

How the feeling of solidarity is important for a person. But I didn't know what to say first and how could I say it in two ticks. And only I inflated my breath in order to try to do it, when he suddenly bent forward to my ear and spoke in a low voice, tickling me with his beard.

"Do you know that you are a very attractive woman?"

In a tone, similar to "Ivan Vasilievich" when Zinaida said to the tsar that he was a very spirited man⁷⁸.

And then he said: *"I'll drop you a few lines"*.

What lines? What is he going to drop and where? Except for one more autograph written by him right there, at the spot. This autograph I investigated later in a proper way. Fionnuala helped me to translate it from Irish. Of course, I didn't show it to her and did not tell her what it was about. I found out that there was written *"To Yevgenia from ... with love"*. And tick-tack-toe meant "hugs and kisses". I was hot after this.

I didn't know yet that, probably, half of Ireland had a photo with him. And who knows what he was telling all those people at that same time ... But a Dutch spirit in me once again woke up, and I took it literally.

At first I couldn't believe my ears. Then I was even offended. I wanted to talk to him about serious things, but he ... A little bit later I felt surprised. Am I attractive woman? I have never thought about myself in such terms ... It didn't matter to me. What if he is right? Important or not, it was certainly pleasant to hear. Without knowing that himself, he has strengthened my weak self-confidence.

Confused by what I've heard I returned to my place. I tried to concentrate on speeches again. The matter was serious: the party indeed was at historical crossroads, turning from being the political wing of an armed organization of fighters for the unity of their country to a parliamentary moderate left party. For example, its economic program became more and more modest. In 1979, for instance, it was said in the party program that *"The state will have complete control over the import and export of capital.*

Finance, insurance and all key industries must be brought under public control. The principal agent of major development in industry, agriculture and fisheries must be the democratic institutions of the people. All mineral resources belong as of right to the entire people (nation). The extraction and processing of such resources shall be nationalized or taken into community control." That *"to ensure justice for all, the means of production, distribution and exchange must be controlled by the people and administered democratically."*⁷⁹ That *"no person should have the means economically to exploit his fellow man"*. That there would be no place for sole proprietorship in the key economy.

But is there much of this left in today's program...?

...

⁷⁸ In a seductive tone

⁷⁹ <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/sf/sinnfein79.htm>

Is there difference between flexibility connected with circumstances and the rejection of basic principles? And when they say “yes”, that they want to come to power because what are the other ways to reach changes? – it is fair. But when in the name of accession to it they decline truly revolutionary changes - what will be changed indeed after this accession to power?... I was at a loss. – Who are these people? Are they revolutionaries or Irish mini-Gorby’s? Fighters for freedom or the Irish version of British “New Labour”?

At that time I was only trying to obtain further insight into the Irish situation on the ground. I didn’t know a lot. There were many wonderful and remarkable people among the rank members of Sinn Féin whom I saw around me. I still have the same opinion about them now and feel a deep respect towards them too. But more and more of such people left the ranks of party over the course of time: some - because of age, others - for “personal” (read: ideological) reasons.

But saying this, local people should know better than I about whom could be trusted, and who am I to agree or disagree with anything, if I have been in the country for only a short time. For one thing there are no ideal parties or movements. For another thing if I criticize them on any subject in a definite Irish situation, it may play into our mutual enemies hands. This is what I told myself if something confused me in the plans and words of my new friends.

For all that, sometimes things are evident fresh eyes and not evident for people “stewing in their own juices”...Because of this, Fionntan liked to talk to me. He respected me for exactly this quality. Instead of open criticism, I asked him questions, if something wasn’t clear. Indeed I didn’t always get a satisfying answer.

I thought to myself that the main reason for such a situation to arise in this party was the fact that “the civilized world” had at last allowed Irishmen to become “white”, since the times that they had been colonized, discriminated and oppressed. Of course, this was not out of kindness, but because there is a lack of “whites” on a global basis. For example, in Britain there are not enough people to bring up the army to required strength, and it’s planned to begin army recruitment in Jamaica. The number of Irishmen who serve in the British occupational troops voluntarily increased twice only since last year after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in Ireland and the termination of the IRA military campaign. Young Irishmen “are looking for adventures, journeys, comradeship” in occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, but of course not with swarthy people, suffering under the heel of Britain and America.

The matter is not only about the troops. There is a shortage of officials and other specialists upon which “the civilized world” could rely in the process of mankind robbery. And the “new Irishmen” are happy to oblige, because only yesterday “*No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs*” was written at the entrance of hotels and today they are *finally wanted*, they are needed. Ireland looked up at America because of historical reasons, in almost the same way as Sonny’s Antilleans do. Today many have begun to look upon their own colonizer in this way - to Britain. *Just fancy! This benefactor deigned at last to*

grant equal rights for Irishmen ...What luck!

There were days once when their party program ran as follows: *“We have more in common with the developing countries of the world (where two-thirds of the world’s population live) than we have with the rich club of former colonial powers in the EEC. Having more in common with Third World countries we would hope to associate ourselves by membership in the non-aligned group of nations..”*⁸⁰

It is all so and nobody revokes the historical Irish experience. But when they were allured from a distance by a fatty piece... That's the matter: first of all, the economic position has changed together with the world-view of modern Irishmen. And this economic position, in turn, was changed with the help of European subsidies and American investments. America and Europe robbed the other parts of the world and shared some crumbs with the Irish, insuring the loyalty of the last and the realization of their dreams of membership in “The Golden Club of nations”...

Perhaps one day somebody will do a research on this subject. I can only say that this was a gradual process, and while “regenerating”, the Irish Left continued to shout so confidently and so loudly about their own revolutionary character - just like Gorbachev yelled that he was “returning to Lenin’s principles”.

I found myself in the Irish ranks right in the middle of this transitional period and I did my best to support all healthy and non superficial forces that were still remaining in these ranks... It’s easier to turn and run away without doing anything. I wanted to make at least my modest contribution in working out of party’s policy towards migrants (of whom there were not so many in Ireland at that time yet). Though it was obvious that they will grow in numbers and the Irish didn’t have much experience of a multicultural society, as in Holland. They didn’t know who we were and what we were here for. I tried to show them that if they admitted us into their ranks, the Irish republicans would let new blood into their veins as well as would be strengthening themselves. They would be able to pay attention to these potential electors’ needs, - something that no party has really done here at that time in their election campaigns.

Most current parliamentary parties in the Irish republic have the same “military” origins as Sinn Fein. Though in due time, of course, they were named freedom fighters, but today, no matter whosoever, wherever, for what reason, for what purpose and against whichever regime they fight, everybody is declared a terrorist, even if they conduct the struggle against occupation. Following such logic, our Soviet partisans of the Great Patriotic War and the Russian partisans of the war against Napoleon in 1812 should also be referred to as terrorists, not to not to mention the French or the Dutch resistance!

A new world order excludes from the terrorists’ list only those, who become “toothless”, fluffy, tame and safe for this order. The empires make much of such “rehabilitated” “revolutionaries”. The greater is their revolutionary experience, the better: *“Join us,*

⁸⁰ <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/sf/sinnfein79.htm>

*Baron, join!*⁸¹ ...Songs are composed, films are shot about them and monuments are erected to them in the capitalistic world. One isn't supposed to say anything critical about them in "a free world". This very establishment will spit at you in the first place. Then the same will follow from your "left wing comrades": "*It's the icon! How dare you? He was in prison!*"⁸²

Usually if you even hint at such things in Ireland, at once shouting begins: "Are you against the peace process? Do you want more people to continue to die?" Though nobody on this conference was against the peace process and nobody wanted people to continue dying. The point was about the different ways leading to peace. Also about how you should be cautious with your imperialist opponents, whose lying and failure to keep promises is second nature to them. Indeed "civilized" Britons did this for ages in different corners of the planet. Suffice to mention a recent historical example in Zimbabwe. During the negotiations over the independence agreement there, as Dermot told me, the British promised Mugabe to compensate the big agrarians, whose land would be confiscated. But they promised it verbally. Then they went back on their word smartly. Well, so much for "the word of a true British gentleman", into infallibility of which many people continue to believe, having read the classic English literature that is composed by themselves about themselves.

Of course I didn't say anything, I only listened. It was striking for me that though debate was hot, in 99% of cases the party's leadership managed to stir it in the intended course and to make the debating majority accepting the solution that often only the minority wanted. Authority of these people was so firm in the party grass roots. It had both good and bad sides. It depends on what course was actually taken.

All of us mostly estimate events and historical prospects by our own experience, and there's nothing you can do about it. My own experience in my own country shows that **unilateral disarmament will lead to no good**. I mean not only military disarmament, but also the spiritual and the ideological ones. **If you disarm in the ideological way, there is no way out**. Nobody can simply smuggle in a new portion of some "just produced super modern" ideology that would be able to replace the one that you have abandoned, for the purpose of persuading the opponents in your friendly intentions,- the way the Irish have claimed would be done with military equipment!

While I was thinking over about what I had heard and seen, the meeting was closed and I left the foyer without feeling my feet. I stumbled across Fionntan at the door. He hadn't been in the hall, but stood all this time in the foyer behind the stand with books and different souvenirs made by Irish political prisoners, ranging from key rings to purses and

⁸¹ Phrase from *The Very Same Munchausen* (alt. translation - *That Very Munchausen*) is a [1979 Soviet television movie](#) directed by [Mark Zakharov](#), based on a script by [Grigoriy Gorin](#). The film relays the story of the baron's life after the adventures portrayed in the book, particularly his struggle to prove himself sane. In the movie, baron Munchausen is portrayed as multi-dimensional, colorful, non-conformist man living in a gray, plain, dull and conformist society that ultimately tries to destroy him

⁸² It refers in particular to Mr. Mandela who became a legend in the very capitalist countries of the West, with streets named after him and monuments built for him, - and to the current miserable situation for African workers in South Africa: the real results of ANC's actions. But he is just one example.

statuettes. At first I didn't recognize him – I saw only a familiar face, but who it was and where we met, I couldn't remember. But I remembered at once when he started to talk. Fionntan has a calm, muffled voice and he is so unruffled that it seemed no power could drive him out of his wits. So you can't mix him up with anybody.

- Zhenya! -he said. – I see, our ranks are growing! At last you are in our ranks. And about time, too!

- Oh! – I was happy to see him. – How are Fionnuala and your guys?

- Very good, thank you.

- And what are you doing here?

- I'm selling the handicrafts made by our friends, who are still in prison. It's for the fund to support their families. I work in the organization of former political prisoners. Soon we'll have the inauguration of our new office. Come to it, if you want. We'll be glad. We can arrange for your lecture at the same time.

- Thank you. - I brightened. – I'll come by all means.

At this moment an unfamiliar girl came up to us. She was red-haired as a fire. She was dressed...I can't describe it, as for a boot camp. There was a feeling that she was just on the point of picking up a knapsack and a rifle and setting off for battle. She, had rosy cheeks, her age though indefinable was not old, and she was certainly pretty.

- Irene, -she said first, holding out her hand. - Frances and I argued about where you are from. She thinks that you are from South Africa, but I say no. You are Basque, aren't you?

- No, neither of the two, but why South Africa? – I asked.

- I don't know...It seemed to her, not to me – Irene was more interested in where I actually did come from.

- Zhenya, you have a strange accent... there is something South African about it, that slips out now and then in your speech, - Fionntan prompted.

- Maybe that's because I can speak Dutch?...I'm Russian, Irene.

- True? A real one?

- Well, not a toy one, of course, am I?

- Oh! Come with me, please! I'll introduce Frances to you. Let's go to a function in the pub tonight together!

...And here I'm, sitting in a pub in the centre of Dublin. It's so smoky here; feels like the time to put on a gas mask. The music is so loud that the glasses shudder on the table. The band «Irish Brigade», which was famous in republican circles, is performing. Red-haired Irene is looking at me with a smile.

- I can't drink any alcohol: it makes me sick! In the pubs I always drink only milk.

In that case, she is a rarity among Irish women...

Irene lives in Dublin, but in the mountains. She walks home on foot along a narrow path, for two hours. She isn't afraid of the whizzing cars that make you jump on the

mountainsides. Now nothing scares her. In fact she had another name, but changed it after her mother's death. So that nothing could remind her about the past... Her Mother was ill for a long time and Irene had been looking after her. When mother died, something broke in Irene. And she "went into Revolution"...

Both her hands were decorated with tattoos: on one hand was the name of the Leader, on other one his autograph was tattooed. The Leader had signed her hand at her own request and Irene "immortalized" this inscription at once. Another leader of less calibre was more sagacious: he have understood right away the reason this young woman asked him to sign her hand and refused...

She hides her tattoos under the long sleeves, despite the fact that she is proud of them. People react to it in different ways, you know. Especially taking into account that she goes to Portadown every summer – for solidarity with the inhabitants of Garvaghy Road⁸³, and the loyalists of that place would not be delighted with her feelings!

I am with Irene at a republican "function" - a musical party in the pub organized by one or another party branch, all proceeds from which will go to its funds. Her friend Frances is at the table with us. She has two children, wears glasses and resembles Valentina Talyzina⁸⁴. She was the one who had nearly attacked me when she believed that I was from "racist South Africa" because of my accent. Irene is teaching me efficiently on how to get rid of the local intelligence services, if they ask why I'm so interested in Sinn Fein:

- I told them to leave me alone at once. "Fellows, I can't help it - I'm just crazy about our Leader!" And they were staved off right away: they thought "ach, one more idiot who is in love..."

Indeed, the intelligence services got used to the fact that almost all republican women more or less are mad about their leader. Though, tastes do differ. For example, for her friend Frances the second-in-command in the party is more to her liking.

- He is my sweetheart! – She said aloud raising another glass.

An ordinary Irish woman is able to drink, according to my conservative estimates, about 8 pints in one evening. Irene is an exception to the rule and not only in the point of alcohol. A typical modern Irish woman throws herself at men's neck. Irene leads a celibate way of life. She let me know as a terrible secret that she was invited for a date by one of the musicians of the group performing here today. But she said that she refused,

⁸³ Catholic area of Portadown, known from the Drumcree conflict or Drumcree standoff - an ongoing dispute over a yearly [parade](#) in the town of [Portadown, Northern Ireland](#). The dispute is between the [Orange Order](#) and local residents. The residents are currently represented by the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition (GRRC). 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](#) ([see map](#)). It has marched this route since 1807, when the area was sparsely populated. However, 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](#).

⁸⁴ Valentina Talyzina (born 1935) - popular Soviet actress

because he's only her party comrade!

Ireland is a small country, where almost all the people know each other. It doesn't stop surprising me that wherever you go you always meet somebody, whom you have already known or somebody, who is familiar to your friends or somebody, who knows you. Though you don't know for sure how they know you. You can't keep secrets here. It's said that in due time our KGB left Ireland for that very reason. (The English adapted themselves: they recruit their agents from locals.). Music bands, performing on the republican parties are well known in all Ireland. And all republicans, who wanted it, got acquainted with them long time ago. Sometimes those musicians do even two jobs at a time: one my familiar republican, who is teacher during the week, in his free time sings in a local republican band and rather with major success. He is 'booked' for all weekends for many weeks ahead.

It's worth saying that there are songs devoted almost to all the fallen for Ireland's liberation, even to those not known beyond their own region as to Paul Magorrian from South Down who was shot by a British army patrol in the beginning of the 1970s. Once I saw his mother. She was an old, quiet woman, an owner of a small restaurant in the village of Castlewellan, where, after Paul's death people tried to throw boiling oil on any British soldier who came there to have lunch.

This time the musicians managed to turn a ballad «Something Inside So Strong»⁸⁵ into a real battle hymn. They managed to raise their audience by chanting: "*We're gonna do it anyway!*" together so loudly and with such a deep feeling that three of us – Irene, Frances and I - lost our voices on this.

...

... We made our way through the mountains to Irene's small house, laughing with our husky voices. She invited me to spend the night at her place. From time to time the cars passed us by, not seeing us in pitch darkness of the mountains. I survived only thanks to skillfully gained reaction of my new friend. Irene heard a car from far away with some sixth sense, as a dolphin hears ultrasound. She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me on the roadside before it even appeared. But the roadside was so narrow that we really had to cling fast to a stone slope.

- I have a very angry dog, - Irene said. – I'm afraid of nothing when I'm with her, but she really can't stand anybody except me. So I'll go first and lock her and you wait for me here.

⁸⁵ (Something Inside) So Strong is a song written and recorded by [British singer-songwriter, Labi Siffre](#). It was released as a single in 1987 and was the song that brought him back to mainstream popularity in his home country. The song was inspired by a TV documentary on [Apartheid South Africa](#) seen by Siffre in 1985 in which a white soldier was filmed shooting at black children. Appalled, he penned the song as an anthem against the white supremacist regime, calling on Africans to stand tall in the face of adversity. The song has also become synonymous with the Irish Nationalist and Republican movement.

At the turn the mountain suddenly parted and a unique view of a nocturnal Dublin opened up to us. The sea of lights stretched far below. For a second I almost wanted to jump down from the steep towards then flying as a butterfly...

- Moo! - Somebody's cow sobered me up. An instant later a ringing barking was heard from Irene's house, which resembled a fairy-tale hut on chicken legs. An invisible dog had smelled me from a distance and did not want his mistress to lock him away. He wanted to bite the unknown visitor.

I do not like dogs much, but they for some reason do love me. However, I did not dare to check whether Irene's dog would stand my charm - he sounded so aggressive. Then, late in the evening, when Irene showed me her enormous collection of videos (she recorded everything about the Republicans that was shown on television, even if it was only about 5 minutes. Suddenly I felt someone breathing in my ear. I turned my head and nearly died of a heart attack But the "beware of the dog," did not think to bite. "Don't you see? He likes me!" Irene did not believe her eyes.

We talked for a long time - despite the fact that both of us could not speak normally, and by the morning I became totally hoarse. But that day I still had to meet the Republican for the first time, the one with whom I had struck up a friendship in writing - Dermot, who did not look like Che Guevara....

That morning I was almost the first person to enter the building where the congress is held. It was still closed, and beside it stood a passenger car in which sat two men, bored with reading the newspaper. Their professional identity was so obvious that I almost laughed aloud. But I spared their professional pride and pretended that I did not notice them. I had nothing to fear and nobody to hide from - I thought so, because I grew up in a truly free society, and was not accustomed to fear. I was even not afraid to walk in Amsterdam at night!

After a while people began to gather, and the doors opened. The gentlemen in the car were still reading their newspapers. They should not forget to turn the pages!

I had to find Dermot, who I had never seen before. I sent him my photo by e-mail, and he, as a true conspirator - did not. But we agreed to meet at a certain place inside the building at a certain time. So I stood there and waited for him.

Around me were a lot of people, like a swarm of bees. Somehow in the vast crowd of strangers my eyes stopped on one man: short, stout, with a very large head, balding, he an intelligent face with sharp features. Yesterday I did not see him. I cannot explain why among several hundred participants at the conference, I noticed him. A thought crossed my mind: "Definitely, that mysterious Dermot is going to be somebody like that type ..."

I almost laughed when at the appointed hour I was approached by exactly this man. But it would have been very impolite.

- Dermot Kinsella - he introduced himself, offering me a soft hand without callosities.
- Yevgenia Kalashnikova - I spoke hoarsely.- Sorry, I lost my voice, we sang last night

...

It sounded so childish, almost like "We are just having fun with buns over here" by Karlson on the Roof⁸⁶ I immediately became ashamed of myself, but Dermot did not find it funny, he just asked if I was a relative to Mikhail Timofeevich Kalashnikov⁸⁷. Alas ...

- I'm sorry that yesterday I could not meet with you. I was busy all day and all night with our foreign guests...

I thought - indeed, he had appeared momentarily somewhere in the hall yesterday, when Grandfather Tom, the most famous party linguist, presented some guests to the participants of the congress. Among them was even the prime minister of a small island Caribbean nation!

So we met in real life. Dermot was not like cheerful Republicans, and this was not just because he had read Marx, and Lenin, and Mao, and Ho Chi Minh City and even the "Green Book" by Muammar Qaddafi, and well versed in world history and geography. He had a sharp, analytical mind, and in all matters that arose before him, he looked directly into the root. Because of his life experience he knew and understood that there are other cultures and traditions apart from Irish. So in a conversation with me - we went to dinner together – he in two or three short, sharp leading questions found out what was known to me about the Irish Republicans and what was not, and then he began his story. He was not talking about himself, but about why the local Catholic community needs protection from the "RA"⁸⁸ (as the Army is called here for short, because it is clear that it is Irish!) . About joy riders and petty thieves, becoming police informers under pressure of blackmail by the police, closing their eyes to their actions after they agree to become informers on the people among whom they live, how unfortunately, after many years they still had not found another effective means to combat them, except by a "punishment beating" and kneecappings for the most incorrigible. He spoke about how people are thirsty, so they finally had a more or less normal police force tracking the order, rather than constantly contemplating just how to create dirty political business...

Dermot was a school teacher by profession. But he did not have the opportunity to work as a teacher for long: He had been arrested in Scotland, where he lived at that time, for participation in the Irish struggle for liberation. He was imprisoned twice, though both times for a short period of time. He had a rough, interesting life that I never questioned, but he gradually told me excerpts later. He had moved from one country to another, almost all over the globe, prepared and selected new personnel and ... and had love affairs with representatives from various national liberation movements. His first wife was Scottish, the second - American who sympathized with the Irish struggle and had

⁸⁶ This phrase is from the Soviet cartoon version of the famous Swedish children's book "Karlson on the Roof" by Astrid Lindgren

⁸⁷ Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov ([Russian](#): Михаи́л Тимофе́евич Кала́шников, *Mihail Timofejevič Kalašnikov*) (born 10 November 1919) is a Russian [small arms](#) designer, most famous for designing the [AK-47](#), [AKM](#), and [AK-74](#) assault rifles.

⁸⁸ RA- short name for the IRA by IRA supporters

imagined herself to be Irish. There is such a special breed of people; I'll talk about it later.

- I was in your country once, but transiently, - Dermot told me, -and I saw almost nothing of it. By the way, I wonder how old were you then?

We counted together. I was 20 years old. Dermot was then 30+.

- When I was growing up, Lenin was a hero of mine - Dermot's sharp looking expression changed to almost dreamy, and child like. Many of my comrades in our struggle thought the United States and the Soviet Union to be of "equal evil" (such views were widespread in developing countries in those years), but I myself never thought so. I think that today most of us realize what not only us, but the whole world and all progressive forces we have lost with the disappearance of the Soviet Union.

This does not mean that the Soviet Union was perfect in all respects. But people who criticize it forget that it was the first experience of building a new society in world history! And that if it was not for the Soviet Union, many of us, peoples struggling for their liberation from the world of imperialism, would have faced far more difficult obstacles on their path.

I have no time for Trotskyists. One may try to catch the wind in a net and to speculate on what could and what could be, if Trotsky had been in power instead of Stalin, but we must not act within the framework of fantasy, but in reality. Trotsky was not the head of the Soviet Union. Stalin was. Politics and freedom fighters had to deal with him. Today one tries to rewrite the history of the Second World War, but we will never forget that without the Soviet Union, without the battles of Stalingrad and Kursk there would not have been the victory over fascism. The Allies would never have coped without the USSR.

The main support the Soviet Union provided was not given to us but to the Workers Party of Ireland⁸⁹, the so-called Official IRA. We somehow were supposed to be fanatical Catholics, though, as you yourself can see here, the Catholic church is an implacable enemy of Sinn Fein and Irish Republicans in general and trying to put a spoke in the wheel, even over apparently small-minded matters such as the organization of a children's boxing club in a village ... Why did the Soviet Union conducted this course for us? I think it was due to the "Brezhnev doctrine"⁹⁰. The World during his time was almost tacitly divided into zones of influence. This does not mean that the USSR did not help the national liberation movements. Helped, and how! It simply felt it necessary to do so in some regions, but not in the others, according to the balance of powers that existed in the world. Ireland belonged to the regions in which Brezhnev government decided not to intervene. I think this was due to the fact that if we had won in Ireland - and Ireland had united and become socialist - it would have upset the balance of forces in the world

⁸⁹ The Workers' Party ([Irish: *Páirtí na nOibrithe*](#)) is a [left-wing republican political party](#) in [Ireland](#). 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, adopting its current name in 1982.

⁹⁰ The Brezhnev Doctrine ([Russian: Доктрина Брежнева](#)) was a [Soviet Union foreign policy](#), first and most clearly outlined by S. Kovalev in a September 26, 1968 [Pravda](#) article, entitled "Sovereignty and the International Obligations of Socialist Countries."

in favor of socialism, however that would have scared and provoked reckless imperialist powers on steps perhaps towards a new world war. In any case, the crisis would not have been less than in the Caribbean! If you look at the strategic location of Ireland, covering the western capitalist Europe flag, you will understand. The Soviet leadership chose not to take the risk ...

I personally think that the "Brezhnev doctrine" has caused serious damage to the credibility of the USSR in the world national liberation movement, and that it harmed it. But I understand what was behind it - political pragmatism. I'll never forget what many of our young people, alas, do not know - that the Soviet Union, if it did not help us directly, would never interfere with its allies to do so. I can safely say that without the USSR, we would not have reached many of the things that we have achieved today. Soviets always treated us with respect – even if they would not officially declare it. They knew what our views were and what we represent, that we are real revolutionaries, and not talkers.

The Soviet leadership, in my opinion, underestimated the national specifics of different countries and their right to build socialism in accordance with the terms of each given country. You cannot paint them all with the same brush. Although, I must say that with this misunderstanding of historical and national conditions for building socialism in the USSR itself links today's criticism of Western leftists. Criticizing is always easier than doing!

Although the book your deserter Gordievsky⁹¹ of the KGB confirms that the Soviets had left Ireland quickly - when they realized that secrets cannot be kept in a small country, however, we are proud that they asked us for help in releasing Soviet prisoners from Afghanistan. Unfortunately, we could not help them - because we had no contact with the reactionary forces in other countries, such as the Mujahedeen who came to power then.

Yes, the Soviet Union could have done more for us at the time, but it would be too one-sided to assess its significance in world history, with only a narrow position. The Soviet Union was such a giant that people have not realized yet. It will be decades, centuries before they are aware of it!

The collapse of the world socialist system was one of the greatest tragedies in world history! - However, paradoxically, this opened up new opportunities for the national liberation of Ireland. Today, the Western imperialist powers do not see a threat in the union of Ireland, as in the years of its existence - for, as they say, a united Ireland would still be a capitalist Ireland. On this basis, we have new temporary allies. But in fact the union of Ireland will only be the first step. The second stage, certainly will be much more difficult, where many, to use the terminology of the Bolsheviks, the companions will leave our ranks, will be fighting for socialism in Ireland. We should prepare for it now. It is necessary to harden and to educate new fighters. The peaceful environment, in which we are now, will certainly help us in this! In this ideological preparation of the new

⁹¹ Oleg Antonovich Gordievsky, [CMG](#) (born 10 October 1938 in [Moscow, Russian SFSR, Soviet Union](#)), is a former [Colonel](#) of the [KGB](#) and KGB Resident-designate (*rezident*) and bureau chief in [London](#), who was a double agent of the British Secret Intelligence Service ([MI6](#)) from 1974 to 1985.

generation of political training for us, no doubt, the experience of the Soviet Union will be very important. Of course, we will try to avoid your mistakes, but it is possible that we will make ours: only one who does not do anything doesn't make mistakes! And the Soviet Union The Soviet Union will always be a light beam in our memory, the memory of mankind. People will make monuments to it!

I listened holding my breath. He somehow foresaw many of my questions before I had time to ask them. From this position in the other way one could see what was going on within the republican movement.

- Of course, it is not easy for you to be with us - said Dermot, finishing his tea. It is hard for a stranger. He receives a hostile reception. We are a closed organization, acting, one might say, along military lines. But in our conditions it could not be in another way. We along with the guys even have a joke that the Songun⁹² idea is simply written off us, the priority of the army in society! Similarly with us

They even know what *Songun* is!

What a pity that I could almost not speak ... I was listening to Dermot - and all my doubts raised after watching the mechanics of congressional debate, evaporated like morning mist. And we parted as old friends.

... One day when I was in my 3rd student year, I was invited to the dean's office. It happened so rarely, or rather, it never happened at all, and I was a little agitated: what do they want from me?

- There's somebody on the phone for you, - explained our secretary, as if it were a common occurrence for a 3rd year student to be sent for by a dean of the faculty. Who would phone me, and why?

- Zhenya? - Said a voice at the other end of the line in a pleasant male bass, almost like that of Yuri Levitan⁹³, - You do not know me. My name is Yuri. Your mum and I were co-students at the institute.

I was relieved at heart. And, suddenly, it was my turn to surprise the speaker.

- Imagine, I do know about you, - I joyfully told him, - My mother told me a lot about you.

He was obviously flattered.

- Really?

- It's true!

I did not specify what I did know. However there was nothing wrong in what she had told me: just some funny stories about when their team went to the harvest on the farm he dug his scoop into the grain, , so that there was nothing to work with. Or, that during physical

⁹² Songun is the DPRK's "Military First" policy which prioritizes the [Korean People's Army](#)' role in life of the state

⁹³ Yuri Borisovich Levitan (1914-1983) was a Soviet radio announcer famous for his wartime reports of the battles, which usually began with "Attention, Moscow is speaking." His voice announced battlefield victories, air raid warnings, and the surrender of Germany to the Soviets on May 9, 1945. He also announced the first public acknowledgment of Stalin's death, and the first manned space flight. His voice was instantly recognizable by the Soviet public.

education, when the students were to take a skiing test, he stopped in the fir trees and waited there until they started approaching the finishing line..

He was a little bit in love with her, judging by her stories. She treated him in a friendly manner, but made fun of his small stature. He was one of the few non-resident students in our provincial institute, and he came from Belarus. He was from the most famous Bobruysk⁹⁴, which was considered "*an excellent and highly cultural place*," by the heroes of Ilf and Petrov⁹⁵. Upon graduation, he realized that his feelings were not mutual. He told her that he was going to settle in Moscow - although it seemed almost impossible. Now, almost 20 years later, he had achieved it. He told me that he had become a writer. He had graduated for a second time: from the Literary Institute. By now he was searching for archival materials for his new book in our institute, he had seen the lists of students on the wall, and there he saw my name... Could we meet?

I was a little confused, but refused to show that I felt uncomfortable. I was flattered by such attention. Moreover it was interesting to meet a man who himself had achieved my own dream that I had since I was 5 years of age - to become a writer. At the age of 5 I told mother, handing her my first scribble with printed letters "storybook," and I told her that I wanted to become a "famous writer" ...

We agreed to meet later that day at the metro station Turgenevskaya. Yuri immediately recognized me. He really was as my mother described him, somewhat shorter than me. He had a huge fur hat, to hide his baldness. He had big, kind hazel eyes that sparkled cheerfully.

- I recognized you,- he smiled at me - your eyes are the same as your mothers.

Incidentally, I saw you, and even held you in my arms hands when you were three months old!

Wow!

Yuri talked about his life and career: because I promised him to re-tell it to my mother. He had something to be proud of, that is not only had he become a writer instead of an engineer, and graduated from the Gorky Literary Institute⁹⁶, but now he was writing books about Lenin. This was his specialty. He was published regularly and he wrote about Vladimir Ilyich with heart and soul. I read them afterwards. He also confessed not only that my mother was his first love, but also that she the love of his life. His eyes grew misty and dreamy when he said this, and I thought he was desperately looking for the memories of my young mother in my own face.

- Well, good-bye, Zhenya! - He said at the parting, - Here's my phone number, please call, with your Mum, too. She and I will meet again: we have ex-student meetings planned now. I hope we will meet annually in our *Alma Mater*!

.... A few years have passed. They were however, not easy years, but very stormy ones for our country. One day I called my mother - just after she had attended that annual reunion.

⁹⁴ Bobruysk is a city in the [Mahilyow Voblast](#) of [Belarus](#) on the [Berezina river](#). It is a large city in Belarus. As of 2009, its population was 215,092

⁹⁵ [Ilya Ilf](#) (Ilya Arnoldovich Faynzilberg) and Evgeny or [Yevgeni Petrov](#) (Yevgeniy Petrovich Kataev or Katayev (1903–1942) were two [Soviet](#) prose authors of the 1920s and 1930s. They did much of their writing together, and are almost always referred to as "Ilf and Petrov". They were natives of [Odessa](#).

⁹⁶ The Maxim Gorky Literature Institute ([Russian](#): Литературный институт им. А. М. Горького) is a higher education institute in [Moscow](#), the only place in the USSR for education of professional writers. It was founded in 1933 on the initiative of [Maxim Gorky](#).^[2] and received its current name at Gorky's death in 1936

- Well, how is your youth's friend doing? -I thought of Yuri. - What is he writing about now? Lenin, perhaps, is not a popular subject at this time....

- He doesn't write anything, - my mother said quietly, - He's a magician now.

- Ha ha, how funny ...

- Nothing funny. I'm not kidding. He now predicts the future, he does Tarot readings. . He tried to heal people, but that didn't work: someone almost died from his "healings" and then they almost broke the door by opening it with his head. He barely lived. Oh yeah, Yurka always had a great imagination and was good at making things up, but this time he's gone a bit too far ...

- Well, does he have many clients?

- Probably enough. Only he could not decide what he actually is: one day he is a psychic, the next day he is a magician, then he can change your destiny by using divination by candle lights, then he is a member of some Masonic order, then he is a numerologist, then he is a member of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences and Academic, (Professor doesn't sound important enough for him. He has to be an academician!)

So, '*Academician, hero, seaman brave / or carpenter - full-heartedly he was*',.⁹⁷

- Did you ever at a young age not notice in him the ability to predict the future? - I said sarcastically.

- What future! If Yuri was able to predict the future, surely he would have predicted how his head would break the door! It's all again from the same type of behaviour as hiding the scoop in the grain and hiding in-between fir-trees.

- What about Lenin? Did you ask him?

- What do you mean Lenin! One must have a means to live, to raise children (he has 2 boys -twins who are already big.) He asked about you. "How is she doing? Tell her not to even think of moving back to Russia! It's impossible to live here.... I will make sure that my children will emigrate."

And he was writing so well ... "*With a purpose, sensibly, and with good word arrangements ...*"⁹⁸ One could almost believe that the subject was really close to his heart. Patriotic Leniniana⁹⁹ obviously suffered a great loss.

.... Where do they come from, such people? For instance, an old writer- a prisoner of the gulag, on whose remarkable, fascinating book extolling our Revolution, I was raised as a child (I still remember the profile of a Red Army soldier, drawn on its light-brown cover and many of the stories in it!) It is from that book that I first learned of the assault at Perekop¹⁰⁰ and the horrors of the white terror in Siberia. About how Cheka¹⁰¹ was set up and the USSR was formed, and about the first steps in the international arena of the diplomats of the young Red Republic. But during the perestroika years, this writer suddenly decided to become an "advocate" and was "one of the key witnesses in the

⁹⁷ as Pushkin wrote about Peter the Great

⁹⁸ Words from "*Woe from Wit*" - [Alexander Griboyedov's](#) comedy in verse (1823), satirizing the society of post-Napoleonic [Moscow](#), or, as a high official in the play styled it, "a pasquinade on Moscow."

⁹⁹ Leniniana - literary works about Lenin, in their total

¹⁰⁰ [Siege of Perekop](#) by the [Red Army](#) in 1920. The siege was a key episode of the [Russian Civil War](#). The success of the Red Army allowed them to oust [Wrangel's White Army](#) from the Crimea

¹⁰¹ Cheka (ЧК - чрезвычайная комиссия *chrezvychaynaya komissiya*, Extraordinary Commission, Russian pronunciation: [\[tʃɛɪ'ka\]](#)) was the first of a succession of [Soviet state security](#) organizations. It was created on December 20, 1917

Constitutional Court case against the CPSU¹⁰². " A lady-expert on Africa, who wrote a monograph about the changes in public opinion of young Africans (in favour of socialist ideas) who just a few years after that, it turns out, "could not breathe freely" in the atmosphere of the same socialist ideas, on which her whole so-called "scientific" career was built. Yuri, expert on Lenin turned magician, who could not predict that writing stories about Lenin would stop being a lifelong feeder for him and many others like him

...

And maybe, it would be better for him to just wait it out, hiding between the trees? Instead of predicting more fires in the Ostankino Tower¹⁰³ and the supposed electoral victory of the Union of Rightist Forces¹⁰⁴, of which now nobody even remembers its existence ? At least, he would keep his head intact, and our future generations wouldn't have to be ashamed of him ..

In my opinion, the most disgusting human trait is ingratitude. First to grab everything that was possible, during your lifetime, from that socio-political system,-- and then to throw dirt at it. First, struggling with both hands to get into the sleeves of the red jacket, pushing others aside - and then to shout: "Take this red jacket off me!"¹⁰⁵ First to shout "Long live!" And then, when an order comes from the top, to shout "Down with!"

The Soviet dissidents were at least honest with their views at any time, even though these were the views of a tiny minority of the population

. But those who were hiding between the trees are far more disgusting. They've not just sat it out: they were actively screaming "Hurrah!" from their fir-trees. It is from these fir-trees that we had heard "loud and prolonged applause and cheers". And when a man whose bread and butter came from a lifetime career of pamphlet writing on Marxism-Leninism, now suddenly screamed from every corner about how he hated Stalin "with his gulags," where supposedly all his relatives had vanished, and that Stalin is to blame that the Nazis shot them during the occupation of Belarus (yeah, in this case, probably, Milosevic was also to blame for the death of Yugoslav children from American bombs : because his country did not give in to American demands, but resisted!), then for such a person I can feel nothing, but profound contempt

If you were so disgusted with the Soviet system, it is your point of view. But then, stay away from it, do not pretend to love and support it, and most importantly - do not use it, do not sit on that system's neck, cheerfully dangling your legs. Why didn't you say

¹⁰² The Constitutional Court Case against the CPSU - the final act of perestroika'

¹⁰³ Ostankino Tower ([Russian](#): Останкинская телебашня, *Ostankinskaya telebashnya*) is a [television](#) and [radio tower](#) in [Moscow](#), [Russia](#). Standing 540.1 metres (1,772 ft) tall, [Ostankino](#) was designed by [Nikolai Nikitin](#). It is currently the [tallest freestanding structure](#) in [Europe](#) and sixth tallest in the world. The tower was the first free-standing structure to exceed 500 m (1,600 ft) in height. Ostankino was built to mark the 50th anniversary of the [October Revolution](#). It is named after the Ostankino district of Moscow in which it is located

¹⁰⁴ The Union of Rightist Forces, or SPS (Soyuz Pravykh Sil), (1999-2008) was a [Russian neoliberal](#) party initially founded as an [electoral bloc](#) in 1999 and associated with [free market](#) reforms, privatization, and the legacy of the "young reformers" of the 1990s: [Anatoly Chubais](#), [Boris Nemtsov](#), and [Yegor Gaidar](#)

¹⁰⁵ "...Get rid, finally, once and for all, of this red jacket" (Boris Yeltsin, <http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=19940711&slug=1919826>)

anything about your relatives, during the many years that you were "the singer of the revolution"? Praising of the Soviet system in this case - if you are really so sure that they were innocent, - would have been disrespectful to them first of all. But I don't think they were so innocent, to be honest. One cannot help thinking that if they were just the same lying leeches on the body of our country, as Yuri himself, we'd still have to find out what exactly were they punished for. More than likely, not for nothing ...

People like Yuri want to make us believe today that all those listed as having been repressed, were in fact innocent lambs. But I still remember listings of those rehabilitated under Gorbachev, published in our regional newspaper. Among them there were almost no workers, few peasants, but the lists were full of salesmen, the heads of all sorts of warehouses and professional party workers. Knowing that at the end these were exactly the social groups that brought our country and our people to an end. How can we believe the word of those "reformed" magazine editors and regional party committee secretaries when they argue that all these people were really just white fluffy innocent bunnies?

I have already said that it's only natural that each of us evaluated life on a basis of our own life experience. But these people do not even evaluate our lives on their own established life experience: for most of them their own life in Soviet times was quite normal, and many of them even lived in clover.

They primarily want to make us - the majority of the population - evaluate our own past and present, based on someone else's life, narrated to them by someone or read by them somewhere. Moreover, they believe that the past suffering of their loved ones - deserved suffering or not, is a very open question - in any way justifies what is being done to our people today. The reality of Russia today is that we have hungry senior citizens (pay attention, they are now hungry, not because the country was at war, or has experienced some kind of natural disaster and famine, but because of the retail prices for food!), street children, who in Soviet times would have gone to school and to summer camps, girls selling their bodies along the Leningrad highway and wriggling on poles of strip bars, boys who are forced to become gangsters or security guards, because it is the only road open for them in life now, unemployed parents who do not know how to feed their children, the homeless, whom until recently we did not have (believe it or not, but we do remember that we didn't!) and refugees who not so long ago did not have to run anywhere. All of these people, according to the logic of anti-Sovietchiks, do not have the right to a decent, normal human life. They have no right to complain about their troubles, but must silently bear their cross and rejoice that "the horrors of the gulag will not happen again."! It doesn't matter that they go hungry today and do not know how they will pay the rent tomorrow, that they can end up on the streets or that they will have no heating, gas and electricity during the winter because they are unable to pay for it - but at least, not a single black market dealer, profiteer or pilferer will no longer be sent to fell trees in Siberia! Here it is, - the main achievement of democracy!

Griboedov's question "*Who are the judges?*"¹⁰⁶ remains very relevant today. I recently read a book on the subject of what is better for Russia, and the only one from all its

¹⁰⁶ Famous phrase from "Wit from Woe" play, meaning "what right do they have to judge others?"

contributors who recalls with distaste life under Soviet rule, was at that time a parasite! He was listed on the job, but did not actually work: that is, he had broken the law. None of the people, who back then worked honestly, said anything bad about that time - not in details, but on the whole, they spoke about the most important things! They could not remember anything bad. Life was a scourge only for those who wanted to live entirely at the expense of others.

I had never really thought much specifically about Stalin. That is, until now. Because he was for me simply a part of our history, like Lenin, like Peter the Great, like Dmitry Donskoy¹⁰⁷. Yes, I know about the “cleansings” during the Stalin era: not from Mr.Radzinsky and Volkogonov¹⁰⁸, when the order came from the top for them to speak about it, but since my childhood - from relatives. But they were not bitter about it, because they did not think of themselves in terms of Donna Rose D'Alvadorez¹⁰⁹: "And one of them is a very important person! ... To be precise, it's me!". They knew that this was a harsh time, and and they had a calm philosophical attitude to it.

I wonder why they talk so much about Stalin? Can you imagine today a mass movement for "the rehabilitation of the innocent victims of Peter the Great's reforms"? But they were no less than during Stalin's time! Or were they not human beings, or family members? Why does not anyone stand up for all those Streltsy¹¹⁰, Old Believers¹¹¹, serfs who were dying like flies on the construction of the new Russian capital, and who were not asked whether they wanted to construct it or not? For Tsarevich Alexei¹¹², finally? For Tsarevna Sophia¹¹³? For Fedka Shaklovity¹¹⁴? Why is anyone not screaming about

¹⁰⁷ Dmitry Ivanovich Donskoy , or Dmitry of the Don I (1350 – 1389), reigned as the [Prince of Moscow](#) from 1359 to his death. He was the first prince of [Moscow](#) to openly challenge [Mongol](#) authority in Russia. His nickname, Donskoy (i.e., "of the [Don](#)"), alludes to his great victory against the [Tatars](#) in the [Battle of Kulikovo](#) (1380) which took place on the Don River.

¹⁰⁸ Anti-Stalin Russian historians

¹⁰⁹ The name of the main character of *Hello, I'm Your Aunt!* - a Soviet 1975 [musical comedy film](#) loosely based on the play [Charley's Aunt](#) by [Brandon Thomas](#) (1892)

¹¹⁰ The Streltsy Uprising of 1698 an [uprising](#) of the Moscow [Streltsy regiments](#). The Streltsy uprising was a [reactionary](#) rebellion against progressive innovations of [Peter the Great \(Peter I\)](#)

¹¹¹ Old Believers ([Russian](#): *starovery* or *staroobryadtsy*) separated after 1666 from the official [Russian Orthodox Church](#) as a protest against church reforms introduced by [Patriarch Nikon](#) between 1652–66. Old Believers continue liturgical practices which the Russian Orthodox Church maintained before the implementation of these reforms.

¹¹² Alexei Petrovich Romanov (1690 –1718), was a [Russian Tsarevich](#). He was born in [Moscow](#), the son of Tsar [Peter I](#) and his first wife [Eudoxia Lopukhina](#). In 1718 Alexei died in the [Petropavlovskaya fortress](#) in [Saint Petersburg](#), two days after the senate had condemned him to death for conspiring rebellion against his father

¹¹³ Sophia Alekseyevna (1657 –1704) was [regent](#) of [Russian Tsardom](#) (1682–1689) who allied herself with a singularly capable courtier and politician, Prince [Vasily Galitzine](#), to install herself as a [regent](#) during the minority of her brothers, [Peter the Great](#) and [Ivan V](#) Her fate was sealed when the [Streltsy attempted to reinstate her](#) in the Kremlin during Peter's absence from the country. This uprising was suppressed with an iron hand, and soon the corpses of the rebels were suspended in front of Sophia's windows. Having taken the veil, she was kept in the strictest seclusion, with other nuns not allowed to see her except on [Easter](#) day. She died in the Novodevichy Convent.

¹¹⁴ Fyodor Leontiyevich Shaklovity (executed in 1689, [Moscow](#)) was a [Russian diplomat](#) .Is known to have been one of the foremost advisers of Sophia Alekseyevna in [international affairs](#), along with [Vasily Golitsyn](#).

Peter's "cult of personality" - in fact, he actually even declared himself an emperor? And what 'human rights' did those forced labourers have in the factories of the now praised Nikita Demidov¹¹⁵?

So, it's not Stalin they hate so much as the kind of society that has been built as a result of his work. That is the road that our people had taken. Similarly, as Yugoslavia was in reality bombed by NATO not for "violations of human rights" or "genocide" (then why didn't they bombed South Korea or Israel long ago?), but for the fact that this country dared to choose its own way. That's the whole point. But they are afraid to say this openly: because the majority of the people were quite happy with the life we had- in general, if the choice is between it and today's "freedom" for oligarchs. People did not like only the retreats from socialist norms. And the people went to such charlatans and thimble riggers precisely because they promised us more socialism. Just like in the old tale of Pushkin, where an arrogant old peasant woman never had enough, she wanted to become the mistress of the sea, and ended up with nothing ...

And these "fathers of Russian democracy" are using essentially the same arguments as their spiritual mentors and sponsors - "humanitarian imperialism". In Darfur, "human rights" for some reason, too, became "violated" only when oil was found there...

And that's why today, for me it does not matter what these types, who with their cannibalistic policies and without gulags diminish Russia's population by one million a year (that's without taking into consideration what is happening in other former Soviet republics), will say about Stalin. "Who are the judges?"

Anti-Sovietism begins with faith in their own exceptions, In the belief that they should have more rights than the others. With an arrogant belief that "the masses" are "loathsome creatures," but they themselves are the "elite" and "the conscience of the nation." Woe to the nation that has such a bad, conscienceless conscience! And I do not feel sorry anymore for those "victims"-intellectuals during the "cult of personality" , when I get a grasp of what they were actually punished for. Like the actor Dvorzhetsky¹¹⁶ Sr., who made "erotic photographs" of his wife - at a time when the whole country didn't sleep enough because of hard work, and malnourishment, in order to build a new life.

¹¹⁵ Nikita Demidov (born Nikita Demidovich Antufiev; 1656 — 1725) was a Russian [industrialist](#) who founded the [Demidov industrial dynasty](#). Peter I of Russia charged the enterprising blacksmith Nikita with casting cannon for his many military expeditions and he was ennobled with name Demidov for having strongly supported the tsar's activities. In 1699 he set up Nevyansk's first iron foundry and in 1725 discovered mines at Kolivan (Kolyban), whose exploitation enriched him. A museum is devoted to him in Tula.

¹¹⁶ Vaclav Dworzecki - Soviet actor (1910-1993)

Imprisoned for savoring the charms of some bare asses instead of doing a decent job?
And rightly so!

And the hypocrites, that now proclaim as "holy" our Tsar Nicholas, forget about Bloody Sunday, the Lena Massacre¹¹⁷, and the millions who lost their lives in that "small victorious, war" of his making, the Russo-Japanese war and the First World War¹¹⁸. If you care so much for the innocent victims -the royal children, why do you not feel sorry for that poor child, the son of Marina Mniszech¹¹⁹, which was hanged on the gallows, when he was only four years old, not by "bloody Bolsheviks," but by followers of the heroes of the New Russians, Minin and Pozharsky¹²⁰ ? The history books keep quiet embarrassed into silence. Or was he to blame for the fact that he was born the son of a Tushino thief¹²¹?

Enough pouring dirt on our history - albeit take a good look at yourselves. We should stop sprinkling ashes on our heads before these ideological black-marketeers. We do not have to defend anything in to those who killed and carried off all that was created by our people for decades and then created nothing in return. We do not have to apologize to them that we, the people were happy when they, a bunch of crooks and profiteers, had to get out and dodge in order to avoid making their tender hands dirty with the farm work, not to serve in the army and to copy someone else's thesis. It's time to learn how to evaluate personalities based not on fine words and intentions "to lie down on the rails," but by the results of their actions. And when I see to what state just exactly the most ardent anti-Stalinists have brought my country to, this alone automatically makes me re-evaluate positively Stalin's personality..

Winter sneaked in obliviously. I must have been so bewildered by my unpredictable work schedules that I did not even notice it. To work all the time on different shifts is far worse than nights only: your biological clock becomes so confused that you do not know whether it is day or night and you are continuously tired regardless of how many hours sleep you get after the shift...It was not easy for the three of us to live on my salary, and I was trying to earn overtime whenever possible. Sometimes I worked two shifts in

¹¹⁷ The Lena Massacre or Lena Execution refers to the shooting of striking [goldfield](#) workers by the [Russian Empire's tsarist](#) army on 17 April [[O.S.](#), 4 April] 1912 in northeast [Siberia](#) near the [Lena River](#)

¹¹⁸ In the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905) Russia lost from around 40,000 to around 70,000 men, in the WWI - more than 3 000 000 men

¹¹⁹ Marina Mniszech ([Polish: Maryna\[2\] Mniszchówna](#) or *Maryna Mniszech*; (c. 1588 – 24 December 1614), was a Russian Tsaritsa and a [Polish noblewoman](#) and a political [adventurer](#) in the [Time of Troubles](#) in [Russia](#)

¹²⁰ Kuzma (Kozma) Minin (? – 1616) was a Russian merchant from [Nizhny Novgorod, Russia](#), who, together with Prince [Dmitry Pozharsky](#), became a [national hero](#) for his role in defending the country against the [Polish invasion in the early-17th century](#)

¹²¹ False Dmitry II (died 11 December 1610) also called the *rebel or the thief of Tushino*, was the second of three pretenders to the [Russian](#) throne who claimed to be [Tsarevich Dmitry Ivanovich](#), the youngest son of [Ivan the Terrible](#).

a row, although it is illegal under labour legislation. My bosses sighed and told me that it's harmful for my health, but that was it. The only essential concern for them was a result. And they knew that I would not quit and then whistle blow.

When I worked on two shifts in a row, I did not have time to go home in-between and sometimes stayed in Belfast at Nadette's place. Nadette actually should have been called just Bernie. But I did not know for a long time that her full name was a typical Irish name Bernadette. I thought her name was French. Nadette had a very interesting job at an NGOs. She lived with the family of her sister Mandy in a big old house in posh south Belfast.

Nadette was very kind. Why would she not be? She never knew what it meant to live in need. She grew up in a wealthy family of philanthropists who had unusually, for the Irish, an interest in different cultures. She had inherited a large old house from her parents, in the most expensive part of Dublin. True, just like Mandy's house, her house was extremely uncared-for, but this neglect was the kind of creative, chaotic neglect of an extravagant intellectual who sees in it a challenge to the surrounding conventional society. Look, my home is in a terrible mess, but I do not have any servants! Such people do not think that actually they can restore order themselves from time to time.

Nadette wasn't a revolutionary and she did not sympathize with them. For her, they were "extremists". thanks to the circles that she had been born and raised in she had never experienced the need to turn to extreme methods in a struggle for her rights. . Still, she sought to restructure the world. Her conscience had tormented her after she had seen life in various countries while working for various charitable organizations and Amnesty International. She had seen Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Brazil ..

Today is her birthday. Nadette can easily travel to any country that she wants to. She has no thought over the main problem that most people would have, when it comes to travel: can I actually afford it? She believes that one can change the world through a sincere interest in other cultures and charity alone.

Her sister's home is indisputably an SDLP¹²² "nest". Until recently, the SDLP was the largest Irish Catholic party in the north of Ireland. To put it bluntly, they are moderates who condemn violence and do not at all mind remaining a part of Britain, provided they maintain the receipt of sufficient handouts from the "master's table." However they prefer not to declare their true position aloud and claim that they support Irish independence too - by consent. The SDLP formed as a result of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s. Their differences with Sinn Fein not only lay in the methods of

¹²² The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) is a [social-democratic](#) political party in [Northern Ireland](#) founded in 1970, moderate Nationalist party that used to be the biggest party among the Catholic population.

fighting for the rights of the Irish. When you meet members of the SDLP and compare them with the familiar "Sinners", first of all you can see class differences: SDLP supporters are mainly prosperous people, quite materially content in life, a kind of Catholic "Uncle Tom ", or colonial "emancipé"¹²³, an Irish version of what was in the Belgian African colonies. "Sinners" are working class, often made up of the unemployed people of the Catholic ghetto, farmers, youth and some intellectuals who sacrificed their well-fed and cloudless personal fate for the sake of the struggle for independence and unification of the country, as did, for example, a friend of mine, a university professor of sociology, who spent many years in prison for his political activities and has not since then had an opportunity to work in his specialty. Today he, like other members of Sinn Fein, has half of his salary paid not to him but into the party fund. You will not see anything like this in the SDLP.

However, in comparison with the Unionists, of course, the SDPL are friendly enough people, polite and intelligent. But they will not take a single step toward anything that would involve the violation of the established framework: Nadette even threw in a bin a smoked sausage, which my relatives in Russia had sent me - because "in the UK the import of meat products is prohibited " Although even in the unlikely event that the sausage had been found at customs, nothing threatened her, not even a fine. The sausage would have been confiscated, and nothing more. But why should she take the risk? After all, there are laws and rules established by legitimate authorities. So they say...

When the SDLP people say "government", they refer to Tony Blair's government as if it is theirs. I will never consider him to be "my Prime Minister". To me, it is the British government and the British Prime-Minister, not mine. This is what the Irish patriots think too. Not to mention that it seems, likely that even the British people will not consider him their Prime-Minister for much longer.

... We were sitting at a table in the kitchen of Mandy's house. It is jam-packed with all sorts of oriental spices and exotic products, about which the owners of the house, judging by our celebration dinner menu, had little knowledge. These products were bought for show: "That's what we can buy!" Here one could see some broken things, obviously expensive and now abandoned in the middle of the house, because of the lack of need or wish to repair them. After all, one can always buy new ones.

The atmosphere at the table was *bohemian*. There were bottles of exotic wines and a dinner, prepared by "the birthday girl" (and because of this it was almost uneatable), but, of course, all openly praised the hostess as much as they could. I brought a gift, a jar of marrow caviar from a Russian

¹²³ Local Africans that got European education and were allowed to work for the imperialist state in the colonial times

store in Dublin. She immediately started telling everyone how she loves marrows and eggplants, and smeared small slices of bread with a very thin layer of caviar.

At the table were Mandy, her husband, an Englishman, Nadette, myself and a respectable middle-aged couple; friends of Mandy and her husband from their party. From time to time children ran into the kitchen: Mandy had one son from her previous marriage and two girls from this one. The younger girl ran with pompoms in her hands and shook her legs in front of us dancing around the kitchen a la American cheerleaders, chanting: "SDLP! SDLP!" It was clear that this nine year old child repeated the party slogans because she had never heard anything else, it was fun, easy, and did not require much thought ...

Class contempt is felt in what Mandy says about Sinn Fein: "These ignorant savages!" The question of why they could not get an education is not of interest to her. She had just drained the third glass of old wine and condemned Irish Republicans because in a small village in County Fermanagh they had not allowed an English aristocratic woman - a distant relative of our Alexander Pushkin¹²⁴ - to attend a cultural evening. They did not allow this because they believe that British aristocrats have nothing to do with Irish soil, as here they behave as if it is their land.

Mandy was surprised that I did not hold any indignation towards "wild sinners" and in her support. And I, frankly speaking, was far more anxious not about the question of the presence of a real or imaginary relative of Pushkin in Ireland, but with why the SDLP supported the disgraceful, not even halved but quartered reform of the local colonial police force. This "reform" did nothing to remove any of those who over the years had violated and still continued to violate the very human rights, about which Mandy and Nadette were so concerned. This was not taking place in Pakistan (they love to talk, for example, about the bitter lot of Pakistani women), but right here, right under their noses, in their own country.

After drinking, the guests at the table began a vigorous debate on vital issues: In which South European country is it better to buy a second house to relax during the summer months? In France, in Spain, or in Portugal? And I remembered the mother of many children from Belfast's Poleglass¹²⁵, pleasing her children with new clothes from a second-hand charity shop ...

I was awfully sleepy, but they didn't allow me to leave the table, they seemed

¹²⁴ Alexandr Pushkin (1799-1837) - a [Russian](#) author of the [Romantic](#) era who is considered to be the greatest Russian poet and the founder of modern [Russian literature](#)

¹²⁵ Poleglass is an area of West [Belfast](#) in [Northern Ireland](#). It is the name of a historic [townland](#) and a housing estate. It is mainly an [Irish nationalist](#) and [republican](#) area.

offended by my attempts. I said that I have to get up at 5:30 tomorrow, but *Bohemians*¹²⁶ have the opposite mode of the day ... And I, trying to keep my eyes open to stay awake, continued listening to them. The decisions made about world problems at this exotic vegetarian table, reminded me of Marie Antoinette: "No bread? So let them eat cake!" Would they be offended if I say this out loud?

When I could not bear anymore of this talk and had to go to sleep, after I had made a thousand excuses, Nadette brought me to the door. Secretly she admitted that she would soon return to Dublin. Although until now I had never heard her complain about her life here or about the unionists, - she spoke of them, anyway, with greater respect than about "sinners."

- Why, Nadette? Is there something wrong?

- Oh, you cannot imagine how hard it is! When we moved here, I thought that in a quarter like this, the question of being a Catholic or Protestant would be of no concern. Only now, two years later, have I finally been convinced of the degree of segregation between the two communities. Even among such respectable people as those among whom we live. Segregation is just absolute - they do not communicate with us and refuse to talk! One would think that they and us have more in common than they¹²⁷ have with the Loyalists, or that we have with the Republicans..... But nothing of the kind.

"The lady, pleasant in all respects¹²⁸" is obviously upset. I know she wants things to be smooth. But she has a place to run, when she sees that her civilized and non-extremist methods do not work in practice. While those who are doomed to a life time of discrimination here have nowhere to escape to. And what are they to do, except to become the "extremists" as they do and are? Except to rise from their knees and take their destiny into their own hands, no matter how strongly the "nice people" condemn them?

I got acquainted with Nadette by chance: in the process of seeking for a new job, at a conference on *multiculturalism*. Those had become more frequent even in the North, and I attended them voluntarily in my spare time, because to start work in the NGO sector with my CV was possible only through volunteering. I was eager to work with real people, not "customers", and it was the field of work in which I thought I was just made for: to work with people of different nationalities.

One should not think that I held any illusions about NGOs. Dealing with them in my spare time, I clearly saw how desperately they had to fight for "a

¹²⁶ Bohemian (here) - a socially unconventional person, especially one who is involved in the arts

¹²⁷ "They" and "us" here means well-off middle class Protestants/Unionists and well-off, middle class Catholics/Nationalists respectively, who in class terms should have more in common with each other than with the poor sections of their own community. But in practice, they still often live completely segregated.

¹²⁸ Term from Nikolai Gogol's classic novel "Dead Souls" (1842)

place under the sun". Every year in the same season a feverish *struggle for grants* began. No position in these "independent" organizations was guaranteed from being eliminated in a year or two, this depending on the ability to receive a regular grant. The sponsor can be either a private charitable organization, owned by a bunch of money bags, or the state, and knowing the nature of the latter here, it was hard to say, which was worse? In any case, what kind of independent organization is this when, for example, the future existence of the NGOs depends on the extension of a contract with the Home Office? Not to mention that once money had been given to any project for 2-3 years, the NGO was then often forced to invent a new name for the activities that they were involved in, simply in order to get money to continue the same work, the need for which over the last 2-3 years has only increased?

It seems that there is no logic in it at all, but in fact it has logic, and this logic is elementary: to remind constantly to "these intellectuals," who holds the reins. NGOs is in fact like an ordinary "kept woman": *"who has dinner with the girl, can dance with her."* If you act too independently in an NGO, the *financial oxygen* is immediately blocked. One should achieve what is firstly useful to the sponsor, and only then, if any space and resources are left, to act for the people. And so, unfortunately, very often all those involved in such organizations were employed for just empty talking. This involved organized seminars, conferences at which participants were fed with tasty food; it was nice for them to communicate with other such "intellectuals" as they were themselves. In these circles, too, all knew each other and "*stewed in their own juices*". The subject of the rights of migrants was spoken about most frequently by "experts" from the local population, who knew about our problems purely theoretically. (None of them had ever experienced any hardship, such as, for example, what I had experienced when trying to reunite my family. And for me it is still a sin to complain, because there are people in far more desperate situations.) If any migrants appeared at such meetings, it was usually for show: here, look, we have a real Nigerian (*Algerian, Mongolian: delete non-applicable*) with us today!...

Here precisely this attitude flourished, the one with which I had tried to fight in the ranks of Sinn Fein: to struggle for the rights of migrant workers *not with them, but instead of them*. This condescending attitude towards us - treating us like children who have not grown up enough to fight, so it should be done instead of us by the locals- deeply offended me. It felt ... well, *as if an adult person was being force-fed with a spoon*. At its core, this was in fact a racist act: like a "missionary among savages" who should be "helped and enlightened." This attitude is doubly sad when the educational and intellectual level of these "missionaries" is far below those of many migrants themselves. For instance, in Russia the whole country knows and loves books written by a native of this place - *Thomas Mayne Reid*¹²⁹. But here in the libraries you will not even find the "Headless Horseman", and nobody has even heard about this writer ... And after this can

¹²⁹ Thomas Mayne Reid (1818 – 1883), was a [Scots-Irish American novelist](#). "Captain" Reid wrote many adventure novels, most famous is "Headless Horseman" (very well known in Russia). Reid was born in [Ballyronney](#), near [Katesbridge](#), [County Down](#), but he is barely known in Ireland.

one take these people who are trying to teach you how to live, seriously?

But I was hoping to break through this brick wall, *decorated in some places with sticked to it Uncles Toms.*

My work kept me in a depression. On the one hand, I realized that the work here is not for the soul, but only is a means for existence. On the other hand, my whole being simply could not accept the fact that it will be like that for the rest of my life. It was not only because of low wages: even if I was offered the same salary as a director of a bank, whilst continuing to do that same work and then was given a choice between this and the work that would have been to my liking, I would not hesitate to chose the latter. I need to feel that what I'm doing is really needed by people, even if it only improves their lives slightly. If working on the "hot line" of a computer company, could at some stretch of the imagination be placed in such a category, I think, that my new job could not be conjured even by a science fiction writer with experience. And the more I , like a machine, answered those generally meaningless e-mails - *not forgetting, of course, to leave three spaces before the signature* - the more I felt like an air seller¹³⁰.

At that time we were serving U.S. clients who had collected points from purchases made by them on the Internet. These points could then be turned into vouchers, which then were used to receive discounts on yet new purchases. In real life around me there was a woman from Kenya who had married a Northern Irishman, but he had died shortly thereafter,. Thus she was left with no opportunity to bring her two children from her first marriage, who had remained in Kenya to Ireland: despite the fact that she worked day and night. There was an Uyghur¹³¹ family, who with two small children had gone into hiding after being denied asylum. (If they were not the Kazakh but Chinese Uighurs, you can be assured, they would have received asylum here!). They were those who were working for a pittance without a regular hot dinner. There were Ukrainians who were fired for any trifles - even, for example, for having high blood pressure. And on this background, I became more and more annoyed with the hysterical letters of overseas customers invisibly stomping their feet "behind the scenes": *"I bought-so many things on this site and I was credited with only *** points. Where are my points? Where? Where? Where?! Give them to me, give them to me, give them!">».*

The deuces take you with your points! These grown up fastidious people.... Get a life. *Wake up and smell the coffee!*. To write this in a reply, of course, was impossible, though sometimes I was very tempted to do it. But one thought was increasingly gnawing my mind: What do I work here for? Who really needs it? All of these *tsaki-karaki*?¹³² "

Christmas was coming, and an avalanche of e-mails began to pour in. The amount was so growing vast that our servers were brought down several times, causing downtime.

¹³⁰ Air Seller - science fiction novel of the Soviet writer A. Belyaev (1929). Expression "air seller" usually means somebody who sells a useless thing or something that shouldn't be sold, a conman.

¹³¹ Uyghurs are [Turkic ethnic group](#) living in Eastern and [Central Asia](#). Today, Uyghurs live primarily in China. Outside of China, significant communities of Uyghurs exist in the Central Asian countries of [Kazakhstan](#), [Kyrgyzstan](#), and [Uzbekistan](#) .

¹³² Useless fancy things (the term comes from the Soviet cult film "Kindza-dza!" (1988)

During the time that the servers were put in order, the mail continued to arrive. Then we had to dig these *electronic Augean stables* overtime. Who said that in the Western market economy, there is no such thing as rush work?

In those days managers - they were also the owners of the company - also did not get out of the office. However, only in order to tell us from time to time:

- Guys, there are still 4387 unanswered letters. The first team to get through this will receive *a pizza per person*. We must answer all today. Try to reduce your pauses. Do not visit the WC without permission from a team-leader. Who wants to work overtime, you are all welcome. We will pay you the money later, together with your February wages.

From our fingers smoke was almost about to rise: such was the speed with which we pressed the buttons. And still, at the same time I had to solve another problem, one in which my mum found herself. The fact is that she was unfamiliar with the subtleties of human relations in the "civilized world", and she had dared in my absence - oh horrors! - to make a comment to a teenager who had smashed our window with a golf ball in summer. She asked him not play it so close to our home .

Of course, in the Soviet society, in which we had both grown up, remarks made by adult people usually impacted the children. And it is exactly the same in the "free world", only it causes an opposite reaction: adults are not an authority for children here, and children are free to terrorize the whole neighborhood as they like. And if, God forbid, someone tries to shame them or - even scarier thought! - to slap them, then *a whole army of "children's rights" defenders* will appear (who themselves seem to live in villas with swimming pools, surrounded by three-meter fences, away from all of this "civilization").

Since that fateful day not one evening had passed without stone attacks on our house. Deeply offended by the fact that someone had dared to make comments, this boy (his name was Robbie, and he was the son of a single mother who was better to be avoided) incited younger children to knock on our door at night with cries, to climb over the fence, to move waste bins in the yard: in short, to do all the favourite "*innocent pranks*" made by "children of the Peace process" in Northern Ireland. Thank God, they did not set us on fire!

This was done usually when I worked in the evening shift, and I could not help mother from a distance. My mother called me on a mobile phone in perfect hysteria - at the very moment when I tried to respond to any e-mail number 1852 ("*Give me two tickets by bank transfer! Give me! Give! Shall I wait? I'll wait* ¹³³..."). She seemed not to be aware that she woke up the sleeping dogs, even though I warned her not to do anything here without asking my advice first.

Life in Northern Ireland is so different and unfamiliar to us and so full of different invisible rules and prohibitions that "*a pas to the left or a pas to the right is considered to*

¹³³ From the comic dialogue "Case with the cashier" performed by Soviet stand up comedians Roman Kartsev and Victor Ilchenko in the 1970s

be an escape, oboe opens fire without warning".¹³⁴What could I do to protect her being 30 miles away from her with a computer mouse in my hand as the only weapon? It is clear what: to call my local friends in Sinn Fein! Thus, I spoke with those whom she had recently asked me not to talk to. I called and they (to their honour and praise), wherever they were, just jumped in the car (or they sent someone who could do it) and drove to our house: to chase away the hooligans ...

A couple of times an "attack" occurred when I was home. Once I even caught Robbie - when he attempted to smash a lantern over our door with an empty bottle. He did this literally under my nose! To seek help from the Northern Ireland police was considered to be *mauvais ton*¹³⁵ among my friends (almost like in Jamaica: "*Junior, you can't call the police!*"¹³⁶), But at that time I could not stand it and called the police. The policeman - a hefty, two meter tall Protestant- arrived, he wrote down my testimony, questioned me in details (it was very peculiar that he asked me not so much about how all this had happened, but more so about where I worked and if I had a car!). He promised to find out all about the case and disappeared. A week later he called me and said that he had "*talked to the boy and believed him when he said that he did not do it.*" It automatically meant that I was supposed to be a liar ...

Needless to say, that the boy's mother was Protestant? Here, in general, all society is built on this: "*I know him*". It almost always automatically meant "*I believe him,*" and "I do not know him" accordingly means "I don't..." ...

Sometime later I met this policeman at the bus station where I was waiting for the last Belfast bus: I had been working in the night shift. It was a cold, wet and dark winter evening. He greeted me courteously, moving his submachine gun from one shoulder to another. And he began to tell me (though I did not ask him) about his harsh everyday life, complaining about his low wages, with a look as if it depended on me to increase it. I was not very comfortable in his company, especially considering the range of my contacts, and how it could be perceived by them if, god forbid, someone saw me in his company. I was thinking feverishly about how to get rid of him.

- Is your machine gun real? - I asked him seriously. He puffed up with pride and said certainly, yes.

- Oh, can I hold it I have not ever seen one so close, - and I stretched out my hand to the barrel of his weapon. The policeman jumped back in horror, and just then my "saving" bus appeared from around the corner.

- Oh, sorry, it's my bus! - I said, pretending not to notice his reaction. - Well, goodbye! Enjoy your duty!

I left him alone on a wet street blown by all winds, and I hastily closed the umbrella and jumped into the warm and dry bus cabin ...

¹³⁴ From an old Soviet joke: instruction to the ballet dancers who were going on tour abroad

¹³⁵ Bad tone, bad taste (French)

¹³⁶ From the Jamaican film "Dancehall Queen"

... But we found a way to sort out that boy. His mum was a Protestant, but his missing dad was a Catholic. And the boy lived in a predominantly Catholic neighborhood. Once when I had the opportunity to point out our offender's to a friend from my local Sinn Fein branch, he did not postpone the case, but immediately ran after him. Ran - because as soon as Robbie saw me accompanied by a *Sinner*¹³⁷, he immediately took to his heels, he knew that it is not like the police. These people do not let anybody to mess with them, and no one can fool them.

Five minutes later, my comrade-Sinner returned.

- He will not bother you any more.

- What did you tell him? Perhaps you know some magic word? - I was surprised because in these 5 minutes he did not even have time to deal a blow to Robbie's neck.

- I said, we know who you are, we know where you live. We know where to find you if you continue to disturb these people..... That's all. Now all this will be stopped,- my comrade told me with no doubt. Once again, Sinn Fein reminded me of our "Timur Squad¹³⁸" and how they dealt with the hooligan gang of Kvakin! - If this ever happens again, call me straight away.

But there was no need to call. Since that day Robbie really left us alone. Now he is grown up already. He serves as a pilot in the British army in Iraq ...

And my mother has since started to respect the Irish Republicans.

... By Christmas I had to stand in a queue for bread. Yes, this does happen in this wealthy Western Europe. I even stood outside the shop because the bakery could not house the whole queue. Why was there a queue? Because the stores were going to be closed for two days ...

Queues can be found here not only just before the holidays, but almost every weekend (and especially at the end of the month after the salary is paid!) people simply *sweep the shelves clean* in the nearest supermarket. The shelves are usually filled on a Tuesday morning, and so by the middle of the day on a Sunday and Monday the whole store presents a sorry spectacle. Oh, and if the sale goes on and the prices drop, the people start to grab items whether they needed them or not, they almost pull the shop's shelves out while clearing them.. "*Forward and only forward, and then we shall see!*"¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Member of Sinn Fein

¹³⁸ The Timurite movement or Timur movement was an [altruistic](#) youth [volunteering](#) movement in the [Soviet Union](#) promoted via mass [youth organizations](#) of [Little Octobrists](#) and [Young Pioneers](#). The participants of the movement were called Timurites. The idea of the movement was borrowed from the popular novel for youth *Timur and His Squad* by [Arkady Gaidar](#). The youngster Timur and his squad clandestinely did good deeds: helped the families of the [Red Army](#) soldiers and combated the local gang of young [hooligans](#) headed by Mishka Kvakin.

¹³⁹ Quote from Soviet children's science fiction novel "The Girl From Earth" by Kir Bulychev

We of course, cannot be surprised with this. When we had prices that allowed most people to eat well, we also did something similar. It simply turns out that shelves are full under capitalism not thanks to some inexhaustible abundance, but because prices are kept high enough to prevent the complete depletion of the store.

Nevertheless, the consumer in a capitalist society is drastically different from the Soviet consumer, in their attitude to the commodity. Briefly it can be expressed by "*in socialism people consume to live, in the "free market world" people live to consume.*" And for the rest their position in life here, too, originated precisely at this starting point. The Soviet people, for example, could not understand how a holiday celebration or a vacation trip could cause "stress "to anybody." One can only rejoice in them! Even if one has to stand in a queue, well, it happens. But a normal Soviet citizen had no craving to overdo his neighbours, colleagues or the classmates of their children in consuming...

Yes, the Soviet consumers sometimes stock up the goods in reserve, just in case (and the good's prices allowed this!) and put such things away for a "rainy day". But a capitalist consumer fills a truck load into their cupboards, only to throw most of it in the trash a couple of days later. He truly believes that he can eat it all at one sitting. Moreover, he often almost manages this, and then next time buys even more. "*Greed has destroyed the sucker*"¹⁴⁰ .

"I am just sick to see how many things they buy!" - A Yugoslav friend told me contemptuously once about Dubliners, - "Are they not disgusting to themselves?"

It is disgusting indeed.

Here people not only over eat themselves and then struggle to lose weight. They do not repair broken TV sets, they cannot sew the holes in their clothes and throw out still reasonably good furniture on to the street. And if a charity shop is too far from home, their children's clothing which is still quite new, but from which the children are grown, are also thrown into the trash container. This same attitude is not only applicable to things, but also to the people. Yesterday girls were crazy about pop-group "X", and the boys put up posters of actress «Y», on their walls and yet today these posters are trash, and the girls moan about pop star «Z» ...

With no shopping Western consumers have no life: They are like the inhabitants of the planet Plyuk, where *life had no purpose without the colour differentiation of pants*.¹⁴¹ Shopping is not just a person's only entertainment. Deprive them of shopping, and they really will go to the barricades! For shopping is their daily «fix», their drug. They themselves are like any addicted person; they will never recognize it, considering their lifestyle healthy and the only correct one.

¹⁴⁰ Was originally Proverb of Russian criminals, "sucker" - potential victim, somebody who has no affiliation with criminal world. Now this saying is being widely used as general condemnation of greed.

¹⁴¹ From the Soviet cult film "Kindza-dza!" (1988)

I recently read a book by one Englishman who had worked for several years in socialist Korea. That's how he sees people from another, non-consumerist value system: "...In North Korea there was not much of what the rest of us call a life in which to participate. For the majority of people in the real world the essential core of life is to be found in the private life with family and friends. Whether we regard our work as totally alienating or deeply rewarding, we still tend to regard it primarily as a means to an end, earning our living. Ask a North Korean what his life is all about and he will most likely tell you that he is building the revolution and construction. ... It is also because life in North Korea consists of little else. There is practically nothing except the home and the workplace.... People in North Korea really are too busy building the revolution and construction to have time for anything other than an hour or two in front of the television before bed."¹⁴²

The famous British sarcasm, if you pardon me, spills over the edge, together with more than enough of the well-known British snobbery and arrogance. But the really ridiculous thing is in the author's categoricalness. Take a look: *only his world is real for him!* Everything, which differs from his world, his mind defines as a fake ("propaganda"), or simply discards as something that "*has no right to exist*".

That is, for him, if a man can see something more in work, than just a means to survive, then there must be something really abnormal with his mind. If there are no pubs in the community, no brothels, no casinos, no McDonald's, no night clubs, no shopping malls, no "soap operas" consisting of 300 episodes, no daily TV games that ask primitive questions and no reality TV- and talk-shows on TV, including adverts, for him that means that such a community has NOTHING. Theatres, museums, exhibitions, cinemas, libraries, botanical gardens, extracurricular after school groups (from music and dancing to sports and embroidery), music schools, parks, circuses (and, by the way, all of it is either free of charge or very cheap!) – All this for him is "not a real life"! TV watching should surely be obligatory until sunrise. It is also advisable to watch it with a plate of fish and chips in one hand and a can of beer in the other.

A capitalistic citizen is very tolerant to anything: to prostitution, to drugs, to teenage crime, - but not to those, who really differ from him by their vital system of values. Facing such a kind of man, he immediately becomes aggressive and intolerant. "*Either you are with us, or against us*". A wrapper and a brand for him are much more important, than the quality of his art. The same is in society: form is much more important than content.

In our country this type of consumers (*mega dudes*, as they love to name themselves) are a kind of new stream, but their aggression is already familiar to us. The 35-40 year old "kids of perestroika" still call their behaviour "youth's pressure", but they seem to forget, that "*the bride is already grey-haired*"¹⁴³... Of course they didn't appear out of nothing,

¹⁴² Andrew Holloway. A Year in Pyongyang (http://www.aidanfc.net/a_year_in_pyongyang_5.html)

¹⁴³ Ilf & Petrov. 12 chairs (1927)

but I still remember the phrase that really surprised me when it was enviously said by my compatriot about the Dutch: “*Yeah, they know how to have a good time over there!*” It was said in exactly the same context which our Englishman was so much, to the extreme, missing, in Korea.

All *mega dudes* are certain that they are “*sweating as papa Carlo*¹⁴⁴” and are “*suitably paid*” for this, in contrary to those “*losers*”: the workers, peasants, and teachers ... But in fact none of them think about whether there is any practical use to be had from their “*intensive work*” for both people and country. For them an indicator of usefulness appears in the form of their own monetary income, instead of the final result. If they were well paid for cleaning out the territory from “*the natives*”, then they would have already gathered our scalps ...

As for the final product of their work: take a look, there just isn’t any! The *Mega Dude* creates nothing. Who benefits from the growth of sales of winged sanitary pads in Russia, from pumping out our oil or from vulgar radio flap jaws? A squirrel in the wheel is probably also certain that it works very hard.

So that is how they live, the “*civilized people*”, who name themselves “*the World*”. At first they gobble, what they want to – then they guzzle pills to lose weight, and on top of this they waste hundreds of pounds/ dollars/euro to go to a fitness club. At first they buy on credit, (“*Oh! I can’t miss this dress...and that one...and tha-a-a-at one, too...!*”) – Then they work like mules only in order to pay off their debts. (Sometimes people need and must be saved from themselves. In the Soviet Union we weren’t able to take out SUCH loans, even if we had a strong desire to– nobody would allow us to get into such debt, but we could buy, for instance, TV sets on credit and pay in back in instalments, without any interest!). Firstly they stress themselves with their “*civilized*” way of life (e.g. the inevitable capitalistic reduction of work places: Thus there is “*the uncertainty about tomorrow*”, as Soviet newspapers wrote; it’s not a fiction. “*Any of us can be only 3-4 salaries away from becoming homeless!*” – As a huge banner seen every morning in the centre of Belfast kindly states) – and after all this they go to their lawyers and psychotherapists who wait for them with their hands wide open (if they can pay well of course)... Others fly to different places for relaxation “*to play the field*”, smashing up everything on their way.

Kids are brought up in the same tradition: “*to give them everything, that others have*”, “*so as not to make them scapegoat at school*”. However, when you ask them: “*Why don’t you bring up your child in a manner so that he doesn’t care about what people say about him and he has no wish to have stuff that is unnecessary for him?*”, they are falling into catatonia. But such an upbringing is real. I had no idea what “*peer pressure*” means, in my school years. I did not care what Lenka N. wore, or whom Tatiana E. kissed. It was impossible for me to be stressed over such things! If anybody put pressure on me to begin smoking or told me that it was time for me to have a boyfriend, because of the fact that

¹⁴⁴ Expression meaning “*working hard*”; Papa Carlo - hero of *Adventures of Buratino*, Russian version of *Pinocchio*.

“everybody already else had one, and I did not”, I would have laughed my interlocutor to dust!

“I know exactly what I want. And I want it now!” (And I will have it, even if the whole world goes to hell!) – instructs an advertisement to a future potential mega dude. The poor fellow thinks that he really wants this or that thing... But as a matter fact, the market has already decided what he wants today and what he will wish tomorrow. The market makes him a slave, but he is completely blind to it. And he continues to think that he is the master of his own life. “See the gadget that I have grabbed! Envy me, dude! ”

Their blinkered mind perceives any negative attitude to them as “envy”. The capitalistic classics are always the same: George Bush Jr.’s *“they envy our freedom”!*

You know what? I feel sorry for them. When I communicate, for example, with an American (even more so, if with such a rare being, as *a progressive American*), it tears my heart: because of compassion. Like for somebody who is suffering from an incurable, day by day progressing disease. Children are not responsible for their parents¹⁴⁵, - I am telling to myself. These people are products of their society. You can’t ask *some* people to overstretch themselves.

What envy are you talking about? You may envy those people whose place you want to occupy. God help you, guys, if you like such a way of life, well then have it! But you *force* your way of life on us all! I know the feeling of satisfaction after buying new stuff. But it can never be compared with the happiness of having like-minded people around you, or the feeling that your work is needed by others. There are other notions of happiness. What about being happy from an interesting book that you have read? What about a kind of life that allows you to wake up not thinking how are you going to pay your bills tomorrow?

But *mega dudes* are often boors, and boors have to be put in their due place. It is advisable to do it politely, but firmly and with a smile. Actually they should have been put in their due place a long time ago, but this has never happened. This does not mean that we are too late. We should not humiliate them, but we should make sure they don’t impose their way of life and ideas on us and our kids, and their standards, of course.

We have to call all things by their actual names. They allege that the evidence for the indisputable advantages of capitalism can be found in the years of the Cold War, when many people immigrated to the West and almost nobody migrated to our socialist country.

You wonder why people did not rush to the socialist world? *Do you know many drug-addicts who admit their illness and voluntarily take treatment?* It wasn’t because the Soviet world was worse, but because *the capitalist consumer is addicted to consumption*, and the socialist way of life for him would inevitably be *“going cold turkey”*. Because

¹⁴⁵ Expression attributed to I. Stalin

you know, in our socialist society, people ate when they were hungry, and not when they were bored or had nothing to do. People drank there, because of a celebration, but not every time that they went out: to a bar or restaurant since there is almost nothing else affordable to do, like it is here. But where else can one go?, they will ask you. Libraries, theatres, exhibitions – all this is boring for them. And only *a dictatorship* can force them to visit such places!

The market affects people like a drug dealer. It's easier for the authorities to rule over overweight drug-takers burdened by debts. They have *plenty to lose but their chains*:¹⁴⁶: their credit cards and their mortgaged houses. They will work all their life as mules only to pay old debts and to create new ones. And with all this, they still piously believe, that they are “free” and “successful” individuals...

...This year we celebrated the New Year...three times. We followed the Russian, the Dutch and the local time. It was mother who offered to celebrate the New Year according to the Dutch time.

- Sonny and Lisa's grandma and grandpa are still living in Holland!

Having decided not to wait the Dutch New Year, mum became slightly tipsy and began tuning in for the Moscow radio in hope to switch to Putin's New Year speech¹⁴⁷ in time. She was not really a president's fan, but today she began to worry, she did not want to miss his speech. When I showed my astonishment, she immediately burned in temper:

- You understand nothing! It's voice of our Motherland!

Strange...I thought, that Yuri Levitan¹⁴⁸ was always the voice of our Motherland...

When the Dutch New Year approached, mother lifted a glass to Sonny's happiness. I had nothing against that, but I don't like to remember him so frequently. Despite the fact that we had divorced, mother still had a large portrait of Sonny on the wall back at home. I always took it down when I was in that house: it was very hard for me to see his sad Indian eyes... the same as Lisa's.

When it was time for the Irish New Year, both of us were already in such a condition, that it was time to sing “Those Evening Bells”. Or “The Reeds Rustled¹⁴⁹”, it depends on your taste. Lisa was sleeping.

What a sad thing it is to meet a New Year with only half of your family, without grandpa, grandma, Little Tamara, Shurek... and of course, without the Motherland! When I was living in Holland, I tried not to think about it. Sonny was completely against celebrating different holydays, such as the New Year, and birthdays; I used to buy a Christmas tree, and carried it home myself (sometimes my Moroccan neighbour, a coffee-shop keeper

¹⁴⁶ Paraphrase of The Communist Manifesto: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains.”

¹⁴⁷ New Year's televised speech is a long-established tradition of the Soviet and Russian leaders

¹⁴⁸ Yuri Levitan - see page 85. Most famous Soviet radio presenter

¹⁴⁹ Russian sad songs popular at the drinking parties

helped me) and I even decorated it by myself. There is no wish for celebrating under such conditions. But even in the here and now there was no so wish either. New Year – it’s first of all waiting for a miracle, you can almost feel it, but what kind of miracles can wait us here? Here, in a society that is stuck in the XVII century, it could only be as Lewis Carroll said: “*curiouser and curiouser, miracle upon miracle*”?

... ..So with the holidays gone, the ordinary days came. Lisa’s epileptic fits continued; sometimes she felt down, smashing her face to blood. She still had a scar on one of her eyebrows. We finally found a school for her –it was only half an hour from the house, and there was also a school bus. But the principle – suffering from a chronically blocked nose flap-eared lady – took one glance at Lisa and said that she couldn’t take her without a special helmet, like an ice hockey one. Can you imagine, would a child be able to sit for the whole day in this, a kind of “*the boot of inquisitor*” on her head? I couldn’t imagine that. And where could I find one? Such helmets, as my social worker said, are made to special order, and there was a waiting list for them, the length of which was close to a few months. As before, my child was still sitting at home....

- But what will she do during all this time instead of school? – I asked.

- It is not our business...

Everything was going as usual: I went to Belfast for work, once a week I attended the party meeting in a neighbouring village, I delivered leaflets to houses, visited political training and also went to Dublin once a month to meet Douglas; we were developing a party policy on immigrants...

...
Occasionally I slept in my Belfast office, this was because there was nobody to bring me home after the afternoon shift that ended when the bus service had already ceased. If I had told them that I had no transport they would have fired me. There was no place to hide, this office was much smaller than the Dublin Bank office, and so I became proficient at sleeping in the women’s toilets, in a cubicle, sitting on the lavatory pan leaning my head against the wall on a pillow brought from home for this purpose. There was no choice. I remember very well how Adriana had treated me in Dublin and I decided not to disturb anyone with my problems. The most important thing was my exiting the building unnoticed by other people: I would leave a bit earlier than the night workers, but not too early, so as not to attract the front-door security man’s attention. It was good that this did not happen on a daily basis. : I had to do this maybe once a month.

During the day time, whatever the weather was, my mum walked along the sea shore with Lisa in a pram. Then she cooked a dinner and waited for me to come home from my work. If I was working during the day, then in the evening she told me what was on TV. She was still bad at English, but she had learned to guess. She learned the two most frequently repeated but unconnected words spoken on news programs: *Sinn Fein* and *paedophile*. I guess that these were the two most pressing issues for Britain.

On my days off we travelled around the country. Sometimes on these travels both funny and sad incidents happened. For example, when we saw a beggar man with a few coins in

his hand on the street, and Lisa, before we could understand what was happening, snatched the coins from his hand with the speed of a snake ... I could not imagine who was more scared, the beggar man or me and my mum. Another time Lisa really frightened us and an old lady, sitting on a bus in front of us. Unexpectedly Lisa seized the lady's hair. At this time doctor *Banionis*, who was experimenting with different medicines, prescribed steroids for Lisa, which almost cured her fits, but she became plump and aggressive on them. This aggression was to such a degree, that she was waking up in the night and seizing my sleeping mother's neck. At lunch time she was not just eating, she was rumbling with pleasure and gulping down her food, like a wild animal. We tried to complain to doctor *Banionis* with these facts, but he reiterated again and again (just like Karlson's grandma¹⁵⁰, "*Change your socks, Karlson! Change your socks!*"): "*But there are no fits?*" This continued until the time when Lisa attacked my sleeping mother again. Then I called him at night and left a voice message threatening to bring Lisa into his office the next day and to thrust her upon him. After this, he prescribed the outdated even by Russian measures, but safe Epilim¹⁵¹...

One event helped me to change this way of life: once I gave an interview to a Dublin radio station about my life in Ireland. Shortly before that one arrogant BBC journalist had annoyed me on the phone, with a request to tell him about "Irish racism". When I had heard *from whom* this request came, I grinned: who do they think I am, to complain to British about the Irish? It was the same for me as to complain to a Dutchman about Antilleans!

- I am treated very well here, - I pointedly said, - I have no problems with anybody here in Ireland. I feel myself like at home.

It was not what he wanted to hear.

The Dublin radio workers were so satisfied with my interview, that I and a few more people were selected from "*uncle Toms*" all over the country— sorry, from perspective migrants! Soon we were invited to work on an Irish radio program: as freelance correspondents, reporting about immigrant's lives in Ireland. But at first we were invited for a crash course in radio journalism

So, it was the beginning of my three day course for forthcoming journalists in Dublin. Finally I began a new life! Actually, I had no idea about how big this turn in my life would be...

It was a frosty, by local standards, February day. I arrived in Dublin the day before the courses were to begin and stayed in a hotel in the southern part of the city. Of course my mood was bright, and I was high spirited. Why wouldn't I be!

¹⁵⁰ Reference to "Karlson flies again" from "Karlson on the Roof" series, popular Swedish children's books by Astrid Lindgren

¹⁵¹ Medication for epilepsy

By a very strange confluence of circumstances Dermot Kinsella was staying in that very hotel on that same evening. The day before, I had told him my news by e-mail – and guess what? He also had some business to do in Dublin. Since we met each other at congress our e-mail chats had become a regular habit. We exchanged our points of view on political matters and, if I could not understand something from the local events, I had been telling him about it honestly, he would explain it to me reasonably and in a bit more detail. In the end he always added: “When we meet I will tell you in more detail”. I wasn’t disturbing him with cross-questioning. When we will meet, we will meet. And now that meeting came...

I wasn’t thinking, if it was by coincidence or not. . I had no grounds to suspect that it wasn’t. Dermot was very correct and polite with me. So I had no feeling that this had been a predetermined or motivated meeting in all the time we were speaking.

- I’m very glad to see you again! –Dermot said welcoming me and shaking my hand. – Is everything OK at home?

- It’s OK, thank you! – I answered, still without any desire to show my problems.

Dermot took me to an Indian restaurant: he himself was fond of Indian food, having lived a long time in Britain, but he disliked Chinese food, for some reason. Actually, I had no idea about Indian dishes, so it was who Dermot made me keen on *Peshwari naan*¹⁵² .

He was telling me his life story, and in my mind I could see dusty Tripoli streets, thick tropics of Florida, the street named in honour of Bobby Sands¹⁵³ (near the British embassy in Teheran. It was previously named Churchill’s street, but Teheran refused to keep that name, despite many British authorities’ demands) and the Tower of Juche Ideas in a faraway Pyongyang. And the death of Najibullah¹⁵⁴, whom he knew personally and highly respected.

- His blood is on Gorbachev’s hands, – said Dermot to me with pain in his voice. – He was a genuine man! A real revolutionary, it is hard to find such people today...

But please don’t think that he was telling me something, that I shouldn’t know; and, of course, I didn’t ask any such questions. He just shared some impressions of what he had seen in other countries and his life observations also. I thought that he would make a great writer, because he had a distinctive quality and could describe a story in vivid and clear pictures. Not everyone has such talent.

¹⁵² Naan is a traditional Indian flatbread and one of the real treats of Indian cuisine. A Peshwari naan i is stuffed with a sultanas, cinnamon, apple and almond.

¹⁵³ Robert Gerard "Bobby" Sands (1954 – 1981) was an Irish [volunteer](#) of the [Provisional Irish Republican Army](#) and member of the [British Parliament](#) who died on [hunger strike](#) fighting for the political status of Irish Republican prisoners while imprisoned in [HM Prison Maze](#)

¹⁵⁴ Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai (1947 – 1996), better known as Najibullah or Najib, was [President of Afghanistan](#) from 1987 until 1992 when the [Mujahideen](#) took over [Kabul](#). In 1996 Najibullah has have been castrated by the Taliban, and was dragged behind a truck in the streets of Kabul, before he was publicly hanged

When I felt his certain trust in me, I became deeply moved and told him about Lisa. It just happened somehow accidentally, I didn't want to tell him about it. Maybe, because this was torturing me. I was waiting for his reaction. I thought it would be an exclamation, like "Oh! Poor child!", but no, he asked curious questions "And what was next?", When I felt his certain trust in me, I became deeply moved and told him about Lisa..It just happened somehow accidentally, I didn't want to tell him about it. Maybe, I spoke because it was torturing me. I waited for his reaction. I thought it would be exclamations, like "Oh! Poor child!", curious questions "And what was next?", something wrathful, like "What a stinker he was, your ex-husband!" or even "Both of you are just as bad!". But his reaction was not anxious, it was businesslike:

- How can I help you? Can she still can be cured? What should I do?

But I wasn't even asking for his help...I wasn't even thinking about it. He had no children, so I could not say that he understood me as a parent. His reaction was so unexpected for me and so in the best Soviet tradition, that I almost began crying.

- There is a clinic in Cuba... But it is very expensive for foreigners and I have no idea where I can ask for help...

Dermot promised that he would find somebody to ask for help.

When we returned to the hotel, word by word we began talking about the Soviet Union.

- Tell me something about Soviet life! - Asked Dermot - Not an anecdote, eh? I had a friend here, your Soviet reporter, we spent his last night in Ireland together in a pub ... And he told me so many of your jokes that I still remember them!

I wondered. What should I tell him?

- I regret that I did not have time to go round the entire country in the past .I thought I had plenty of time, a whole life ahead. I visited only 7 republics out of our 15, I never was in Siberia ... Actually I have never been to the east from Kuybyshev¹⁵⁵. And those remaining 8 republics, which I did not have time to go to, are now "abroad". They cut our body alive, and now they are offended, when our people on Eurovision vote for each other... What else can we do? Did I ever feel a stranger in any of the republics - if judging by the attitude of the local population? Was there any hostility towards us? No, I did not feel any. I felt a bit like a visitor to a certain extent, such as in the Baltic republics. Here it was felt quite strongly that these people were of another culture than us. But no hostility was ever felt. Not even in Lviv¹⁵⁶. (Instead, in the women's restroom at the station black market traders offered us all sorts of things from Poland. (In good Russian, though with a Ukrainian accent!).

¹⁵⁵ Former name of Samara city (1935-1991)

¹⁵⁶ Lviv (Lvov in Russian) - city in Western Ukraine known among other things, for its Ukrainian nationalists

This diversity of cultures was what I liked.. I traveled by a touring train¹⁵⁷ around the Baltic States, Ukraine, Belarus. What? You do not know what a touring train is? It was the cheapest form of tourism in the Soviet Union and by touring train you could go to Central Asia, and even to the Far East! In general, the country we had was so large and diverse, that a you would need a lifetime of travel to visit it all. It was hard to get to Kamchatka and Chukotka, but you could if you really wanted to. One of mum's colleagues, the artist who drew plant stands and posters, visited the whole area, including the famous Valley of Geysers¹⁵⁸. Today he is living on bread and tea and is very glad to have even that. But in the Soviet times he had seen the world. ...

But let's get back to our touring train. There was, for example, a week long trip to the capitals of the Baltic States with a stop in Leningrad which cost about 80 roubles. This price included three hot meals a day: breakfast and supper, you ate these on the train, and dinner - somewhere in the city. At night such train goes, and in the day time it stops at the next destination on your travel program. You went on excursion trips and then at the end of the day they left you a little free time for independent exploring of the city. You lived on the train for the whole week in one of the 4-berth compartments. Breakfast and dinner were served in the dining car, it took place over 2 or 3 shifts, because all the passengers could not fit into that car at the same time. The train was long: 12-15 cars, not less. Six tour buses were needed to take all passengers to the excursions. The train had its own radio station, which announced the news, talked about the next day's programme and could even play songs by requests from the passengers. Imagine how much money would be asked here for such a trip?

I was completely mad about Tallinn, with its Toompea, Fat Margaret, Long Hermann¹⁵⁹ and legend of why Tallinn will never be completed¹⁶⁰ (if you want, I can tell you). We went there in winter, the train passed snow-covered fields, where there are no villages, as we have in Russia, but only a few isolated farms, and I remember how we laughed when the conductor on the train accidentally said on the radio:
- Right now, we are passing *their* station ...

What do you mean, "theirs"? Are they, perhaps, strangers to us? Not at all. When we woke up near Tallinn, our car was standing next to an Estonian diesel locomotive.

¹⁵⁷ *Touring train* or *cruise train* was very popular and affordable in the USSR for long journeys around the country, with several different stops on its way. During the day trains were stationary and tourists went sightseeing, at nights they were travelling to the next destination

¹⁵⁸ The Valley of Geysers is a [geyser](#) field on [Kamchatka Peninsula, Russia](#) that has the second largest concentration of geysers in the world.

¹⁵⁹ Toompea Castle is a [castle](#) on the [limestone hill](#) of [Toompea](#) in the central part of [Tallinn](#). Fat Margaret tower was built in the early 16th century (from 1511 to 1530). Long Hermann-tower with Estonian national flag on top, one of the greatest towers in Estonia

¹⁶⁰ The myth of the Old Man of Ülemiste Lake. An old man is said to be sitting on the outskirts of Tallinn, near the lake and watching Tallinn growing. Once every year he rises from the lake, comes to Tallinn and knocks on the city gates, asking if the city of Tallinn is finished. The guards were given strict orders to always respond with a „No!“. Then, the Old Man of Ülemiste would turn around and go back to the lake, mumbling angrily all the way. The belief was, that is someone ever told the old man that the city is finished, he would call up the waters of the Ülemiste lake and send them all down to Tallinn, flooding the city entirely.

Estonian train driver, a cheerful blond fellow, almost Albino, looked at us from the height of his cabin through our window and joyfully, with a smile and a charming accent, said:

- Well, you woke up already ... it's *ka-ra-sho*¹⁶¹!. Now *dafay-dafay, top-top*¹⁶², do the morning exercises!

Would a stranger have spoken in this way?

People in the Baltic countries were very polite: that's why they enjoyed among us, Russians, a reputation of being highly cultural. It was hard for me to believe that now they are discriminating against the Russians so badly, but they do. Apparently, some deeply frustrated people came to power in the Baltic.

In the public transport in the Baltic cities it was so quiet, but my fellow city folk bursting into a tram or a bus, gleefully shouted:

- *We are from the glorious city ****!*, - and my mum and I pretended that we were not with them

Mum was considered by the local inhabitant in the Baltic countries to be one of their own - and they were very surprised that she was Russian. At first she resented that men, did not pay her much attention as she was accustomed to at home, and then she saw that the Baltic states men also turned their heads to her, but only slowly, and even after she had already passed by ...

Street signs were bilingual everywhere, in the stores a lot of the local products had labels only in the local language (with a little explanation in small letters in Russian). Magazines and newspapers on the news-stall, "Soyuzpechat¹⁶³" in the vast majority were in Estonian, it was the same for the movies and theatre performances also. Of course, local residents talked to us tourists in Russian. (By the way, no one ever expressed their dislike to us, not even indirectly). So what is the problem? And now they speak to visitors in either English or German, but still not in their own language. Alas, such is the fate of small nations. But they all tend to know a few languages, unlike us, the peoples of the big nations. Is this bad?

I didn't like Riga¹⁶⁴ as much as Tallinn, although it was beautiful, too. Tallinn is more mysterious - like a medieval legend. After the trip there, I began to imagine myself as a woman knight, dressed up as a man, who defended the poor in the old days. ... I associated this city with the colour of silver and the smell of scented candles, which were then for us perfectly exotic; they were produced in Tallinn. Singing sounds so beautiful in

¹⁶¹ Good (Russian)

¹⁶² Come on, go! (Russian)

¹⁶³ Set of kiosks selling Soviet periodicals and also organization that was dealing with centralized subscription to all Soviet periodicals

¹⁶⁴ Capital city of Latvia

the Estonian language, and the folklore festivals and the Song Festival¹⁶⁵ - all this captured my imagination after that trip. And so many of our great Soviet films were shot on Tallinn's streets! Estonia's own films as well. Now making their own feature film is a problem for Estonians as they do not have enough money for it today...

I sincerely loved Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. And I was always in favour of people who moved there to live, learning the local languages. I am so hurt right to see that the Baltic States have become the U.S's stooges today...

Dermot listened as spellbound, without blinking, with his hand under his cheek, his big green cat's eyes were burning. Perhaps he looked a bit like Andrei Mironov¹⁶⁶, if he was not so obese.

For some strange reason, he sat on the floor: either from being shy, or to make the atmosphere more relaxed. Anyway, I felt that this was some sort of signal, perhaps for me to approach..

- Can I sit next to you? - I asked, not knowing myself why. He seemed to me at the moment so alone. Dermot nodded. And so we sat side by side: on the floor ...

... And then it all happened somehow. When it was not too late to stop yet, I asked myself, "Zhenya, are you sure you will not regret this?" And myself mentally replied something like: "But I also can't have a full-fledged relationship with anyone. There can't be anyone for a proper relationship: in my situation. I do not want to: it would be unfair to Lisa. And no man will cope with this for long, even if it were his own child. Besides, I do not want to fall in love with anybody. But the feeling of loneliness visit me sometime. I need a friend. He is a very interesting person, with unusual life. And we have common political views. So, why not? What do I have to lose?" ...

... ... On parting, we had not made any promises to each other and had not arranged to meet again. The next day I received a very short e-mail message from Dermot: "*I cannot get you out of my head. It was a fairy tale. A dream.*"

In other words, "*Donna Rosa, I'm an old warrior and I do not know the words of love, but when I saw you*¹⁶⁷ ..."

... Some time will pass, and he will call me "LFC", "Lover, Friend and Comrade, in that particular order. But I personally would rather have called him "CFL" ... Because for me, Dermot was and always remained first and foremost just a comrade.

¹⁶⁵ The Estonian Song Festival (In Estonian: *Laulupidu*) is one of the largest amateur [choral](#) events in the world, a [Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity](#). It is held every five years in July on the [Tallinn Song Festival Grounds](#)

¹⁶⁶ Andrei Alexandrovich Mironov (1941 – 1987) was a [Soviet](#) theatre and film actor who played lead roles in some of the most popular Soviet films and was also well-known singer

¹⁶⁷ Quote from the Soviet comedy film "Hello, I'm your Aunt!" loosely based on "Charley's Aunt" play by B. Thomas

Chapter 12. In the Midst of "the Silly Season"

*"What makes cows go mad? British democracy."
(Vladimir Zhirinovsky)*

*"And you dare call me a terrorist, while you look down your gun?"
(Irish ballad "Joe McDonnell")*

... - I don't like him - mum said thoughtfully, looking at our new neighbour, or to be more exact, at the boyfriend of my already more than middle-aged female neighbour, the local drug don's mother-in-law. That boyfriend came to her every morning, parking his car with a trailer full of branches cut off trees and tools for "gardening surgery": apparently, that is how he earned his living.

- He looks suspicious. He is always snooping around.... - mum said critically. - And yesterday for some reason he was looking at the mountains with a hu-u-uge pair of binoculars... And their cat comes to us looking for food all the time, already since the summer. She is always hungry: these drug lords, apparently, have no money for cat food! They let her out early in the morning, and she immediately comes to us in a gallop... She's so skinny, and so curious, she eternally pokes her nose into everything, and if you take your eyes off her, she'll run into the house looking into all the rooms. They'd better feed their cats properly, instead of their drug trade! And he has such an appropriate profession for following people: trimming bushes while looking into their windows... - she couldn't calm down.

- Yes, we still have to find out why this cat comes over to us all the time... For example, the British intelligence services in the past have used cats to spy on people. Only that cat ran away and got under a car, with all its sensors that they have put on the poor animal, - I said half-jokingly. I was told that such a case actually happened.

- Exactly! Have you noticed that this mob's Murka¹⁶⁸ has a bell around her neck? She didn't have it before, only a collar. Why would a cat need a bell? Especially since you can barely hear it anyway... And they don't feed her on purpose, so that she'll run to us! - Unexpectedly said my mother,- Come on, let's catch her and see what's in this bell!

- Strictly speaking, Murka (whom her owner called by some other tricky English name) didn't even need to be caught; she usually would go jump your arms by herself and readily allowed anyone to pat her striped belly. She was still almost a kitten. At first the suggested idea just had amused me, but after watching the local news on TV for days, I suddenly felt exactly what my mother had in mind. In this country of nutters - "Norn Iron¹⁶⁹" - anything is possible.

- Defunct IRA spies disturb the sleep of respectable Masonic gentlemen from the Orange Order; Unionist housewives manage to see the Leader's "intrigues" even in bad

¹⁶⁸ Murka – most common Russian name for a cat

¹⁶⁹ Norn Iron – "Northern Ireland" in local dialect

weather, and while they continuously spit on the Peace Agreement, to which we all owe our jobs here, the heating system in my office breaks down every day, even though a plumber comes out every day to mend it, while all we are offered is a sip of whiskey by our employer, as compensation for "moral damage"; and the security guards jealously guarding the local airport force you to show all the electronic equipment from your suitcase in operating mode every time you travel, be it a laptop or a camcorder, while not noticing a table knife accidentally left by your child in a cardboard box with the French gateaux...

Northern Ireland is a country of contrasts¹⁷⁰! So, a cat-spy here is not impossible. Murka didn't even resist that much. The collar had elastic embedded in it, and it was easy to pull off. We uncoupled the bell, and my mother escaped with minor scratches after putting the collar back on the cat again. When the bell tinkled in our hands behind her, Murka looked somehow guilty (she had a dishonest face, very dishonest!). She mewed plaintively in search of the beloved object.

We used a kitchen knife on the bell. A small metal rod dropped into my mother's hand. The broken bell ceased to function. I felt a bit awkward towards Murka, but my mother was quite pleased:

- Look, a piece of metal! They don't have so much available metal around here to waste it! This must be a bug! Or even a small camera...

We decided to throw away the traces of our crime against our neighbour's property in a street bin next to one of the shops.

- Let them listen from that bin! - Mum said with a triumph in her voice.

Yes, when you live here, you inevitably become paranoid...

... And on TV they still continued to yap about IRA spies, those serious-looking grown-up men with a small-town mentality. Then they started to show a children's choir from a Catholic school, which enthusiastically sang a song... about smugglers! It was a folk song, of course (in the past many local people smuggled goods through the mountains here, and even now many still smuggle cigarettes and fuel, since they are cheaper in the South), but the strange thing was that after singing that song children told with some genuine enthusiasm what they knew about the smugglers, how cleverly they fooled the taxmen, etc. I have not seen any other country where children would have such heroes! What a weird country! But local residents really do believe that they are an example of democracy and freedom, that the whole world envies them. And that they have the best education and medical care in the world. Well, I already expressed some of my thoughts on their medical care, and as for the education...

One day I was invited into one of the Belfast schools as an interpreter: the mother of one of the pupils spoke only Russian, and the teacher and principal wanted to talk to her, to find out how they could help the girl to get used to her new surroundings.

As a result of living here, I automatically, instinctively tried to guess if that school was a Catholic or a Protestant one based purely on the name of the school so that I would know how to talk with the people who had called me. Of course, the conversation would be

¹⁷⁰ Paraphrase of a catch phrase from a Soviet comedy film "Diamond Arm" ("London is a city of contrast")

completely neutral, but new people are always curious, and the tone should be such that it would calm down their curiosity. There are still very few integrated schools (that pupils attend regardless of the religion of their parents), and we immigrants, who in the overwhelming majority are neither Protestants nor Catholics, find ourselves in a situation that forces us to choose one of these two types of religiously segregated schools. If we were given such a choice, of course.

Judging by the name of the school itself and its principal, this one was a Protestant school. The street name didn't sound familiar to me, but for some reason I automatically imagined it was in respectable southern Belfast. At the bus station, I decided to find out in the Information Office about it: Where is Alliance Avenue? Sitting behind the counter was a huge paramilitary looking type with a very short haircut whose enormous arms were lavishly decorated with tattoos: apparently, that was supposed to attract tourists to the city! Barely glancing at a piece of paper with the name of the street, he tossed indifferently: "I don't know," without making even the slightest attempt to look into any directory on his computer or call somewhere in order to help me.

Service in Northern Ireland - particularly the one provided by the representatives of the privileged community who apparently believe that they are already doing you a great favour by dealing with you - is far superior to the Soviet service of the "stagnation" period in its rudeness and crudeness. And the rare tourists who come to the city are supposed to feel welcome by the local loyalist humour, like the plates inside the taxi, "hospitably" meeting you at the airport: "*The tourist shooting season is open.*"

Season or no season, in this case I couldn't make it without a cab. Taxi drivers are experienced people and know all the streets by heart.

- It's in Ardoyne, - said my driver straight away, on hearing the name of the street. Ardoyne? But Ardoyne is a Catholic area! How can there be a Protestant school over there?

- I honestly have no idea where it is, - I answered him quite frankly.

This response was meant to emphasise my "neutrality", just to be on the safe side: I also did not know if this taxi driver was Catholic or Protestant, and North Belfast, where Ardoyne is situated, today is one of the most dangerous parts of the city.

One can write a separate book about Belfast taxi drivers. Well, or at least a separate story. In West Belfast there is even a mural dedicated to their heroism during the war, and very often Catholic taxi drivers became victims of their loyalist killers' passengers. There are taxi stands or companies of which you clearly know whether they are Catholic or Protestant. One of the most famous of these stands is on Castle Street. From here they depart to Catholic West Belfast: these local "bus replacements", the old black taxis like in London, are shared by passengers and are incredibly cheap compared to private taxis. They belong to the WBTA - West Belfast Taxi Association - a kind of cooperative created by local residents in the midst of war, when public transport had ceased to serve these neighborhoods. Many if not most of the drivers of this cooperative are former Republican political prisoners, for whom it is so hard to get a job anywhere after their release.

But the taxi stand that I chose that day wasn't so clearly defined by its place. This explained my accented neutrality.

- I know where it is, - my taxi driver tried once more to start a conversation with me on the way. - It's not far from the Holy Cross Girls School¹⁷¹ – you have heard of it, perhaps?

The driver was hinting to me that he was a Catholic. But I was still cautious.

It always makes you feel very unpleasant, as soon as the car turns over the rotunda at the Carlisle Circus. It makes you feel sick in the stomach. Even the weather is somehow always the same here: dark low clouds dispersing across the sky by almost hurricane force winds. On one side of the square the figure of William of Orange - "*Good King Billy*" rises up "on the hot battle horse" from the roof of the old Orange hall. Right under the same roof there is the lonely and timid-looking Indian cultural centre - without any identifying signs on the doors, just in case, - and on the other side of the roundabout a narrow road leads to the Catholic New Lodge district.

From Carlisle Circus Crumlin Road begins: a dark street going parallel to Shankill Road, with the ruins of old brick buildings on both sides and the loyalist wall murals. Only in some places there are a few new buildings. Here stands a beautiful but derelict building: the infamous courthouse where closed trials of Irish political prisoners were held in the late 1960s-1970s. On the other side of the road is the building that used to be a prison, but is derelict now. Prisoners used to be taken there straight from the courthouse. After several desperately daring escapes of convicts on their way from the courthouse to prison the authorities built a special underground passage for them between the two buildings.

... Ardoyne is like a patchwork quilt: loyalist flags and painted red, white and blue street pavements here and there, then the Irish "Tricolour" and wall murals with calls to release political prisoners - Irish republican dissidents. Moreover, these changes from one to another occur unexpectedly and in the most unlikely places, so that every step here is like walking on thin ice. The school to which I was invited looked quite unremarkable. One was (delete is) struck by something else: how strikingly different from this school was the other one, located just outside: a Catholic school that was surrounded by barbed wire, with its windows fortified for defence. Unlike Catholics, Protestants, judging by the state of their schools, did not have to fear their neighbours. That would be a good thing to show on a tour to those who believe in British fairy tales about "equal fault on both sides" and that life goes on in Belfast on the basis of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"!

I was greeted by the principal, a quiet, elderly grey-haired man, seemingly reminiscent of a typical representative of the Eastern European intellectuals. Apparently such looks are quite common among local Protestants, so that they sometimes involuntarily remind me of some of my countrymen. At least, until they begin to talk.... I remember how a Protestant worker in one of the local charities, an elderly man called John, happily

¹⁷¹ The Holy Cross dispute occurred in 2001 and 2002 in the [Ardoyne](#) area of north [Belfast, Northern Ireland](#). During the 30-year conflict known as [The Troubles](#), Ardoyne had become segregated – [Protestants](#) lived in one area and [Irish Catholics](#) in another. This left Holy Cross—a Catholic [primary school](#) for girls—stuck in the middle of a Protestant area. In June 2001, Protestant [loyalists](#) began [picketing](#) the school, claiming that Catholics were regularly attacking their homes and denying them access to facilities. For weeks, hundreds of protesters tried to stop the schoolchildren and their parents from walking to school through their area. Some protesters shouted [sectarian](#) abuse and threw stones, bricks, fireworks, [blast bombs](#) and urine-filled balloons at the schoolchildren and their parents. Hundreds of [riot police](#), backed-up by [British](#) soldiers, escorted them through the protest each day. The "scenes of frightened Catholic schoolgirls running a gauntlet of abuse from loyalist protesters as they walked to school captured world headlines". Death threats were made against the parents and school staff by a loyalist [paramilitary](#) group called the [Red Hand Defenders](#). Some likened the protest to [child abuse](#) and compared the protesters to American [white supremacists](#) in 1950s [Alabama](#).

greeted me in Belfast as if I was his cousin, and told me that his grandfather was a rabbi near Minsk. When he had emigrated, they had promised to take him to America, but they cheated and landed him in Britain, using the fact that he did not know the language and "would not notice the difference anyway." Since then his grandfather had parted from his brother who did go to America, and they met just over 40 years later. John himself was born in England and had never even been in Eastern Europe, but he spoke with affection and even admiration for everything that came from our part of the world, and I talked for almost an hour with him about the borsht soup and buckwheat porridge, about our rigorous winter and about classical music.

I was met by this school principal, whose name was Sam, with the same kind of hospitality.

- Lena has only been with us for two weeks now. She is a great girl, and she already speaks English. We have assigned her a special teacher for that. All the children are delighted with her. We would like to talk with her mum to find out what else can we do to help Lena get used to her new surroundings - he told me. Lena's class teacher, Mrs. Robinson, came in. She looked like Sam's sister. And behind her was Lena's mother, Marina.

- Did you notice, it's so cold here in summer! – she said to me immediately, like a child, when she came in, in a soft southern accent.

- This summer was still quite warm! It's usually much colder here! - I smiled at her. For some reason, the vast majority of my compatriots whom I meet abroad come from the South of our country (Rostov, Krasnodar, Stavropol...). Maybe it is emotionally easier for them to leave their homeland and start a new life in obscurity, because of their Cossack wandering roots? I don't think life is much easier in Central Russia is than it is in the South. Or maybe there it is really harder, but I just don't know about it? – this flashes through my head, but I do not have time to ask Marina about it.

Marina shines with pride for her daughter. And she was quite right: the girl struck all the teachers by asking them to give her more homework. The local teachers had not experienced anything like that before!

- They really don't give them any homework at all - says Marina to me. - And we aren't accustomed to this. Lessons here are also quite strange: they are spread over the whole day, but they practically don't teach them anything!

She just admits this to me as to "one of her own". But she is not going to complain about it to teachers in such a wonderful, civilized country (and, frankly, it would not make sense anyway: they do not even know that education can be different!)

- My eldest one goes to a different school, and there they do not like her: she knows too much. She is 15, but in her class for the 15-year-olds here they are learning what she already learnt back at home when she was 12. Well, naturally she is bored because of that. If it wasn't for her English, she would already have been the best student in the class. She tried everything. She said to the Physics teacher, "Why you don't give us tasks to solve?" And guess what she answered? "What tasks? There are no tasks in Physics!" Oh, and when she showed her maths teacher her homework book from her last year in Russia, the teacher just went into a rage: "This is supposed to be learnt only at the university!" –Marina said to me.

However, our hosts were concerned, as it turned out, with something very different than the quality of education in their country. They hesitated, not knowing how to say this, and

finally issued a pleading appeal to me as the "expert" (because I have lived here for several years and more or less was aware of the "complexities" of the local life):
"... M-mmm... How can we put this to Mrs. K. **, to explain it to her better? You see what the problem is.... Her eldest daughter attends a different school - around the corner from here. And sometimes she comes to pick up her little sister after school wearing the uniform of that school. You know, we have absolutely nothing against it. But we are in such area, you know.... We just fear for the safety of the child... maybe she noticed how the other children look at her - no, not the children from our primary school, but the ones from the adjacent secondary one?

Marina raised her eyebrows high in surprise. She has only been here 3 months. Yes, her eldest daughter said that she has noticed strange glances from other children in this Protestant school. But she absolutely did not understand what was happening. Maybe there was something wrong with her hair? Or a button was off her coat? But Marina usually looks after her girls well; she is not some kind of unfit mother whose children run around the streets late at night without supervision. She even gives extra lessons to her girls herself. And she is strict with them. Her girls are from a good family, they were excellent pupils back at home, and here in the future, too, they want to go to university... Marina herself is a doctor by profession, she worked for 18 years after graduation and here she also does not want to sit around doing nothing. Just you wait till she learns English – you can be sure she'll find a job!

But it wasn't due to a lost button or her hair. Not even to the presence of Russian girls who are "exotic" for the Northern Irish ghetto. The thing was that the older sister was attending a Catholic school, and the younger sister a Protestant one. And the uniform of the older sister was the uniform of a Catholic school.

- I do not understand this - Marina confessed. - I was told that there are two places for girls in two different schools. What? No, nobody offered me any choice. I was so pleased that, at least, they did not miss much from the beginning of the school year. And yesterday, some suicide bomber broke into my eldest girl's school... They say he set fire to six teachers' vehicles and that he himself was killed in a car.

- No, he wasn't. There are no suicide bombers among such people, - I "reassured" her. They love themselves too much for that.

The teachers hinted that the older sister, of course, could come at any time to pick up the youngest, but only if she wore something else, just not that uniform, please, you know... Otherwise, unfortunately, they could not guarantee that these youths...

There was silence for some time. I remember a story from our schoolbook "Native Language" for the 2nd year, I think, of Soviet primary school: about a little black girl in America whose dad was going to buy her new red shoes. He was saving up money for this pair of shoes for a long time. And when she tried on a pair in the store but the pair was too small for her, the shop owner forced her dad to buy that pair too: because "nobody would want to buy shoes that a Negro had tried on."

Marina, to whom are you trying to prove that we are cultural and intellectual people? That we are "not some kind of..."? Why do so many Russians suffer from this inferiority complex based on absolutely nothing, except for the shameless Western self-boasting?

Just look at those around you here! Look at them. At the university graduates who believe that the capital of Hungary is Prague. At school lunches made from scraps, on which schools in Britain spend on average just 35 pence per child per day (even on a prisoner's lunch they spent at least 1.74 pounds!). Look at the pages of local newspapers, where they have just discovered that "fish oil is good for your health" (my grandmother was forced to drink it in the nursery even before the Revolution!). Look at their TV, where they advertise an "exotic new Chinese facility, fashionable among the stars of show business": ordinary medical suction cups¹⁷²! And these "stars" show off the bruises from these cups on their bare backs like some new cool tattoo! Look at their school curriculum, where a single object, somehow uniting the basic rudiments of physics, chemistry and biology, is called by the fancy word "Science". Do not throw pearls before you-know-whom, dear Marina!....

In Russia now, I saw somewhere on the Internet, they are going to start a competition for talented children, where the winner will be sent to study in some "civilised" country. What can they teach our talented children here, if even our secondary school pupils know more than the local teachers?

...Sam volunteered to take me back to the city centre by car: I could feel that he really wanted to show me the town. He really knew a lot about the streets where he grew up, and he told me with deep feelings about the problems of the local community: poverty, sickness caused by stress, alcohol and drugs. He remembered also about the local Catholic girls' school and the attacks on it by loyalists; no, he was not proud of these acts of his co-religionists, but his primary task was to ensure the safety of children at *his* school. We drove past the gates of Catholic schools.

- You see, that's the place where it all began. These girls could just easily walk to their school through the back gate. But no, they wanted necessarily to go through the front door... - he explained.

And I became painfully sad. If even this cultured gentleman, nice in all respects, does not understand it - if he really believes that "all the problems started" with the fact that people refused to go through the back door to their own school...

Do not cast pearls before the West, my former Soviet people. It is not worth it.

... A couple of weeks after my meeting with Dermot I was already working as a free-lance reporter for the radio and thought about leaving my permanent, full-time job. In order to interview the migrants in the North, I would have to locate them first, and I had to travel a lot through all the six counties. I barely had time for that. But it was a bit scary, just to leave my main, secure job behind: I would have to depend entirely on the wages from my free-lance job: 50 "Southern" pounds¹⁷³ for each interview. Just to pay a

¹⁷²

http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9C%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B5_%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BA%D0%B8

¹⁷³ Irish money before **the** introduction of the Euro

month's mortgage, I would need to make at least 7 interviews. That's not counting insurance, taxes, transportation and food and clothing for three. But where would I find that many migrants to interview? And what happens when I run out of them? But this new work was very interesting. First of all, I had wonderful colleagues, though all of them were based in the South. They were from 11 different countries! Together with them I followed that short radio journalism course, and since then we kept in touch. Especially I had a lot in common with one Kurd from Turkey: we both asked our lecturers rather tricky questions about the local "freedom of speech", when we received a lecture about it. What kind of freedom is it, gentlemen, if until very recently it was forbidden to interview on Irish radio and television members of a political party that was not officially banned, according to paragraph 31 of the Television and Radio Act?¹⁷⁴ If even one actor, who was a member of this party, was not allowed to participate on the radio in a commercial for some brand of soap...? A journalist who tried to resist such censorship was sent straight from the current affairs program to do programs on agriculture and religion.¹⁷⁵

And on this job I was able to meet so many interesting people with difficult destinies! Not everything that they said about their lives in Ireland fitted into the official line that "*all is well, beautiful marchioness*"¹⁷⁶ and sometimes the radio people mercilessly "slaughtered" those interviews. I couldn't do much about it. One could understand them too. How could they allow a story like this to appear on radio without major cuts?

...A female prison guard goes through my pockets for the last time and throws a paper napkin on the table. She unfolds it with an expression of disgust. Finally she is sure that I do not intend to carry anything illegal through the prison doors. On the wall there is a poster, "Before bringing any photographs to prisoners, including family photos, you must give them to the director of the prison for inspection and approval. It is strictly forbidden to bring in various shopping catalogues of clothing and other goods." Fiona and I leave our bags to the mercy of these guards ("screws" they call them here) and find ourselves in a long, dark corridor reminiscent of the entrance to an aircraft. A two-meter tall "true Aryan" in a uniform form shows us the way. He has a huge bunch of keys on his belt, as if from some old movie. He stops when the road is blocked by a door to which he has no key, and presses the button. Nobody responds. 5, 10 minutes... No one hurries to open the door for us. Fiona wearily closes her eyes and leans against the wall: - That's how it goes here - every time - she whispers to me softly, so that the "Aryan" cannot overhear her.

He presses the button again, and finally, on the other side of the bars a woman in uniform appears, with a similar bunch of keys and explains to us that in general this is not her area of work, and that she does not know exactly how to open these doors, and then she lets us in. Behind the door is a semi-dark room, a bit like a canteen in a Soviet village - with benches and tables along the walls. Actually, it is not a dining room; it is a rendezvous

¹⁷⁴ Sinn Fein in the Irish Republic

¹⁷⁵ I was told these stories were told by people working for RTE

¹⁷⁶ Popular satirical Soviet song by Leonid Utyosov (1895 – 1982), a famous [Soviet jazz singer](#) and comic [actor](#) of [Jewish](#) origin, who became the first [pop](#) singer to be awarded the prestigious title of [People's Artist of the USSR](#) in 1965

place for the relatives of prisoners. And even though we are not relatives (Fiona is a solicitor and I am a translator), we also sit down at one of these tables, selecting one that is at least partially in the sunlight.

The guard, who looks more like a convict (he is all covered in tattoos!), brings us a small, cute bearded man of delicate constitution, with kind blue eyes. This man surely couldn't hurt a fly. Seeing Fiona and me, he sadly smiles and joyfully rushes to kiss our hands. One look at him is enough to see that - there can be no mistake! - this is a representative of the Soviet intelligentsia. What landed him here, this poor fellow, in a Northern Irish prison, near the loyalists and republican dissidents?

The man's name is Boris. When he speaks, his voice is hoarse, unnatural: recently, before he was brought here, he had tried to hang himself when he was detained at the airport. When he was told that they were going to deport him to the country whose citizen he is. To Israel...

Boris was born and raised in the USSR. A journalist by profession, he was a member of the Union of Journalists of our great country, now sunk into oblivion. In the mid-90s, his parents emigrated to Israel. He followed.

- Please, could you explain to Fiona, - he says to me gently, - that a Jew for us and a Jew in Israel is not the same thing. In Israel, it is first of all a religion, but for us....

- And for us - an ethnic group? - I suggest (in my opinion, Boris speaks fine English, but when he is worried, he begins to forget words, and it is at moments like these that he needs an interpreter. A "nationality" means here not the same as a nationality in Russia, it means only citizenship.)

- Ethnicity, - I explain to Fiona.

- My parents are not religious at all, and neither am I, - says Boris. - That's why this all started.... - And he sighs heavily.

- Excuse me, but usually people emigrate to Israel in order to be able to practice Judaism?

- Fiona wonders. - If not, then why Israel?

Boris smiles to me, as to someone who will immediately understand why.

- Because they won't take us anywhere else. In order to leave. And nobody else needs us...

In Israel Boris wrote several books that ridiculed the orthodox Jewish and conservative circles. That's when this all started, as he says. According to him, somebody "arranged" a car accident for him three times. He miraculously survived, but his nerves began to fail. Especially when after the third car crash they called him and said, "Well, shall we "arrange" another accident for you?..." Together with his fiancée and her daughter from her first marriage, Boris went to England in search of a better life. By the way, just as the ancestors of many of today's British politicians did some time ago, for example, Oliver Letwin. Only today, Britain doesn't need new refugees, even if they are of the same origin as those long-suffering-in fashion here, such as Mr. Letwin and many of today's newly minted Lords. Well, maybe they might consider their case, if they brought stolen billions along with them, as the Russian *nouveaux riches* do who, in reality, have bought for themselves the title of political refugee in this "democratic" country.

Indeed, if a bandit who has robbed millions of people in his native country is a political refugee, then I must be a trolley bus! But the British ruling circles, apparently, have their notions of what a political refugee is all about. "*If the Indians in their time had a stricter immigration policy, America would not be such a brothel today*", I remembered a sad satire of the Dutch. ...

Boris was denied political asylum and was deported back to "the allies"¹⁷⁷. "*Sans Famille*"¹⁷⁸, as in the name of the novel by Hector Malot, because their case wasn't processed yet. Before the deportation, Boris did not eat or drink for 5 days and then he tried to cut his wrists. After the deportation he almost immediately tried to return to his beloved woman and her daughter (who considers him as her own father), through Belfast, where he was arrested.

- I know Shakespeare better than many of the British do, - he tells me.

I have no doubt that he does. Only no one here cares about that, you understand?

- I would like to see Dublin: my favourite writer, Jonathan Swift¹⁷⁹, is buried there.

- I wouldn't recommend you tell the judge about Dublin at all - sighs Fiona - Especially if you want to be released on bail. They might decide that you would want to hide there.

- Why should I hide? - Boris is quite genuinely perplexed. - I just want to be with my family. I'm going crazy without them. We have never been separated for so long!

- ...And please, do not stress to the judge that you're going crazy! It can also be used against you - sighs Fiona. - And what if the judge asks you what you will do if you are rejected again?

- I will find some other legal way to stay here. Maybe I will get a job somewhere? - Boris hopefully asks.

"*But I want to be with you, I want to be with you, I want to be with you, and I will be with you!*", the drunken voice of the lead singer of "Nautilus Pompilius" sounds in my brain, performing one of the most famous songs from my student days¹⁸⁰. From times when Boris was still living at home. This song always makes my eyes dim with tears.

Especially when I myself am separated from my loved ones, being in a foreign land...

Our interview with Boris is coming to an end. Fiona instructs him how to behave in the process, what to expect, what else is possible. And he sits in front of her - like a little butterfly with broken wings - a man who is in prison without committing any crime. Just because he wants to be with his family and live like a normal human being...

Dostoyevsky said that famous phrase about a single tear of a child. Tears, sweat and blood of our men, women and children are pouring in streams - all over the world, for over a decade already. And in the meantime the perpetrators of this receive the Nobel Peace Prize from their masters ...

¹⁷⁷ Israel is a staunch Western ally

¹⁷⁸ *Sans Famille* (Translation: *Without family* English title: *Nobody's boy*) is an 1878 French [novel](#) by [Hector Malot](#). Most recent English translation is "Alone in the World" by A J de Bruyn, 2007.

¹⁷⁹ Jonathan Swift (1667 – 1745) was an [Anglo-Irish satirist, essayist](#), political [pamphleteer](#) (first for the [Whigs](#), then for the [Tories](#)), poet and cleric who became [Dean](#) of [St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin](#). He is remembered for works such as [Gulliver's Travels](#), [A Modest Proposal](#), [A Journal to Stella](#), [Draper's Letters](#), [The Battle of the Books](#), [An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity](#), and [A Tale of a Tub](#).

¹⁸⁰ I want to be with you – a popular song in the USSR in the late 1980s

... Temporary office of a slaughterhouse in a Northern Irish border town.

The mooing of cows that are still alive and the strong smell of rotting meat on the bones, garbage that crows in the yard peck at, make me feel like vomiting. Beside me sits a Ukrainian worker in a bloody apron, with sad eyes, and a perky girl dressed up in the latest fashion, at least 10 years his junior: Vicky is a representative of a "prestigious" (that's how such people usually like to call themselves) recruitment agency that recruits Ukrainians to work abroad. She is now living away from home, in England. From time to time she comes here to check how their "mercenaries" are doing (but more so - how they behave at work!).

- Well, Vasil, are you all right? - she asks in a brisk, peremptory tone. Just like my former Dutch manager in "McDonald's", the one who taught me to smile broadly and non-stop!

- No. I have problems at home... - sighs Vasil. - We got married just before I left. I earn money here, and my wife went to Poland, got a job in a factory, only illegally. And there she almost severed two fingers. Now she is in a hospital. Of course, she doesn't have any insurance: she was working illegally. The hospital bill has gone up to over \$500 already. All I earn here, I send to her, to pay for the hospital. I am so afraid that she'll get her fingers amputated.

- But it is still better here than in Ukraine, isn't it? - Vicky interrupts him without listening. And she whispers to me in confidence:

- You can not imagine what kind of problems we have here with them. For example, we recently brought a girl here to pick mushrooms, we already paid for her ticket and everything else, but it turned out that she had leukemia! Can you imagine? - she says it in such a tone that I should really have not the slightest doubt that the leukemia is really *their* problem, not of that poor sick Ukrainian girl who got up to her neck in debts in order to come here to work...

And when we find ourselves alone, Vasil tells me:

- They selected only those who were younger than 30. We had excellent masters of their craft there, men of 35-40 years, but they were immediately rejected. The conditions that we have are like this: you get fined for the slightest issue; if you didn't show up at work because you were sick - a fine, if you signed a contract but did not arrive on time - another fine... And how much money we paid in order to get this contract!...

- Do you want to stay here?

- No, I don't. I want to go back to my wife, only at the moment we have nowhere to live. No money to build a house...

- Have you noticed that the local adults wrap themselves up properly, but send their children to school in January with bare knees? - Another Ukrainian, Petro, asks me. - Why do they do that?

I've noticed. But, frankly, I don't know why.

Others begin to talk to me in Ukrainian (the majority are from the western regions of Ukraine), and I understand and translate into English directly from the Ukrainian, although I can answer them only in Russian. A small stumbling point comes with the calendar months: neither I nor they can remember the exact matches in the other's languages.

- Well, I mean the second month of summer! - they explain, seeing that I do not understand them.

The majority of Ukrainians who came here have never previously been abroad. Probably, they would not even want to come here - if not pushed with their backs to (against) the wall by the difficult economic situation at home. They do not hide their reasons for emigration.

- I never thought I would find myself here - says Petro. - I was a factory worker at home... but now all the plants at our town are closed, you cannot imagine what's going on! It's a horror! In my time my photo was hung on the board of honour¹⁸¹ three times. My wife is a chief economist at the factory, and she gets such a pittance that it isn't enough to even live on bread and water.... We took a sip of that bloody capitalism, big time! - He forces himself to laugh. -Me and the guys say here: there is nothing good to expect, as long as this president stays in power...

- They know nothing about us here. Absolutely nothing. They don't even know where Ukraine is, - echoes Volodimir. - Once we came into a pub, and they asked us, "Where are you from?" We said: "We are Ukrainians". "And where is that?" We really tried hard to explain to them, but they did understand. What do they teach them here in school, do you know? Don't they have any geography lessons at all? Then we just told them: "Chernobyl" - well, that's the word they all know over here! And they ran away from us the moment they heard it - the whole pub was left at our service!

They come in for an interview in order to get a National Insurance number - one after the other, all healthy, tall and strong. They smell of tobacco and of something else, incomprehensible - as only our people smell who have recently arrived from our country. I close my eyes for a second, and it seems to me that I see in front of me our old house in April when the snow melts, and from beneath it the first patches of soil begin to appear...Yes, that's it! It is the smell of spring, of earth!

The men yearn for their families left behind in Ukraine: wives, children, and for some, even grandchildren. All of them have unusually strong family ties for our times, many have been married for many years, there is not one among them who is divorced, and all of them can remember the exact date of their wedding. Contrary to the myths so common in the West that virtually everybody in our country is divorced, and that our men are some kind of monsters - alcoholics who beat their wives as a hobby.

What does it feel like - to be ripped away from their homes at that age, to leave family behind and to start living like a student (6 people sharing a house!), as well as not being able to speak a word in the local language?

They all agree, no one wants to stay here for life. Except for one young guy, but - here's the problem for you! - his wife does not want to emigrate permanently for any money in the world. Igor complains to me about her:

¹⁸¹ Board of honour – a billboard on the wall in the Soviet factories, schools etc with photographs of the best workers, students etc

- She says, I wouldn't mind coming for a visit, to see what it's like, but to move here for good - no, no, don't even dream about it! I said to her: you're a fool, now it would be easier for us to settle, we still have no apartment of our own at home, no house, nothing! When we are settled, it will be much harder... But she just goes on - no, no...

They are too proud to complain about life.

- We were lucky! Do you know how strict was the selection?

But of course, the agency that brought them here, promised them mountains of gold:

- We were told that housing and transportation are all paid by the employer. And that we would be paid more per hour than we are getting now. And once we came here: they subtracted the rent, bus fares, gas, electricity and diesel fuel from our wages... and it is useless to complain: we tried, and they, the ones from Kiev, just tell us: "You are not happy? Well, go back home then! Do you know how big the queue is to take your places (delete is)?"

-People here envy us: when we tell them how much cigarettes cost back home. But they're not aware that our wages over there are so low that we cannot buy a lot... I showed some guy a family video, my son's wedding was filmed, as he looked at our party and said: "If you live like this in the Ukraine, I'd like to live like that too!" But he doesn't know how much debt we've got into in order to celebrate that wedding...

- It is just so boring here. There is nowhere to go. Only to the pubs - but that's boring for us. Not interesting. There is nothing to watch on TV. At home in the Ukraine I have cable TV, I watch Italian football. But here, even on cable TV all they show are just English things. Well, there is some football out there - but only local! - golf and cricket. So bloody boring! And the news - there is also nothing about what's happening in other countries. Back at home they show news about all over the world! So, that is why they don't know anything, - Petro concludes. And suddenly he asks me something I cannot imagine a local ordinary worker asking:

- Could you please tell me, what's happening there, with Iraq? What about the UN Security Council? What about our representatives there, are we against it?

I answer his questions, and I feel inner pride: look what kind of workers we have, they know everything and they care about everything, not just about what to eat, what to buy and where to drink! However, they clearly underestimate themselves...

- They treat us well here. They appreciate us. First, we are not like the locals: locals go to their pubs in the evening, then they are sick with sore heads the next morning and don't show up to work. And we all come to work every day, sick or not (because we are paid by the hour, we even try to work overtime!) Well, second, we are also paid less... So, we make them so much profit! The Locals, if their knives are blunt, they get angry, stand up and walk out: "We won't work unless they sharpen our knives!" And there is nobody to work in their place, of course... But we, we just work, no matter what shape the knives are in... "- says Sergiy, wiping his hands on his apron, from under which protrudes another protective clothing: the iron one, that looks like medieval chainmail.

- Of course, such workers will be appreciated ... - I sigh sadly.

That's exactly why they brought them here. That's why the British government has allowed citizens of countries that joined the EU in 2004 to come to Britain for work immediately, - unlike most other European countries who make people wait for two more years. So that they will work hard for a pittance and not complain. And then, perhaps, it will also be possible to reduce the wages for the locals... under the threat that otherwise their jobs will be taken over by these "new Europeans" who are not so fussy. Ukrainians do not even fall under this category. They are "non-Europeans", "non-whites". They have even fewer rights than the Poles...

The following scene unfolded in front of my eyes: a nurse was trying to measure the blood pressure of one of the Ukrainian workers, and he - fearing that he might be removed from work on grounds of health and safety - attempted in every possible way to avoid it and explained that high blood pressure is just a thing in his family: it is hereditary, he is in excellent health, he knows that without any doctors from the hospital... Because he won't be paid if he goes on sick leave. And what if they decide to send him back home altogether?

Many of them told me how much it had cost them to come here. Most of them had to borrow this money from friends and family- between \$2,000 and \$3,000 dollars... And you just can't go home without being able to repay this money.

I walked outside into the street. I was immediately surrounded by the foul "odour" of raw meat. Suddenly, somewhere around the corner, in the corral, a cow was mooing plaintively. She felt that her last day had come. I've never been a vegetarian, but this plaintive sound suddenly grabbed my heart. Who gave us the right to decide at our sole discretion over the lives of other living beings, as if they belong to us? Who gave the West the right to decide over the lives of our fellow countrymen and other "non-white" people from all over the world, as if they were some lifeless "natural resource"?

- There are a lot of soldiers in the streets here. And the policemen are armed. But they are quite polite with us - Vasil said to me. I looked at a photocopy of his registration certificate issued by the local police, and suddenly I noticed something that wasn't visible on the original, even if you look at it in the light. On the photocopy a watermark was clearly visible, imprinted into the original paper - in order for it not to be tampered with - of a skull and two crossbones...

I'm not kidding! That's how "welcoming" this police was to foreigners. They were so certain that no one will notice this pirate-criminal hallmark of their choice for tagging their documents.

Ukrainians are surprised when I show them the skull and crossbones. They do not know how to react.

- Does that mean that the police here are dangerous to deal with: they might kill you? - Mikhailo asks.

I'm leaving. In front of me a bus full of Portuguese slowly trudges along the road: they are going to work on the late shift at the local poultry farm. And at the train station I encountered a crowd of Filipino nurses...

Since we have parted that February morning in Dublin, Dermot regularly phoned me, sent me some quite nice in contents SMS messages, but we rarely saw each other: no more, but also no less than at least once a month. I decided not to tell anybody about our relationship, and not just because he was married. My mother, for example, was unlikely to condemn me for this: on the contrary, it seemed that she considered only this kind of a relationship to be normal. Anyway, somehow she always praised to me those who were entirely unavailable - and, conversely, she strongly criticised any inadvertent appearance of a bachelor in my environment, despite the fact that I was not paying any attention to either.

Before I started my relationship with Dermot, it was quite enough for me to be just inspired by my rare contacts with the Leader. Once I was in Belfast for a morning event dedicated to the Irish language, in the heart of the city at the new concert hall. It was attended by all McCracken summer school teachers that I knew; and the Leader, as an activist of the movement for language revival, of course. could not miss such an event. Unfortunately, I could not stay until the end of it: I had to go home to give mum a break from looking after Lisa; she needed some rest, at least on the weekends. I slowly walked out of the hall so as not to disturb anyone, and bumped into him, face to face in the empty lobby. Usually there was always at least somebody around us: other party members, bodyguards, journalists, but here suddenly there was no one. It was too early in the morning, you see, and especially on the weekend, plus this city district was not exactly Republican. So it happened that this time there was not a soul around us. Even his eternal companion, the press secretary, wasn't there.

The Leader greeted me: in Irish. To this I still could probably answer, but at that moment all Irish words completely flew out of my head.

-Your postal services here must be working very badly! - I said, hinting to him that he had said he would drop me a line, but it has been more than six months since then. I wondered how he would respond?

He didn't say anything. Instead, his near-sighted brown eyes flashed with a slightly cheeky look, he leaned down from his height of almost two metres and gently kissed my lips aiming at them with precision like a real sniper - before I even had time to react. And then he went away with quick steps...

Well, what interest could I have in any bachelors after *this*?
Inspiration from just this memory alone should have been enough for me now for a lifetime.

Since then I saw the Leader, of course, many more times. For example, at the weekend of

celebration of Irish culture and language hosted by the party. But there the atmosphere was already quite different. Not a kissy one.

...There is an unusual place in the Irish county of Meath, not far away from Dublin, between Drogheda and Navan, - a place which you wouldn't really expect to find here. By the way, it is not so easy to find: a village called Rath Cairn, the only place perhaps in the whole province of Leinster where people still speak Irish, and which is far from main roads -- and the road signs in Ireland are in general not very clear. But those who love Irish language and culture and still manage to get here, are up for an unexpected surprise: a sign of "Gaeltacht"¹⁸² stuck in the middle of a road to nowhere, and wonderful, responsive and talented people, the epitome of the Irish hospitality!

I first heard about Rath Cairn from Fionnuala whose parents, as it turned out, were the IRA fighters in the 1920s, and then became the Irish language teachers in that village. Strictly speaking, in the 1930s the Irish language was just as extinct in Rath Cairn, as in the rest of the East of Ireland. But in the 1930s it was decided to hold a kind of socio-linguistic experiment: move closer to Dublin Irish speakers families from Connemara and try to give a second life to the Irish language ... It has not spread to the rest of Leinster. But in Rath Cairn it is still the main language of the daily life for the entire population.

I also decided to visit Rath Cairn, though not without hesitation. To be honest, it was a little scary: my knowledge of the Irish language was still very limited, and according to Fionnuala, during such weekends it is strictly forbidden to speak in English.

To reach this village lost in the fields and groves was even harder than I thought: the weekend started on Friday night, but there were no buses from the "civilised world" to there around that time. I had to rely on contacts in Fionnuala's Irish speaking world. Great was my surprise when it turned out that I was going to get a lift to Rath Cairn from none other than a real living legend: a childhood friend of Bobby Sands, who was starving with him in the prison of Long Kesh in 1981, the same man whom Bobby did not want to appoint as his representative for the press during the hunger strike which ultimately had taken his life, because he was afraid that this man, as a real friend would not let him die! To Rath Cairn we arrived after a long adventure, late in the evening. The living legend was silent almost all the way: firstly, because he was in general a shy person, and secondly, because he did not want to speak in English. But since then he always says hello to me when he sees me somewhere.

There was a hideous weather outside, with almost gale-force winds, but here, in a local pub, where we were greeted by Douglas, it was cozy and warm. All the fireplaces were lit, and next to one of them sat all the locals: people of all generations from Rath Cairn, both the elderly and the children who began a long Irish night for their guests. Children danced for us an Irish dance - not a bit worse than some Michael Flatley¹⁸³. One old man could not hold it anymore, got off his chair and, keeping grabbing his sore back, also gave us a couple of dance moves: under common applause. Other old people started telling jokes and poems in Irish, and then moved on to a song. Part of it was improvised by them right there on the spot: in the form of some friendly, sarcastic stories

¹⁸² Irish language area, area where people use Irish Gaelic in their daily life (Gaelic)

¹⁸³ Michael Ryan Flatley (b.1958) - famous [Irish-American dancer](#)

about local people, and when Rath Cairn people switched on to Irish republican ballads, they became unanimously supported by a polyphonic choir of their guests who have gathered from across the country ...

My shyness caused by the lack of knowledge of the Irish language was over almost immediately: that's how warmly we were greeted. And besides, I found out that during this weekend you were not supposed to speak only in English but in all other languages you were most welcome ... With some I could explain myself in French, but then it turned out that in Raith Cairn they even have Russian speakers! I was approached by a tall Irishman, who was quite fluent in Russian. His wife, as it turned out, was from Moscow, and their little daughter was fully trilingual and could make herself understood equally well in Russian and in Irish! Unfortunately, communication with a fellow country woman did not exactly work out: she happened to be religiously obsessed.

Well, and then ... then of course, the same good old pub was waiting for us! When I first saw Douglas' wife, I seriously thought at first that it was his mother. I do not want to hurt her feelings by saying this, but I do not exaggerate: she really looked so much older than him. From the first glance it was obvious that this woman's character was that of a "drummer of a retired goat", as men say in Russia. Later on, when I read in the tabloids, how she beat up a gardai¹⁸⁴ on the street somewhere in Dublin, while being drunk, it did not surprise me the slightest. That would have been typical of her! After I became acquainted with Angela, Douglas reminded me even more so of our Shurek: perhaps, he also had got himself into this pretty mess in his time, poor intellectual ...

- Douglas, how did you join Sinn Fein, if this is not a secret, of course? - I asked him.
- I think it's in my blood. My family was always speaking Irish at home and has always been involved in various campaigns: against the architectural destruction of Dublin, for the Irish language rights, against the imposition of martial law and against civil rights violations in the North ... I joined the ranks of Sinn Fein as a student. In our *cumann*¹⁸⁵ many remarkable people began their political careers. We had such amazing, such hot discussions! Then we started to take part in social struggles: such as the strike of contract cleaners. We realized that we could not fight for the rights, whether our own students rights, or those of our cleaners, within the frames of the university: that we must go beyond it. Although since then much has changed, at the same time many of the issues for which we fought then, are still relevant to the present day. The area in the South of Dublin, where I'm working now is one of the most affected by inequality and social injustice, and the politicians until this day haven't helped it much. Did you see the construction of luxury apartments, which is so widely deployed now? But these apartments are not being built for those who live in the area.... What we need, is the creation of jobs for our people and for the future of the huge youth population in our older neighbourhoods, new schools for children, new clubs for teenagers ... What good is offering to them the Government's proposed new budget, with tax cuts for the wealthiest 2% of the population? If the children are still in the same overcrowded schools, live in the same overcrowded houses where their parents lived 20 years ago? If parents have to still be for years or even decades on the waiting list for a new home or waiting for hours

¹⁸⁴ Irish policeman

¹⁸⁵ Local branch

in a hospital for an X-ray? What good this "new wealth" in our country is for, if only in Dublin alone there are more than 200 homeless children sleeping on the streets? These areas are being destroyed for many years by drug addiction. In our area, now there is the largest concentration of heroin addicts in Europe. This state of affairs cannot be tolerated. Of course, we cannot change all that as if by magic. But the Peace Process, the Good Friday Agreement gives us the opportunity to start from a new point, to start building a new Ireland without the "ghetto" areas devastated by the inequality. The victory over censorship¹⁸⁶ after 30 years of armed struggle has allowed people, at least, to hear what we offer, what our party is advocating. Sinn Fein offers hope for real change for the better in people's lives in all of these forgotten neighbourhoods.

- And how can we be sure that you will not put on "Armani suits"¹⁸⁷, will not start driving around in "Mercedes" and will not become like the rest of them?

- After the Civil War of the 1920s in all of Ireland everybody who remained in the radical Republican movement in the country were either in exile or in prison. The State was back in the hands of conservative elements of society: those who from the outset opposed republicanism and socialism. The new state fell into the hands of businessmen, the Catholic Church and many others: those who took part in the anti-colonial struggle for very different reasons than from the Republican ideological position. Recall that 80% of those officials who were deciding the affairs of the British administration in Ireland, not only remained in their seats in the new Irish state, but many of them even got a promotion! In order to change this situation, it is necessary to give power to local communities: groups of local people and help them to believe in themselves. And these communities -that's exactly where are the roots of our party. Our people have behind them years of struggle, repression, sectarian killings, terror, Bloody Sunday. Our party is not like the others. We are always on the streets where we live, in the midst of life. Other political parties appear in the people only during electoral campaigns, with little postcards of the "I missed you so much!" ...

- Zhenya, did you see the recent TV discussion with the participation our Leader, who was accused by one of the female participants: "You have a hidden agenda: you want to build a unified Irish socialist republic"? The Leader, of course, quietly told her that nobody was ever making a secret out of it: it is the official goal of Sinn Fein, as established in the party programme. Unable to find what she could argue to that, the little, lady, however, was not appeased: "Do not deny it, for example, you have a beard ... All the terrorists have a beard!" And he just smiled and told her so quietly: "Do you consider Santa to be a terrorist too? "..., - interfered into our conversation Fionntan, who was also here.

All present laughed contagiously.

- A sense of humour has always been as necessary a weapon for the Republicans as a "Kalashnikov". If you only knew how our people lived in the 1970s! Only humour helped them to survive. Older people may tell you: riots, unemployment, injustice, discrimination in all areas, from housing to voting rights in elections ... it was a horrible life. But we survived. And are growing stronger every year! When you were arrested, it went without questioning: first, to what we all began to prepare immediately in a prison,

¹⁸⁶ Sinn Fein was banned from Irish and British broadcasting companies

¹⁸⁷ "New Sinn Fein: from Armalite to Armani" (see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2003/nov/20/uk.northernireland>)

was an escape. We were organised into cells, similar to army units, and were preparing for the escape very much. Politics then was to us a despised word. 30 years ago the path of armed struggle was seen as the only possible way of liberation of our country.

- While being in prison in rather free conditions in the camp of Long Kesh, I've seen how the Maze prison was built (it was called then the H-Blocks) - an unknown to me Republican said quietly.- Back then we had no idea how many lives they will take away from us, these walls that were rising so quickly ... At the end of the 1970s Margaret Thatcher's government moved to criminalisation of politics of the Irish liberation struggle: if before they recognised our special status (of political prisoners de facto), now we suddenly were declared to be ordinary criminals ... First of all, we were denied the right to wear our own clothing in prison, which we always used to do. And that's how the first protest was born: the Republicans were called "the blanket men," after the first of us who refused to wear the prison uniform of a convicted felon and chose to rather wear a rough blanket, with which he concealed his nakedness. This movement has become massive. By her policy of criminalisation Thatcher has tried to crush our boys: something that she could not achieve by military means. Bobby Sands was just an ordinary guy, "he was a poet and soldier," as they sing in a ballad about him. In spite of all the myths of the British propaganda, he had not killed anyone. What else could he have become in life, if since childhood, he only saw pogroms, his family was several times "ethnically cleansed" of their home, and because of these cleansings he himself has lost his job, gained with so much difficulty? Already at the age of 18 Bobby joined the IRA. Starting a hunger strike, he knew he was going to die. But that could not stop him. And yet we believed until the last minute that the British government would not allow him to die: especially after he, being on hunger strike, was elected to the British Parliament, with the number of votes that was greater than that of Thatcher herself. In fact, Thatcher allowed her colleague in Parliament to die an agonizing death from starvation! It was the biggest political mistake of Thatcher in all her career. Although she did not realize it at the time: because the hunger strike did not have immediate results. Bobby died in May, after 66 days on hunger strike... I will not describe to you now all his suffering, and how he was gradually becoming blind and deaf, and how all this time they were purposely bringing to his bed 3 daily meals, - tasty meals, not the ordinary prison diet. In October, after 10 deaths, the hunger strike was cancelled. But from that time we went into the new phase of our struggle: the political stage. The ranks of Sinn Fein began to grow incredibly, even the children in schools played into Bobby Sands, his fellow soldiers and the IRA. For us in jail, too, a new phase began: the death of Bobby pushed us to the Political Education Departments, to the political studies. Before that, few of us knew anything of revolutionary theory. Immediately we began to organise ourselves into circles, which, among other things, studied Marxism, and much more. It began already with preparation for the hunger strike: we studied a lot of information about the hunger strikes in various countries, preparing as best as we could, our guys to what to expect.

Together with the political education also came the new tactics of the struggle: we decided first of all, to outnumber our enemies, the Loyalists (from whom we then were not separated in prison, as it became later), and then to take into our hands the management of all the circles, all classes that they held for us prison, which has allowed us to take virtually all the prison under our control ... We have begun an intensive campaign of sabotage inside the prison, and two years later, in 1983, it allowed a large

group of Republican prisoners to commit an amazingly daring mass escape. Gerry Kelly became especially famous for his daring back then: our current Member of the local Assembly, who after his escape was hiding in the Netherlands. Even later, when he already became an MLA, Gerry managed to get into some adventures: once he was arrested while acting as an observer for the protests. Excessively zealous constables have handcuffed him, but to the delight of the crowd, he managed to escape from the police "funnel" right in those handcuffs, literally in front of the peelers¹⁸⁸! Not surprisingly, Kelly today is our speaker on all matters relating to the police! Some of the friends of Bobby Sands, who have left the walls of Maze in that escape in 1983, have never returned there afterwards.

- The first political success of the new Sinn Fein came in the mid-80s - again took the floor Fionntan. - Alex Maskey became our first councillor in the citadel of Unionists: Belfast City Hall. If only you could hear some of the insults that he had to listen from them every day! Honest to God, they treated him just like a dog! But after a while one can become immune to anything ... We, Republicans by now have such thick skins, that no words can hurt us! And look at us, where our party is today, what we have achieved over the years. The so-called "Ulster" was created as a "Protestant state for Protestant people", but today we are part of the government and are about to become the largest Nationalist party. You find it strange, perhaps, that in today's Ireland, the Irish still have to fight even for their cultural rights, but that's the way things are. Even for the right to have all documents and stationery in two languages: Irish and English, we have to fight through the courts ... Our objectives remain the same, only the way to achieve them is different, more up-to-date with the conditions of struggle. Objective is to change the system from within! The difference between us and other parties is in the fact, that we do not seek to "enter into the system", but to change it! It is already rotted and cracked. Just take a look today's unionists: they have no friends anywhere in the world. Even the British do not really need them anymore! We are witnessing the fragmentation of unionism as a political movement. That's why the behaviour of Loyalist paramilitaries today is so unpredictable: because they sense their own doom. Which, of course, does not make the situation any less dangerous for the ordinary people ... But they have no future. And they know it.

- I will give you just an example of how things have changed - entered into conversation again that unknown to me Republican. - Recently I was at the Stormont¹⁸⁹. I went to the toilet after a meeting, and in the same direction with me walked a prominent Unionist politician. I was already about to go out of there, but he was still nowhere to be seen. I went out and found him still standing at the front door, suffering, and shifting from foot to foot: he was waiting until I get out ... He was afraid, apparently, to go into a toilet with a "terrorist"! Even though I had no intention of exterminating Unionists in their outhouses¹⁹⁰! If we achieve full equality even in this so-called state, it will collapse like a house of cards, with the "domino effect". Because the only thing on which it rests, the

¹⁸⁸ Peelers - Northern Irish term for police officers.

¹⁸⁹ The Parliament Buildings (1932) — commonly known as the Stormont because of its location in the [Stormont](#) area of [Belfast](#) — is the seat of the [Northern Ireland Assembly](#) and the [Northern Ireland Executive](#).

¹⁹⁰ Reference to Putin's famous words: "...and excuse me, but if we find them in the toilet, we'll exterminate them in their outhouses."

only thing on which it is built, is segregation and discrimination.

This our conversation lasted until late at night. I do not even remember at what hour did we go to sleep.

The next morning just as an interesting program was waiting for us: a discussion on the future of the Irish language and of what kind of language policy should the state implement for its revival, an exhibition of paintings dedicated to the upcoming anniversary of the hunger strikes and, finally, the visit of the Leader, for whom the whole village was waiting.

Particularly active in the debate were the Northerners. And it is not surprising: after all, it was the Belfast people who have managed to prove by their personal example that the revival of Irish language and its return to daily use can be a real thing, as I once was able to see for myself, talking to a Belfast journalist, a former political prisoner and two of his daughters: among themselves they spoke exclusively in Irish, though he had learned it not since childhood, but while he was in prison during the "blanket protests."

The Leader came late, but only by about 5 minutes. When he walked in: tall, youthful-looking, with his intelligent brown piercing eyes, he looked like a university professor, and on that day he also looked very approachable and homely in his thick Donegal jumper. As soon as he appeared at the door, we heard an applause. Someone called him "the last living revolutionary in Europe." The longer I live here, the more I doubt this (thank God, there are some more revolutionaries in Europe, although they are really very few). Even though Dermot who was well acquainted with the Leader personally, tried to assure me that the latter was almost a communist who had "to step on the throat of his song"¹⁹¹.

It was a Saturday. He told us that he had to contact the British and Irish governments in the morning over the phone, then covered not only the problems of the revival of the Irish language, but also on what has become a dangerous situation surrounding the Peace Process as a result of decisions taken at the just held a few hours earlier at a council of the Ulster Unionist Party, and then it was time for answering questions of the public and for relaxed socialising with the people. He ended his day in the same pub as all of us. Even though all the Republican leadership are teetotalers¹⁹². Still, it was so unusual to see this man, whom I used to perceive as a "living monument" in such surroundings ... Unfortunately, again, I had to return to Belfast for work. That's how strange was my working schedule.

- Douglas, do you know anyone who is going back to Belfast today? - I asked.

Douglas laughed.

- Why don't you ask the Leader?

- Do not joke like this, - I said - Otherwise I really will.

- Bet that you won't dare?

- Bet that I will dare?

Irish love betting, and I too was suddenly gripped by it.

- What are we betting at?

¹⁹¹ Russian expression meaning being forced to do something against your will or beliefs

¹⁹² Teetotalism refers to either the practice of or the promotion of complete [abstinence](#) from [alcoholic beverages](#). A person who practices (and possibly advocates) teetotalism is called a *teetotaler* (also spelled *teetotaller*; plural *teetotalers* or *teetotallers*) or is simply said to be *teetotal*

I found the Leader with my eyes and waited, when there will be fewer people around him. There was a sort of non-stopping queue towards him. Just as at Lenin's Mausoleum.

- Sorry, are you going back to Belfast today? - I asked, after greeting him.

- And what's the matter?

- Could you perhaps give me a lift? I have to go to work, you see ...

He looked as if he couldn't believe his ears. Douglas, however, too, couldn't: he froze with his mouth open.

- You know, - The Leader finally said after some thinking, - We cannot do that, we do not give lifts to anyone, for security reasons, but please do not go away, we'll think of something. Wait for me here, I'll be right back ... - and he ran for the door. Had I scared him so much?

He returned after 5 minutes. With the very same journalist, the former political prisoner.

- Here is Jim, he is going back to Belfast in half an hour and he'll take you there. Is that OK?

- Oh, thank you very much! - I was delighted. - Can I ask you a couple of questions before saying goodbye?

- Go ahead! - He shook his head almost playfully.

- What do the Irish Republicans think about our experience of building socialism in the USSR? I myself usually say to the critics, the words of an Irish song, "*But at least we took up the challenge, we didn't just pretend*"¹⁹³ - but I know that, of course, we have made mistakes along the way, and some of them, unfortunately, proved to be fatal ...

What do you think, where did we go wrong, and what positive experience of our socialism's construction can be used in Ireland and in other countries?

- I have spent practically my entire adult life in a conscious struggle against British intervention in the affairs of my country, and so I think that it would be arrogant of me to try to evaluate your history and your experience. I am just an observer from the outside, and an observer who is not very knowledgeable, so I do not have, in my opinion, the moral right to read you a lecture on the topic, where you may be wrong. This is the right of every nation - to seek their own path, their own truth and their own lifestyles.

- We in Russia have now become very cynical towards politics in general and politicians in particular (it is not surprising when we remember the years of Gorbachev and Yeltsin!). Just some 10 years ago, people were filled with so much enthusiasm, wanted the changes so much: it even entered the songs of that time. But at this stage of our history, people prefer to maintain the existing regime: capitalism, which robs them daily and deprives them of a decent life - simply because they are afraid to change the "lesser evil to a even bigger one", or do not participate in political life at all. The destruction of life and ideals that we've had, has such a negative impact on people, that they seem to just no longer have any ideals at all. When I talk about Irish republicanism at home, some people respond to me, 'How are they going to build a socialist republic in Ireland with American money? Some say that the real revolutionaries need to be flexible in changing conditions (let's be realistic: the situation around us today isn't exactly revolutionary!) and to use all opportunities available to them in order to achieve their goals, to put their ideals into practice, but what would you say to such cynical critics?

¹⁹³ Song of "Saw Doctors" (Irish band)

- When you talk about the issue of financing from American sources, it is important to remember that in the context of the Irish diaspora in the United States. We are just a small island with a population of 5 million, but in the world there are 70 million people who are proud of the fact that they are of Irish descent. When we set the party strategy for the peace process in the late 80s - early 90s, we recognised the importance of international perspective and its ability to influence the events here. For us, the U.S. - in which 40 million Americans describe themselves as Irish - was important and a natural place from which we could obtain political and financial support. The U.S. is also very important because they can strongly influence the British policy towards Ireland. Most of the funds received by us in the U.S., we use over there: we have two offices there, through which we are lobbying the U.S. politicians in Washington. People who donate money to our party, constitute the entire political, economic and social spectrum of the United States. They support us because they support our first political objective: the creation of a free, independent and united Ireland.

- The main danger to any party that comes to power and becomes part of the system is revisionism. Many devoted party activists, coming to power, unfortunately, forget their roots and what they were fighting for ... But there are also difficulties arising from the fact that yesterday's friends become deadly enemies, simply because they see different ways of further development of the country, different ways to achieve their ideals, and each of them at the same time is convinced that his vision is the only correct one. The main question is: "Who will guard the guards?" Sinn Fein is now growing at an unprecedented pace. There is a big possibility that your party will be part of the next Irish government. In the North it is on the verge of becoming the largest political party - for a start, of the Catholic population. What do you think: will Sinn Fein be able to deal with this threat and to keep the banner of its ideals as high and as visible as it had been all these years?

- In any organization, group, political party or government, there are always trends that always remain the danger. But we have a clear perspective of our political goals, and we also clearly understand our strategic objectives. That is what leads us down the path of our struggle. We constantly discuss and collectively seek nuances in our progress. Leadership in our party is a collective one. The leaders of Sinn Fein do not lead a flock of sheep! We are constantly working on a process of dialogue with all our activists and the wider community of our electorate. All this is necessary in order not to lose our way, not to become an "elite" and to continue to stay focused on the needs and objectives of our struggle. Let me give you one small example of how we function as a party: all our elected members, who receive a salary for their political work in the Northern Ireland Assembly, or in the Irish Parliament, do give to the party most of their salary. It does not matter whether it is the deputy minister or a political adviser or a secretary - they all receive the same salary from the party. Everything else goes to the building of the party.

- What would you recommend for those of us in Russia and other Eastern European countries who are tired, gave it all up and no longer believe that social justice can be achieved? How do we regain faith in ourselves?

- We all get tired. It's human nature. Fighting in Ireland has been going on for 800 years. For most of us this is the cause that goes throughout our lives. We must return to the basics. It means to realise that most people are good by nature. There are very few really

bad people in the world. It means to realise that the conflicts stem from the injustices, and that in order to end the conflict and to make life better, it is necessary to deal with the causes of these conflicts and to eliminate them. And that means: never give up.

Jim looked at his watch. I had to go, even though I really did not want to!

- Is there any place for a socialist republic in today's world? - I asked the Leader with such hope in my voice, as if everything really depended on his answer to me.

- Yes!

... And Douglas still sat there with his mouth open.

- Close your mouth: a bird will fly into it¹⁹⁴, - I said, starting towards the door. But obviously, the humour of our expression was lost in translation.

When I first arrived in Ireland, one of the things that struck me there, were the local telephone directories. More precisely, the fact that often there were literally dozens of pages with the same name. And there were very few different names all together. No real diversity. But Jim's last name you would not come across in there, because his name was a translation from English into Irish. Very rarely, but such names do exist. This is the certificate of patriotism of their bearers who have made this conscious translation. But look at the Irish phone books of today, full of exotic names - just a few years down the road! Even I feel slightly unwell from such dizzyingly rapid changes.

Jack arrived to Rath Cairn in a big jeep.

- I have five children, - he said. - That's why I need a big car.

Two of his daughters, 10 and 12 years of age, sat in the back of the car, and I sat in front next to him. The road was not a short one, and to remain silent for nearly three hours all was somehow embarrassing, so I started to tell this man whom I practically did not know... no, not anecdotes, but different funny stories from my own life. At first, he just listened, then he began to smile, then chuckle, then he started to laugh. In between the funny stories I told him serious stories too: so that he won't get exhausted with laughter. One such serious story was about an article that I read on the internet when doing an overview of what is written in the Russian press about the Irish republicans. In this article, one of our well-known journalists, a "human rights activist" compared one of the least known of Irish Republicans, the army man, with a wild beast and practically called for the British to shoot him on the spot. Never having even been in Ireland, she confidently, peremptorily, in bold strokes painted a picture according to which the leaders of Sinn Fein were just pawns and puppets in the hands of this treacherous man. I retold my travel companion this article in colours, expressing outrage that people writing about things they have no idea of. I thought that he would share my indignation. But Jim suddenly burst out laughing uncontrollably: like if I told him the funniest story that he has ever heard in his life. He even started to drive with one hand while wiping his eyes from with the other: it was filled with tears from his laughter. I could not figure out what was wrong. It took another five minutes before Jim finally was able to say:

¹⁹⁴ Russian mocking expression.

- Oh ... haha ... this is just priceless ... well, I'm sure to tell him: that's my father-in-law! Here came my turn to be embarrassed and ashamed, although he knew of course that these were not my words, but of that Russian journalist. It was a good lesson for me: in such a small country like Ireland, you never know with whose relative or friend you are talking to, so before you say something, you must carefully consider what kind of reactions it can cause.

Later on I saw that father-in-law of his, once: at the opening of Fionntan's office in Dublin, office of the organisation for former political prisoners. The man in question looked sternly, spoke little and rarely spoke to the media. Therefore, journalists on that day came down to this very office, like flies to honey. I really wanted to say at least a few words to him, but when I mentioned his name to Fionntan, he somehow pretended that he has not heard me. And even that he does not know this man, but then I saw them talking to each other like old friends. Later, after getting to know Fionntan a bit closer, I realised that if he pretends he cannot hear you, it means that he does not want to answer your question. This means that you touched something that you are not supposed to know. Of course, I never insisted on getting an answer. And it would be foolish to do so. After the official part of the office opening was finished, as usual, the drinking one began. That's the best place for figuring out who is in active service and who is just a chatterbox. Volunteers usually either do not drink at all, or drink only a little. There I met an Australian girl who came here to work among the Republicans at their invitation: one of those foreigners who consider themselves Irish. However, unlike my other acquaintance, an American, rotating in the same circles, this one was a very sweet, down-to-earth girl. I chatted with her, when from behind my back, someone touched my shoulder and called me by name. I turned around.

It was a complete stranger to me, a dark man with a moustache. But, most surprisingly, he somehow knew me! And even knew a bit too much about me. While I feverishly tried to figure out what would it mean, and who is it, I was gripped by some drunken veterans, and one of them began to assure me that I have such a face, that I will definitely have to be a native of South Derry. Barely I managed to break myself loose from them. The moustached dark man did not go away, and finally it dawned on me who it was! It was the same bearded man, who escaped from the British prison, whom I met on the same day, when I first saw Fionnuala: at the Irish course! Only his beard was shaved off, so I did not recognise him!

It turned out that he and Fionntan were great friends, and now both started to persuade me to speak in their organisation about my memories of the Soviet Union.

- I am now responsible for the political education of our youth - said Fionntan to me. - You cannot imagine how the guys will be happy if they have the opportunity to listen to you. And also to what extent it will be useful and important for them. I hate speaking in public. Before a large audience I feel as if I want to compress myself into a ball and to hide. But how could I refuse this request?

And we agreed on the date. Fionntan carefully recorded it in his diary.

It was from that time I began to often stop over at Fionnuala and Fionntan's place, when I came to Dublin. And I became very attached to them both. Fionntan impressed me by his imperturbable calm, by how patient he was with his children, by how much time he spent

with them (he often was preparing their breakfast in the mornings and taking them to school while Fionnuala was still sleeping). He's got his children late: he was already far over 40, when they were born. It is not uncommon among Irish republicans, who spent many years behind bars. His youngest child, a ginger-haired 8 years old boy with a very inquisitive mind, was already interested in military history and spent his days playing tin soldiers. Quite amazing for a modern child, he loved to read books! And not some comics, but really serious, political stuff. And then he asked such questions on political topics, that even I did not always immediately know what to answer to him. Now this guy finishes high school and already has organised a communist circle in his class. Even more surprisingly, he was able to unite around himself other teenagers, and that's in our time, when most of them only care about some silly computer games and all kinds of "happy slapping"¹⁹⁵! That meant that he has the qualities of a real organiser, and that young people have a need for such an organisation. In his own school, the first thing they did, was organising a boycott of "Coca Cola". That is how Fionntan brought him up.

Once, we spent the whole evening at Fionnuala's in a conversation about what mistakes were made in the USSR, and how they can be prevented in other countries in the future. The discussion was in friendly tones, not hostile, and that's why I took such criticism without offence. We were just looking for the answers on the same issues together. Fionntan suggested creating accountability for the party to the people by creating a special body: a kind of popular control, but endowed with much more authority. This body itself should also be under the control of the people. If the party lost touch with the ground, the people thought this organisation should be able to urgently change the party cadres, recalling some and suggesting some new candidates We all agreed on one thing: in order to make socialism work in practice, above all, it is necessary that the people themselves should not be indifferent to what is happening around us! Should not wait for someone else to suggest something, not running away from discussions and meetings, leaving them at the mercy of the professional talkers.

Fionntan had a very inquisitive mind. And this is the main feature that distinguishes a Republican-"army men" from the civilian Sinners¹⁹⁶: gravity, that makes them so different from the usual Irish superficiality. Serious, thoughtful approach to every issue, vibrant, deep interest in people - and also that they don't talk much. The one who cries at every corner that he is in the IRA, in fact by 200% has nothing to do with it. After a while I learned how *to feel* which of my new friends were the army people and who was not. I cannot express it in words how, but I just knew it. For example, Dermot – yes, he was, but Douglas – not any longer. Of course, those things are never asked.

****... On one cold and wet winter Sunday afternoon I was sitting in front of the computer in the room, working on my next report for the radio. The work was hard, I had to do it over again, and I couldn't resist some cursing, when I heard a loud explosion. I remember that I was surprised very much: wasn't frightened, just surprised, and a thought came to my mind: "Wait a minute, that sounds like a bomb!"

¹⁹⁵ Happy slapping was a [fad](#) in the [UK](#) and [Europe](#), in which someone assaulted an unwitting victim while others recorded the assault (commonly with a [camera phone](#) or a [smartphone](#)).

¹⁹⁶ Sinners - members of Sinn Fein (pronounced "Shinners")

It was the bomb: for our neighbour's son-in-law who was visiting her at that time, a local drug dealer. And it wasn't the first time: for the first time he was saved because he had some republican relatives. But he didn't even think to give up his dirty business. Instead he began to train in kickboxing and when some fellows came to beat him up as a warning, he beat them off. After he'd got a black belt, he already began to believe in his own invulnerability and didn't intend to stop. That day someone has placed an improvised explosive device on a roof of the car that was parked next to our houses. He had seen it just in time, when he left his mother-in-law's house, and had thrown it on the ground. In half an hour the police has arrived, we were told to leave our houses, in the rain and the peelers began to comb the place, with small torches (because it already became dark). We were walking around the closed shop with Lisa's wheelchair and were cursing loudly because nobody could tell us, how long this was going to last.

– I saw them, – my mum said suddenly.

– Whom is “them”?

– Well, your *boys*. I don't know these ones, they are not from here, but I figured out who they were. They have passed by the back gate nearly half an hour before the explosion. Such good-looking fellows, in long raincoats.

– Don't tell this to anybody. It isn't like our *militsiya*¹⁹⁷ back at home and life here isn't like we used to have back at home either.

– How can I tell anything to anybody, if I don't even speak the language? And I have seen enough here: what such types as that man get up and how the local police operates. So, calm yourself down.

When Dermot saw on TV about the bomb in the news, he became scared very much and phoned me.

– Are you sure that it was not addressed to you?

- Absolutely! - I have calmed him. Mum and I have recorded on video from our TV set how policeman searched for explosives in front of our house: to show it back at home, otherwise nobody would believe us.

And that drug dealer was killed a year later. Right on my birthday. Local newspapers wrote about him what he really was like. Even Wendy knew that he sold drugs to kids.

– He was a bad rascal! - she said. His widow, my neighbour's daughter, was raging for a long time, threatened to sue the local newspapers for defamation, but, of course, she didn't: after all, the whole village knew that it was truth. And if some journalists would begin to investigate, how a simple mechanic managed to buy several houses in different villages

But Dublin anti-Republican newspapers differed: they described him like some sort of a hero, a sportsman who was going to take a part in the Olympic games, etc. Though he was engaged in sports only in order to protect himself from just punishment. Goodness gracious! Now he will be immortalised as a «political victim of the conflict», as it is

¹⁹⁷ *Militsiya* or militia - the name originates from a Provisional Government decree dated April 17, 1917, and from [early Soviet history](#). The new law enforcement authority was associated with the self-organization of the people and to distinguish it from the [czarist police](#).

common in those “democratic” states where the police does nothing when such people poison children with drugs. When you see this, you’ll really start thinking about how many such “political” and “innocent” people were among the «victims of repressions» in our own country. At the very least, because the journalists who write about them in “democratic” Russia, have the same political views as those in Dublin.

And the more I was reading, the more I wanted to witness personally the events such newspapers were covering. Fionntan helped me by pointing out whom I could consult for this. First thing, I wanted to visit Garvaghy Road in Portadown, to see Drumcree stand-off which Geoffrey and company thought of as an annual entertainment. For that, though, I had to wait until July, the Orangemen parades time, which local Catholics and even many Protestants call a ‘silly season’.

Actually the parades here start right after Easter, and they last – with breaks – until December. But the most important of them takes place on the eve of the Battle of the Boyne (July 1690) in which the Protestants led by William of Orange (known among local Protestants affectionately as ‘*good King Billy*’) defeated the Catholics led by King James II . Since then Protestants have been annually reminding Catholics of their ‘proper place’.

I went to Garvaghy Road together with Patricia, the lawyer defending the rights of the local residents, who has fearlessly replaced Rosemary Nelson killed by the Loyalists in 1999¹⁹⁸. Being a human rights lawyer in Northern Ireland is really very different from staying in luxurious hotels and having lunches accompanied by singing Ulster constables- , the privileges *our* Russian visiting “human rights activists” enjoyed here¹⁹⁹.

Patricia is waiting for me at the train station. She is a small, round woman with fine, sharp features; there are some bags in her hands as if she’s just finished shopping. With such an appearance, she does not look at all like a heroine (which she really is!)

- I’ve bought us train tickets; the police told me yesterday that *they*²⁰⁰ got my car license plate number, she says in a calm, quiet voice as if it is something quite ordinary. ‘They’ are the Loyalist paramilitaries, in whose possession there is still a considerable amount of arms, but the world press seems to be totally ignoring this.

We get on the train; it is almost empty, just like the city of Belfast itself. Those who can leave Northern Ireland in July, do so, including quite a significant part of the Protestant

¹⁹⁸ Rosemary Nelson (1958 – 1999) was a prominent Irish [human rights](#) lawyer who was killed by a [loyalist](#) paramilitary group in 1999. It has been suggested that British Security Forces were involved in her killing,

¹⁹⁹ I heard about it first hand from Russian participants of such a “field trip” to the North of Ireland in 2001.

This trip was fully paid by their British hosts (including guests’ expenses). After this, of course, Russian “human rights activists” said that they really “didn’ t think there was anything wrong with human rights in Northern Ireland”.

²⁰⁰ The loyalists

population. “Drumcree” can entertain only the declassed members of the community, those looking for the slightest excuse to “start the war all over again”, and the Orangemen themselves, - those who still cannot accept the fact that their absolute political and economic power in “*the Province*” (as they call it) is slipping away from them.

Last year the Orangemen made a practically open call on the Loyalist paramilitaries to support them, which caused the biggest upsurge of rioting in recent years. This year the number of policemen and soldiers to maintain order in Portadown was 1000 more than the actual participants of the parade. *Drumcree* costs the British taxpayers 6 million pounds - a hardly justifiable spending while there isn't enough money for education and healthcare; in the first place, for the ‘suffering’ Protestant working class community itself.

On the way, Patricia tells me about herself, pointing to her former school and her house as the train passes them by... Our talk drifts on then to David Trimble²⁰¹ whose insulting comments about a Catholic boy killed by Loyalists in Antrim²⁰² had brought about a real storm of indignation. As a result, the Nobel Peace Prize winner had to take back his words and publicly apologize to the boy's parents.

- It is actually not the first time Trimble has been allowing himself such comments! ,Patricia says. - When Rosemary was killed he was in the US and commented on her death in a very similar way. Yet it went almost unnoticed... What's worse, Trimble was her University professor, but he still couldn't even formally keep up appearances and show his respect for the deceased...

While saying this, she shows me the house of the former Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from the carriage window.

- Very few people know he lives there, otherwise there would be endless picketing. This year things are very calm; last season my own house was under siege ...

Portadown Orangemen refuse to negotiate directly with Garvaghy Road residents on the grounds that they “won't sit at the same table with terrorists” (Breandan²⁰³, the leader of the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition, was once sentenced to prison for taking part in an IRA operation), yet nothing keeps them from inviting their own paramilitaries there”.

²⁰¹ William David Trimble (b.1944) is a politician from [Northern Ireland](#). He served as Leader of the [Ulster Unionist Party](#) (UUP; 1995–2005), was the first [First Minister of Northern Ireland](#) (1998–2002), and a Member of the British Parliament (1990–2005). Trimble was awarded the 1998 [Nobel Peace Prize](#), along with [John Hume](#). He used to work a professor of law at [Queen's University Belfast](#).

²⁰² Refers to the murder of Ciaran Cummings in the summer of 2001.

²⁰³ Breandán Mac Cionnaith (b.1958¹) is an Irish politician and a prominent residents' group leader. He is currently the General Secretary of [éirígí](#), a [socialist republican](#) party, and was previously an adviser to [Sinn Féin](#) members of the [Northern Ireland Assembly](#). He came to prominence in the 1990s as the spokesman for the [Garvaghy Road Residents' Coalition](#). In the early 1980s, McKenna was jailed for six years for his involvement in blowing up the [British Legion](#) hall in [Portadown](#). In 1997 he was elected to [Craigavon Borough Council](#) for the Portadown area and sat on the council until 2001. Mac Cionnaith had received numerous death threats and a live bullet had been sent to him.

-When I first met Breandan, he appeared to be a cold, peppery person. But now, as I got to know him well, I can really say he is a treasure! Unlike politicians, he doesn't make false promises, or exaggerate his achievements. He simply does what he can to help the people. Look how much Garvagh Road has changed because of him! It was Breandan who managed to get the investors interested in such a hopeless area, and then persuaded them to set up a call centre here with 130 jobs at this very moment, and hundreds more in perspective. Garvagh Road children could not attend college in the town centre because of continuous sectarian attacks. Breandan managed to get a special computer link set up for them, so now they can study online, without leaving the local club. New houses are being built at Garvagh Road! The population of the district is growing; and also more and more Catholics now live along that road where the Orangemen are allowed to march tomorrow; so, in the near future nobody will want to see them there... “

It takes about half an hour by train to get from Belfast to Portadown. This place is unwelcoming, even in the peaceful months. In the city centre shops they shower you with false smiles, yet you can read it in their eyes: “She is not one of us. Who is she? What is she doing here?”. The memory of a recent murder is still fresh: romping Protestant youths beat to death a young Catholic man called Robert Hamill²⁰⁴ on his way back from a pub - all in plain view of the sectarian police who preferred not to intervene. Hypocrisy is clearly felt everywhere. Graffiti under the bridge are filled with hatred: “*Kill all taigs²⁰⁵!*”, “*Rosemary, where are you? Ha-ha-ha!*”, “*Bobby Sands, burn in hell!*”. Those who speak about the ‘equal responsibility’ of both communities simply haven't seen those graffiti...

The Irish write, “Brits out!”, implying the British army, but never, “Kill all Brits!”. Sometimes they even bid them farewell, “*Slán abhaile²⁰⁶!*”.

When we got out of the train it was drizzling. There were no taxis at Garvagh Road. Under the railway bridge the first surprise was waiting for us: a barricade set up by the British army. There was a tiny door in it though, which we used to let ourselves in, with several submachine guns pointing at us.

In Northern Ireland British soldiers are usually very eager to greet you and will be absolutely happy if you reply. Locals, however, usually just ignore them, and do not return their greetings.

We turned right and walked through the “*Jurassic Park*”- the local nickname for a park where you can be attacked by some two-legged dinosaur any minute just because you are a Catholic... Anyway, why would you be heading to Garvagh Road if you are not a

²⁰⁴ Robert Hamill was a 25 years old [Catholic](#) civilian who was beaten to death by a [loyalist](#) mob in [Portadown, County Armagh, Northern Ireland](#). Hamill and his friends were attacked on 27 April 1997 on the town's main street. A car of the local police - [Royal Ulster Constabulary](#) (RUC) - was parked a short distance away, but did nothing to stop the attack.

²⁰⁵ Derogatory term for Irish, used by Loyalists

²⁰⁶ “Slán abhaile” is an [Irish](#) phrase used to bid goodbye to someone who is travelling home. A [literal translation](#) is ‘Safe Home’. In [Northern Ireland](#), the phrase has also appeared on many [Irish Republican murals](#), as an [ironic](#) farewell to the British Army.

Catholic? But on that Saturday the park was silent as a graveyard. When we got to the road itself, Patricia suddenly grabbed my shoulder:

- Look!

I turned round and saw a light-colored taxi slowly approaching us. There were no passengers in it, only the driver.

- It is a Loyalist taxi. It is a Belfast license plate, and this taxi company is Loyalist. What would a Belfast taxi be doing here now, and without passengers? It is a 'scout'."

Indeed the taxi reached the end of the road, then turned and drove back just as slowly. The driver's face was absolutely impenetrable.

- I've got to tell *the boys* about it, immediately!- Patricia said agitated.

We were already at the local club. Garvaghy Road has really been rebuilt. People were clearly settling here to stay and would no longer let anyone bully them, or "ethnically cleanse" them. Not only did new houses appear here, but also car washes, small shops, and an industrial zone, quite big on the local scale.

The club hadn't changed, though; it was exactly as shown on TV, with barred windows and the 'No press allowed' inscription on the door. But that was not addressed to those who had friends here...

Breandan was waiting for us inside. American observers who visited the place every year were here too. Local women were serving tea and coffee. There were also people from all over Ireland – Kerry, Dublin, Galway, Drogheda...

I was immediately introduced to my host family with whom I was to stay for the night. The young woman was a Catholic and her husband - a Protestant. At Garvaghy Road. Nowadays. Yet nobody made any insulting comments about the man; while should a Catholic man find himself in the 'Orange den', it would have been very different. Here he was just a 'local', just one of them...My hostess told me, laughing, that once a saleswoman came to their office, offering her products.

- She must still have been convinced that all businesses in Portadown were run only by Protestants. So she started to paint us a chilling picture of the terrible things happening here, asking, why they wouldn't let poor Orangemen march through the district, as it took just about 10 minutes on foot. We were listening to her carefully, nodding assent, and then said: "Thank you very much, Missus! *We do not need your products now, but drop in some other time! Bye!*"

Her mother started asking me about Russia. Unlike so many other Westerners, Irish people from the North don't assume that they know everything about other countries. They have learnt from their own experience that neither press nor TV could be trusted; and on their trips abroad they constantly face misunderstanding and prejudice against

their native country, deeply rooted in the hearts and minds of the general public. So, on that matter, Irish people from the North understand us better than anybody else.

- I remember once we went to Spain for a holiday. There we met a very nice Protestant couple from Belfast, so we made friends with them. After all, we are from the same place! The English who were there too could not believe their eyes: "You should be hating one another!" , they told us. So you see, this is the plan of the British Empire, that we should hate each other... But even our verbal clashes with the Orangemen when they are marching here, are not without their own peculiar humor,- my interlocutor said- It is a kind of competition, who will crack a better joke. Yet, if you think about it , we all have such particular mindsets here... For example, what did you think on hearing my son-in-law's name?

-That he is a Protestant, - I said honestly.

- You see! You are becoming like one of us!,- she concluded.

Having had some rest in their house, I returned to the club. Here everything was still calm, just as before. New guests were arriving. My new acquaintance, Conor from Drogheda, volunteered to show me the scene of tomorrow's events, and the cemetery where Robert Hamill was buried.

We left the main road and using back ways approached a Catholic church; the British army made it famous worldwide, by keeping local parishioners from entering it during a Drumcree parade several years ago. The soldiers blocked their way, and so the priest had to conduct the service in the open. Now, standing here I could see that it was done on purpose, as there was no objective necessity to block the road leading to the church; the blocks could have been very well placed where they were now.

The parking lot by the cemetery was filled with police armoured cars; two armoured troop-carriers were driving up and down the street, with submachine gunners aiming at passers-by from the top. Not a very peaceful sight, that's for sure!

The road was blocked with huge rolls of barbed wire, along which local special servicemen and women (yes, women, wearing helmets and bulletproof vests!) were seated on the grass, having lunch.

We entered the cemetery. It was shielded from the road with tall green boards, so that tomorrow no Orangeman would be able to see it... Behind the bushes – quite sure of its invisibility! – a British platoon lay in hiding...

- These boards are here for the first time, - Conor told me.-Every year, passing by this place, they start to stamp their feet loudly , all of them, when they reach the cemetery - to signify what their people did to Robert Hamill... He was not just beaten, you see: he was *kicked* to death! So tell me, would any mentally sane people be doing this? I'm going to show you his grave now. His father could not stand all that, and passed away last September. He wasn't very old, either...

I felt a lump in my throat at seeing a familiar from face smile at me from the tombstone, the face I knew so well from newspapers; Robert was only 25, and never hurt anyone in his whole life...

Not far from here I saw another graves, those of local IRA volunteers, buried here in the 1970s; young men, long-haired as was customary back then, were looking at me from the photos. They would not have even turned 50 by today...

Portadown is inside the 'deadly triangle'- the part most dangerous for Northern Irish Catholics in their ancestors' land. The "*Taigs shooting season*" never stops here. Could anybody pass a judgment on those who stand up to fight against such life?

Over the hill was the parade's supposed 'ending point': the Drumcree church. Have you ever seen *sectarian flags flying from a belfry*?

Those who have been there even once, can clearly see that the real goal of the parade is not "attending a church service" or "expressing their culture", as Orangemen contend; it is done solely to demonstrate power, to constantly humiliate the neighbors, and to remind them of their historically established submission. Were there no Catholic district on their way, life would become senseless for the Orangemen of Portadown...

After a short tour around, we went, as the Irish tradition prescribed, to the pub which was at the other end of the district. To get there we had to cross the "borderline zone": the Orange "triumphal" arch²⁰⁷, installed at the "border", which was also well-marked, the Irish tricolor on one side of the road and the British "Union Jack" on the other. I learnt an interesting thing about arches: at first they were appearing all over the place, set up in early summer and taken down as late as September. Then, after one of the local lawyers unearthed a law prohibiting such installations over public roads without a 5 million pounds public liability insurance (in case one falls and breaks somebody's head), which in effect meant spending hundreds of pounds a day, Orangemen stopped mounting so many of them. The arches now appear only a few days before the parade and are taken down speedily after it...

The atmosphere in the pub was quite usual: lots of people, cheerful in the traditionally Irish way. They obviously knew Conor well here, as they got interested when we came in, and even cracked some inoffensive jokes about us. Several dark-skinned men standing at the bar caught my eye:

-Are those Americans too ?

- No, those are Portuguese contract workers. An agency brought them here, and is now cheating on them. Besides, they weren't told where they would be accommodated... So you can imagine how very surprised they were when they found themselves among

²⁰⁷ From June to August, Protestant, [unionist](#) and [loyalist](#) areas of Northern Ireland are decorated in a 'loyal' style. Streets and houses are bedecked with [bunting](#) and flags (mainly the [Union Flag](#) and [Ulster Banner](#)). The bunting and flags are usually flown from [lamp-posts](#). [Kerbstones](#) may be painted red, white and blue and [murals](#) may be made. Wooden arches, bedecked with flags and Orange symbolism, are raised over certain streets

heavily armed British soldiers! Breandan tries to help them so there would be no tricks with their salary, but the agency has already warned them against any contacts with the Garvagh Road Residents Coalition...

The Portuguese, though, seem to have fully recovered from their initial shock, and felt quite at home there. Still, the very fact of someone from former Portuguese colonies in Africa *being* there somehow didn't match the usual idea of Garvagh Road as a place where two communities clash... It appeared Garvagh Road was turning international!

We were going back to the club late at night. The scene was rather exotic: warm, almost stuffy Irish night, thickening dusk, tall trees around, and a British submachine gunner under each of them... Many lay in hiding under the bushes with their guns out and ready, some were crawling on their bellies. In the moonlight one could make out the silhouettes of paratroopers, Scots Guards in their trade-mark hats, and members of some other forces with silly feathers on their berets... One of the armored cars was open, obviously because of the heat, displaying a young, beautiful, almost baby-faced soldier girl, peacefully reading a book. A situation more awkward, absurd and unreal was hardly imaginable.

-We don't really know what to expect tonight. Anything can happen, - one of the soldiers told me. A couple of years ago Garvagh Road got so much isolated from the outside world that people from all over Ireland equipped and sent a food convoy for the residents. When it arrived here the people met it as if in besieged Leningrad²⁰⁸!

The night passed without major incidents except that my hosts were not really happy with patrols entering their garden without permission. In the morning around 8 o'clock there was a single shot in the distance...

The parade started around 10:30, which meant there was about 30 minutes left before the time when the Orangemen would be seen from Garvagh Road. Last year²⁰⁹ they chose the *attack-is-the-best-defence* tactic and invited Loyalist paramilitaries to Drumcree; Orange leaders openly called on the Protestant residents of the North to start a defiance campaign with rioting and blocking the roads, hijacking and burning cars and attacking Catholic homes at night. Then the British authorities had to "rent" Belgian water cannons, which were used in Belgium against football hooligans. The water cannons were rented this time, too... Why wouldn't they buy a couple? Indeed, as a local joke has it, "*the difference between Drumcree and a foot-and-mouth epidemic*²¹⁰ *is that the latter will end some day...*"

This time the Orangemen, though, having understood that last-year's *pogroms* not only failed to win them international support but on the contrary strengthened people's

²⁰⁸ The Siege of Leningrad, also known as the Leningrad Blockade was a prolonged military operation undertaken by the German Army against Leningrad during the World War II. The siege started in September 1941, when the last land connection to the city was severed and lasted for 872 days. It was one of the longest and most destructive sieges in history and overwhelmingly the most costly in terms of casualties.

²⁰⁹ In 2000

²¹⁰ In 2001 there was a big outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Britain and Ireland

disgust, decided to change tactics. This year the ‘*brethren*’ decided to exchange hawks for doves. Yet their desperate hopes for victory at any cost showed just before the parade: the Orangemen asked the Parades Commission²¹¹ to reconsider its decision on the ground that they had come up with ‘new, daring initiatives about settling the matter’. The ‘new daring initiatives’ meant their consent to take part in Citizens Forum meetings, together with Garvaghy Road residents, but only if they **first be permitted** to walk through it! The Commission of course did not swallow this bait and did not call off its decision.

We were standing at the hill when an orange and black mass of people appeared on the horizon and started to move slowly down the road. Scottish bag-pipes, accordions, flutes and drums sounded louder and louder. Our hill was silent; the soldiers, though, became alert and aimed even more diligently.

Next to the church of John the Baptist, blocked from Orangemen’s view with tall shields, Sinn Fein members stood, holding hands, in silent protest. Orangemen were now passing by: cold, sleek faces under black bowler hats, white gloves, umbrellas in hands and an orange ‘sash’ on their necks.

During the parade it is prohibited to carry paramilitary flags, to stop or to sing humiliating sectarian songs. Yet, how could they keep from insulting the memory of murdered Robert Hamill, as they have been doing this from 1997? When the Orangemen reached the cemetery, they and their supporters burst out applauding, making it almost an ovation... The people from Garvaghy Road were looking at them not with hatred but the deepest scorn imaginable. None of those standing at the church yielded to the provocation. I too did not want to descend to the level of those mentally sick racists.

- Do you know that this year they have spent 60,000 pounds to employ special image-makers? - Conor asked.- They wanted to improve their public image worldwide...
- I don’t think that helped,- was all I could say.

American observers were diligently photographing and video-recording what they considered to be violations of the Parades Commission’s rules. The Orangemen in Drumcree proclaimed that if any riots broke out, that would be the responsibility solely of ... the Parades Commission! One of their *grand*-masters called for the dissolution of the ‘offensive’ Commission (despite the fact that it allowed most of the marches). “Its final goal is cultural genocide of our community!” , he announced hysterically. After that, he insisted on “full restoration of human rights in Northern Ireland”, which made me remember an old Soviet joke: “*Chukcha has seen that human*²¹²!” For them this

²¹¹ The Parades Commission (established in 1998) is a [non-departmental public body](#) responsible for placing restrictions on or banning outright any [parades in Northern Ireland](#) it deems contentious or offensive. It is composed of seven members, all of whom are appointed by the [Secretary of State for Northern Ireland](#). Restrictions it can impose include a prohibition on music being played, banning a parade from certain areas, determining the route of a parade, and banning bands it deems provocative.

²¹² Old Soviet joke; here means that on Orangemen’s terms, only certain people would be allowed to have those rights.

“restoration of human rights” means placing overwhelming rights into the hands of just one part of society, thus totally depriving the other.

It is impossible to explain this to them, though, because they earnestly think there are no *real humans* here, except themselves! They very often try to convince you that some thirty years ago everything was different, and that *then* Catholics ‘liked’ to watch the parades, and it’s a bunch of ‘Sinners’ who are to blame for today’s attitude.

Well, Liam Neeson²¹³, a famous Irish actor who was born and grew up in an “Orange enclave”, the Northern Irish city of Ballymena, can hardly be called a ‘Sinner’. However, he still remembers how much he hated July, the month of parades, the ‘silly season’ – when he, a Catholic boy, was afraid even to leave home. When Neeson shared his childhood memories with the media those in charge of the Ballymena City council, abandoned their decision to give him Freedom of the Town of Ballymena²¹⁴! Truth, it turns out, can be painful to acknowledge...

While the Republican leaders admit that they might not be able to understand fully the sensitivity of the *mysterious Orange soul*, Orangemen-Unionists turn a blind eye to anybody’s feelings except their own. But their time is running out. “*The Drumcree spirit is on decline*,” Irish newspapers stated the day after the parade. “*There were more journalists in the streets than Orangemen*”, “*the general atmosphere was that of tiredness and depression*”.

Looking at Orangemen one starts to appreciate the Soviet policy which wisely prohibited religious sects on the grounds that such a masonic²¹⁵ ‘fruit’ could grow from them.

...The parade ended, most Orangemen went home. We returned to the hill and stood there looking through the barbed wire as they were passing by, without bowler hats and gloves, in small groups, bringing to mind people on their way home from our First of May demonstrations. It’s just that our demonstrations were not aimed at humiliating or hurting anyone! And we, unlike them, used to live a lot happier!

Passing by, on foot and in cars, the Orangemen were keenly waving British flags, some of them whistling, looking as though their whole life depended on that. Even though most of them had left and there were just a few hundred standing at the barricade, the Garvaghy Road residents did not relax.

- During the parades themselves there is almost never any unrest. It will all start in the evening. Now they’ll go home, get drunk and will be back there again...- I was told. ----
-The worst starts after dark..

Many journalists were disappointed with the quietness on the hill of Drumcree this year; the bigger the sensation, the ‘hotter’ the story, the better for them. I was happy – together

²¹³ Liam John Neeson (b.1952) is an Irish actor, who has been nominated for an [Oscar](#), a [BAFTA](#) and three [Golden Globe Awards](#).

²¹⁴ Only in 2012 this decision was changed

²¹⁵ Many Orangemen are also members of Masonic lodges.

with the Garvaghy Road residents – that this time everything was without incident. People differed in their opinions as to why it was so.

- Maybe they have learned something now!-, a salesman in a local shop exclaimed.

Will there ever be an Orange march through Garvaghy Road in the future? People again were not unanimous. “Never!” , many said. “When there is a united Ireland, let them march to their heart’s content!”, others replied. Breandan put it like this:

- Everything depends on whether the Orangemen enter talks with Garvaghy Road residents, talks without preconditions – then we’ll see what will come out of that. Unfortunately, the Orangemen believe the process should have a pre-determined result, and that you’ve got to start by ensuring this result. Both sides should enter the talks with a clear understanding that the outcome can be a parade, or no parade.”.

... And that’s how it was every year: coming July, coming Drumcree, we at work had to prepare for the "siege" and face a dilemma: whether to sleep in the office, bringing in the sleeping bags and food for several days, or not to go to work at all.

Imagine an early morning: as usual in Belfast, wet and grey. I am on my own in the office, it is too early. Phone beeps: an SMS from Dermot.

"- Are you all right? "

"What, did something have to happen to me? "- I am writing in response, jokingly.

"Don’t you know what is going on in your area? ..." - Phone beeps in response.

"-What is going on? It’s all quiet in Baghdad,"- I type into the phone, and look out the window.

From there I can slightly smell smoke: from the charred remains of a bus. The street is dead, as if everything fell into hibernation. Actually, what else to expect after such a stormy night: police attacked with homemade bombs in the hands of a mob of about 75 bullies, theft and arson of several cars and a bus and a great fun game trying to prevent the firemen from reaching a fire by stoning them with bricks? Of course, the jolly loyalist fellows are now asleep! And therefore we can safely go to work ... Dermot really didn’t have to worry about me.

... The bus was still burning slowly, when I was walking to the office. A wall of a house was adorned with "*A tout is a tout*²¹⁶! *Those who will be squealing*²¹⁷ *on their neighbours: to the social services, dole*²¹⁸ *or elsewhere, will be seen as touts and will be dealt with accordingly!* " Loyalists also have their own code of conduct.

Every year before the Northern Ireland parades on July the 12th electricians warn that it is dangerous to climb electricity poles in order to hang flags on top of them. And every year, these words are thrown to the wind. This year the flags are attached not even on top of the poles, but tied to some particularly long metal rods, and these rods are hoisted to

²¹⁶ Informer

²¹⁷ Informing

²¹⁸ Benefits office

the very-very top of the poles. To be seen from as far as possible. On Sandy Row where I work - in contrast to the Catholic Ardoyne or Falls Road, - no one says "hello" and no one even look into your eyes, if the locals do not know you. When you try to look into their eyes, they turn away uncomfortably. They don't like it.

That night, loyalists went "on the hunt": one person was killed and four others were injured ...

Remarkably, nobody in the media is demanding that they should disarm.

I went to Sandy Row in the afternoon. I had to explore whether we could safely get back home in the evening. The sleepy street charred after yesterday's storefront was gradually filling with just awoken tank-like mothers in rumpled jogging pants, richly decorated with golden chains, pushing baby prams in front of them. Dads were nowhere around, most likely, still sleeping ... No one disturbed them, those mothers, no one was offending them. Judging by the thickness of the golden chains around their necks and their fat bottoms, they were not dying of hunger. Around the corner, shrinking into the wall, hiding behind a police armoured car, was the only policeman sent to keep an eye on things here: in full combat gear.

I remembered Petrovich, who sometimes expressed his negative feelings - if there were no objective reasons for them, and he did not know where they came from - with the phrase "evil enrages me". These people must be feeling exactly like this. They cannot define with words "what is lacking in the soup?", as used to say a hero of Gennady Khazanov²¹⁹ .. But those who provoke them and give them such ideas - the British intelligence - know exactly why they need them out on the streets. It is they who bring out into the street -- through their loyalist lackeys - those who do not understand where they are going and what for, for whom the main thing is that "evil enrages" them. And all of this is needed in order to finally provoke the IRA to "strike back" and then to proclaim that the "bloodthirsty terrorists went again on the war path". Honour and praise to the courage of those who do not succumb to provocations of the British imperialism!

I look at the "loyal subjects of Her Majesty"- obese mothers who are trying to figure out with their brains, irreparably damaged by their daily watching of "Big Brother", how it would be handier to barricade the road. And I remember the mocking words of the geologist to Lisa Brichkina from the Soviet film "The Dawns Are Quiet Here" - "*Stupid things shouldn't be done even out of boredom!* "

... It just so happened that at the time when the "silly season" began again, I was again left alone. In April, Lisa began to go to school, wearing a helmet: like some real hockey player. It was locked on her, so that she could not take it off (poor child!). The teacher sent us every day in her school bag a kind of diary: what they did during the day. Because Lisa herself could not tell anything. She was going there for a couple of weeks, and my mother finally got angry:

- Hey, they're not doing anything there with her at all! Back at home at our special

²¹⁹ Famous Soviet stand up comedian

schools we have a school speech therapist and really good teachers. And here, you just look at her diary: every day the same thing, "went to the shops," "went to the shops," "went to the shops ..." Are they mocking us? Or do they use their working time for their own shopping?

Every day when I came from work, mum nagged me:

- Why are we sitting here, wasting time? There is neither decent medical treatment here, nor school. Back at home, even now, things are still better than here. Yesterday she came back from school again with a torn off button. They always forget to return things home: one day she comes back without her coat, the other day -without her hat.... What can they teach her here, when even their principal is mentally retarded?

By mid-May, the situation escalated to such an extent that my mother started making scenes to me.

- Back at home I at least have someone else to help. Lisa can also go to the children's sanatorium of our factory. And here ... I cannot sit here among your stupid paddies anymore! I'd rather go and drown myself in the sea. I want to go home! You ruin a child's life without proper treatment! When you'll find a decent doctor, then ... - and everything else that I've already heard from her in Dublin.

The point is that at home mum intended to go back to work (her "red director"²²⁰ allowed her to take such a long leave to care for her granddaughter, paying one third of her wages, which were collected for her by proxy by a colleague) and to leave Lisa for the whole working day mainly in care of our already very old grandmother, and sometimes - in care of yet another distant relative, who undertook this job, paid by my uncle. I still could not afford a nanny to , nor could I trust Lisa in her condition to a stranger. I also could not quit my job and take care of Lisa entirely by myself: it would mean a life of poverty. I would not have even been able to pay for the house and would have lost it, and then where would we both live?

Before this I somehow thought that people become grandmothers naturally and automatically: if your own mother helped you in your time so that you could live and work, with no questions asked, then you, when you would grow old, will too, help your children. And I myself was ready to do that when I would become a grandmother. Yes, of course, for this we must be grateful to grandmothers, but is this not what family is all about: to help each other in difficult times? How could it be otherwise? And when not to work and to live to the full, as in your young years? So, when our grandmothers who are now adapting "modern", Western individualism, with outrage repudiate this role, arguing that "I have raised my children, that's enough, now I want to live for myself," I would like to remind them: I'm sorry, darlings, but unlike your Western contemporaries, it was not you who raised your children, but our state and your parents! The Soviet state has made available to all people kindergartens and free of charge schools with after school clubs, and pioneer camps in the summer. Only socialism - in combination with a self-sacrificing grandmother - can make provide for a woman the opportunities for succeeding in professional life. You were already "having a rest" from children in your youth: at

²²⁰ In the 1990s a term for those Russian factories directors who remained convinced communists, mainly in Central Russia

work, but you are still demanding it for yourselves now. Instead of telling the truth: I'm just not made for family life (and certainly not - under capitalism), and I had children in my time just because it was considered to be "a necessary part of life".

Alas, Lisa's grandmother was not an example of selfless dedication, like my own granny was. I do not want to diminish my mother's irreplaceable and valuable help or underestimate the extent to which it was hard for her, even though I was doing the best I could in order to ease her situation, entertained her in my spare time as much as I could, did not say a word when astronomically high phone bills came through the door (completely all my quarterly bonus was spent every 3 months on paying them). But my granny did not have it easy in her life either, and yet not even once had we heard from her "You sucked out all my blood," or "You have stolen 4 years of my life!". But from my mother, I heard the likes of this on a daily basis. You would really get an impression, as if we enjoyed enslaving her out of some sort of ill-will or as if we had nothing better to do, and not needed her help out of the hopelessness of our situation.

My grandmother never poked anyone in the nose with her help. That was the main difference. There is a story from Valentina Oseeva²²¹ called "The Blue Leaves." It expresses a very wise idea: "*you have to give in such a way that one can accept taking.*" And this applies fully to human help.

It took me such efforts, I had to work so hard in order to reunite his family, to find good house, to get help of a medical specialist for Lisa ... In the end, it was in order to be together with Lisa that I moved to this terrarium referred to as "Ulster"! And again, all my efforts went down the drain. I tried to offer my mother a reasonable compromise: for example, she and Lisa could go home every summer (though summers in Ireland are just beautiful, and winters are disgusting as hell), but my mother acted just like the daughter of Mr. Twister from Marshak²²²'s poem: "But anything what daughter needs, should be executed. Full stop! ". Even if I'll break my neck in the process. At the same time, just as a few years ago when I still lived in Holland, my mother did not want me to come back to Russia to live with her:

- You will not find a job there, and I cannot feed you both.

Well, what else could I do?

My heart bled when in May I again brought them to Dublin airport. My mother still did not notice this state of mine. Maybe she just didn't care. And I felt for the first time to the

²²¹ Oseeva, Valentina Aleksandrovna (1902-1969) A teacher for many years, Oseeva published her first work in 1937. She is the author of collections of poetry, fairy tales, and stories for children, including *The Orange Cat* (1940), *The Magic Word* (1944), *My Friend* (1950), *A Simple Matter* (1956), and *Blue Leaves* (1965). The trilogy *Vasek Trubachev and His Comrades* (books 1-2, 1947-51; State prize of the USSR, 1952; book 3, 1952) is devoted to the heroic deeds of Pioneers during the Great Patriotic War. Oseeva also wrote the autobiographical novella *Dinka* (1959). Her books have been translated into a number of the languages of the peoples of the USSR.

²²² "Mister Twister" (1933) is a biting satire by S. Marshak about an American capitalist. After traveling to the USSR merely to entertain his spoiled daughter, Mister Twister is horrified to discover that the grand hotel where they were intending to stay, accepts "people of colour" as guests too. The story follows his fruitless search for a hotel in Leningrad that would practice segregation. The work enjoyed immense popularity among generations of Soviet children

full how lucky I was that I had my grandmother when I was a child. With all her almost puritanical severity and yet, with a loving, warm heart. What would my life have been like without her, considering my mother's such lack of respect towards other people's feelings and sufferings, it was even not to imagine.

Lord, how long will this all continue? What should I do just to make my little daughter to be able to live with me, and to possibly get cured, even if not for 100%? What else mountains should I move for that?

After that, I went to work all week like under local anaesthesia. I could neither sleep nor eat. It would seem that now I could sleep as long as I wanted (usually Lisa woke us in the morning quite early, starting to bang on the window with her dolls), but it didn't make me happy. More than that: I woke up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat from nightmares and no longer could sleep....

Another thing my mother did not understand was that every time, taking Lisa from me, she seemed to have opened the door, hidden in my subconscious from which all the dark, ugly memories began to creep, memories of how Sonny and I were getting divorced and how Lisa got sick. At night, these memories were taking the form of nightmares and began to suffocate me...

Feeling that I was about to break down, I went to the doctor. He prescribed me some pills for depression, but they didn't make me feel any better. Then I went to the doctor again and this time I got an appointment with his wife. She prescribed me sleeping pills: without even looking at my medical record. The next day, I literally almost died at my workplace, I barely reached home, lay down and then took out a box with both drugs and read the instructions: there it was, in black and white, stating that anti-depressants should never be taken together with the sleeping tablets ...

Mr. Yulian Semyonov²²³! You have argued that Soviet doctors treated patients badly because they were low-paid. These "Aesculapius", who have prescribed to me both of these at the same time, receive up to 100,000 pounds per year Any questions?

And then I decided to get myself sorted out without any medication: just as I did when I had suffered after my first sad romantic experience. The main thing is not to sit idle for a moment. If you are afraid over the weekend to stay alone at home and feel like buying yourself a bottle of wine, is it not better to go somewhere else and to see something new? And my next weekend I went to Scotland.

... " In the beginning, The Lord God Almighty, sitting on His throne on high, turned to His mate, the Archangel Gabriel and said "Gabby, today I'm going to create Scotland. I will make it a country of dark beautiful mountains, purple glens and rich green forests. I will give it clear swift flowing rivers and I will fill them with salmon. The land shall be lush and fertile, on which the people shall grow barley to brew into an amber nectar that

²²³ Yulian Semyonovich Semyonov - pen-name of Yulian Semyonovich Lyandres (1931 – 1993), was a [Soviet](#) and [Russian](#) writer of [spy fiction](#) and [crime fiction](#)

will be much sought after the world over. Underneath the land I shall lay rich seams of coal. In the waters around the shores there will be an abundance of fish and beneath the sea bed there will be vast deposits of oil and gas".

"Excuse me Sire", interrupted the Archangel Gabriel, "Don't you think you are being a bit too generous to these Scots"? "Not really", replied the Lord, "wait 'til you see the neighbours I'm giving them".

This story is printed on tea towels sold to tourists in Scotland. I encountered Scots for the first time in my life in Ireland during those cold February days when I just started to live and work in Dublin. All around was to me still a novelty and a wonder. One day, foggy and chilly February Sunday, the Irish capital was flooded with a crowd of tall, strong men in kilts, and not just in kilts, but in all the Scottish national attire: special shoes, socks with a sheath and a dagger in them, with a small bag of fur on the belt, in berets and checked capes. What I found most amusing of all, was the fact that almost all women accompanying them, as if by agreement, were wearing trousers! Kilts did not shock me, no, but, of course, caused great interest, because earlier I saw them only in the movies. Men wearing them looked very imposing, and I even felt sorry that in other countries this wouldn't be accepted. Why not? But how did they manage to walk down the street in winter without stockings or tights, will forever remain a mystery to me. It turned out that they were Scottish fans who came to cheer their rugby team at the famous Six Nations international tournament. That's a manifestation of patriotism: I would like to see our fans anywhere abroad wearing Russian kosovortoka and lapti²²⁴! Scots lost on that day to the Irish team. And what do you think? There were no fights, no rudeness between the guests and the hosts: After the game all together they went to the pubs: to celebrate the Irish victory, but after getting drunk the Scots at the posh "Burlington" began to dance a jig. One of them, a hefty guy in a huge kilt, who looked like a lumberjack, tried to pull me by the hand into a circle, and then they all chanted in unison something what I have never heard even from the Irish: "We hate the English! We hate the English!" Although the English, luckily for themselves, were nowhere around ..

The second time I met a Scotsman in Shannon airport when I was flying home. He, too, was flying home: he worked in Ireland and went to his family on holidays, which he began to "celebrate" already at the airport. Being already quite loaded, he did not want to change his remaining Irish punts for sterling, instead he bought with them two boxes of chocolates and gave those boxes to me with words, said in a voice that does not accept any objection: "Give it to your mum, tell her: it's from Stewart!" So, it's a lie that the Scots are stingy, do you remember those Dutch students with their half-empty peanut butter jar which they first decided to leave for us, but then changed their mind and took it back to Holland? And you say, the Scots are stingy ...

From my conversation with this Scot, Stewart, I noticed that they are hotheads, probably sometimes even bullies, looking to have a fight with someone (certainly not with me!) - when they drink. Just like my late grandfather, who had Scottish square cheekbones, a la

²²⁴ Traditional Russian shirt and bast shoes ([shoes](#) made primarily from [bast](#) - fiber from the [bark](#) of the [linden](#) tree or [birch](#) tree): they are a kind of basket woven and fitted to the shape of a foot. Bast shoes are an obsolete traditional [footwear](#)

David Coulthard²²⁵. With regard to the Northern Ireland Protestants with whom I have now been sufficiently familiar by then, I can say boldly: no matter how Scottish seem to be their family names, and no matter how many relatives they have in Scotland, they are most certainly not of ethnic Scottish origin! They have completely different character. That is, to have a fight - oh yes, with pleasure, but only with someone weak: women, pensioners, little primary school schoolgirls. They are cowards, and their entire culture is based on hate. A sad sight!

The Protestant response to questions about Scotland ridiculously reminds me of the phrase from "The Golden Calf" by Ilf and Petrov²²⁶: "Hearing of the word" Bobruisk "the assembly groaned painfully. Bobruisk was considered an excellent, highly cultured place. To go there anyone would be ready right now." So I decided to see for myself what it is like, this "beautiful, highly cultured place," this British Bobruisk. And one weekend I gathered my things into a small backpack and went to Edinburgh and a short trip to the Scottish Highlands ...

The plane flies from Belfast to Edinburgh so quickly that I did not have time even to notice the sea: I thought that we were still flying over the Irish Ards peninsula and its bay until I noticed that the landscape has changed in some strange way: there were mountains with flat tops, as on the pictures of the Moon or Mars, planted with coniferous forests, that were cut through with such correct in form and so numerous paths that it left no doubt of the artificiality of these forests. Among this lunar landscape were also an incredible amount of scattered quarries, and it seemed so desolate terrain, so free of buildings, that in no way could this have been flat, densely built-up North Down. And indeed, immediately after I noticed this, it was announced that we were going to land, and I could only wonder how did I miss the flight across the sea ...

Edinburgh Airport - small, almost pocket-sized, and taxi drivers here, in contrast to the Irish, are silent, to such extent that it even feels uncomfortable. My driver, a red-haired giant, did not respond to any of my jokes and stories, which I learned to tell the taxi drivers in Dublin, to which the Irish would have definitely immediately found something to say. More than that, he remained completely silent like *Fantomas*²²⁷. And only when I was already paying to him, half-expecting that he was going to turn to me and say the famous *Fantomas*' "Ha-ha-ha!" Cool bass, he indeed turned to me and said for some reason in a shy tenor:

- By the way, my name is David!

David wasn't just his name. The owner of the hotel where I was staying, was also called David; he too, was red-haired and "of other origin all together," as that girl in Moscow told me some years back; David was also the name of the bartender at the pub, and, of course, of the famous Scottish racing driver Coulthard. Obviously, this must be the most popular man's name there. Then, when I got to know the Scots a little better, I found out

²²⁵ Scottish Formula One driver (b. 1971)

²²⁶ Sequel of the famous satirical novel "12 chairs"

²²⁷ *Fantômas* is a [fictional](#) criminal character created by French writers [Marcel Allain](#) (1885–1969) and [Pierre Souvestre](#) (1874–1914). [Fantômas](#) (1964), the first of three films directed by [André Hunebelle](#); with [Jean Marais](#) as both *Fantômas* and *Fandor*, [Louis de Funès](#) as *Juve*, and [Mylène Demongeot](#) as *Fandor's* bride, the photographer *Hélène*. The film was very popular in the USSR.

that only the Edinburgh people are so silent. Residents of Glasgow are much more talkative and friendly, but some say, that they do not like to bathe ... I wonder how do the taxi smell over there?

My first impulse when I saw Edinburgh was to compare it with London: they are most similar in architecture, of all cities, that I've seen. Houses of gray stone, with residential basements (as in London), cobbled pavements ... But Edinburgh was much smaller and cozier, and the number of really magnificent monuments, gathered within a small area, was just astonishing.

The next morning I went on a 3 days tour of the countryside on a small bus, in a very international group - the likes of groups that usually go on such tours: Australians, Americans, Canadians and a few Asians, most of them students. Our driver and guide was the namesake of the famous Scottish monster that we, too, were going to see: Nessie. It was only then I discovered that it was endearing form of the name Vanessa!

On the left hand of the bus opened a breathtaking view over Edinburgh Castle and our driving "Loch Ness Monster" meanwhile told us that under the city spread out yet another Edinburgh: the medieval one, which can be visited on a special tour of the underground, a Ghost Tour (they have interesting tastes in Scotland: they have reconstructed a medieval prison in which interested visitors can sit for a while!) that Scotland is the only country in the world where the most popular soft drink is not Coca-Cola, but the local lemonade Irn-Bru²²⁸: orange, sweet and apparently a real help for the hangovers, that Sean Connery's actually was called Tammy, that he was a milkman in Edinburgh's West End, and that up to this day all Edinburgh older women (many of whom are now younger than Connery himself!) assure you: "You know, Sean Connery was once my milkman! "

It caught my eye that in the parks and streets of Edinburgh there were lots of wooden benches, that were quite comfortable to sleep on for the homeless. In London and Belfast they purposely make metal partitions in the middle of such benches: so that the homeless people cannot sleep on them, but when the local youth sit on the backs of those benches, with feet put on the seat, right in their muddy shoes, apparently that doesn't bother the authorities. Their main concern is how not give the homeless a place to sleep!

Soon we were out of town, and I realised that I will have to go back to Scotland at least one more time: Edinburgh and Glasgow are worth the visit on their own. Just as, probably, the other Scottish cities such as Dundee. At the word "Dundee" I always remember Mick Dundee: "Crocodile" from the Australian movie, tanned unflappable blonde, who was hiding his age under a wide leather hat. The city of Dundee, in the words of Nessie who trained there to be a teacher, is not a very pleasant place.

- I was most afraid that they would place me in a school there! - She admitted. -You know what children there are like? During my practice, I conducted a survey among the

²²⁸ Irn-Bru is a [Scottish carbonated soft drink](#), for long advertised as "Scotland's other national drink" (next to [Scotch whisky](#))

11-years old: what do they know about different professions. In response to the question "What do you know about the police?" children wrote: "Police are bastards!" Then we took them on a tour of a police station. The policemen really did their best to show the kids how cool it was there: kids had a cup of tea and cake, were allowed to shoot, used their hands on different equipment, played on computers, tried on a uniform ... It was like every boy's dream! A week later I again conducted a poll on the same topic: what have you learned about the police? And I got the following response:

"Police are clever bastards!"

... And we also heard that the Scots never diluted whisky with any lemonades: just with water, and that whisky here is brewed over a peat fire (hence its "smoky" flavour!). After that it is stored for 10 years and during that time one third of it evaporates, and this part people call "angel's share" and when it's raining, the Scots say angels are having a party ...

Scotland, in spite of the hills that on the road to the North already began to grow slowly into the mountains, seems much closer by its landscape to Russia than Ireland: there is no Gulf Stream here and so, no palm trees! Forests, just forests around us: spruce, pine and white birch trees are the main trees here ... It was something like Siberia: perhaps this impression was intensified by the similarity of the cold and bubbly mountain rivers and streams. According to Nessie, only the birch trees were really part of the native, true Scottish forests (the pines are imported from Norway), which was nearly 98% was cut down, first during the industrial revolution, and later - because of two world wars, for fuel and other household needs . Planting forests does not bring any profits, and so they are still not being planted. Because of that some animals became extinct in Scotland: bears and others. Local people earn money from sheep and from letting out their land for hunting (for foxes, rabbits), to English aristocrats, and thus, they don't really need forests ...

In recent years red deer became more numerous in Scotland: there are now so many of them that men are thinking of bringing a couple of wolves to Scotland. And Scottish sheep-- kamikaze, still continue to roam the local roads, sometimes jumping on to the road in front of the bus, along with strange hairy, mostly ginger-haired cows with huge horns, which are called "hairy cow" (pronounced in the Scottish style - "koo") . Long ago Scottish clans were engaged in stealing the herds of "koo" from each other, and then they would return the herds to their neighbours for a ransom. To move such cattle from place to place was called by the word "mail" . Hence, that's how a term "blackmail" appeared in English, corresponding to the Russian-French "chantage." So the Scots were famous for blackmail and the Irish - for boycott! And the English - for their concentration camps, which they have invented for the first time in the history of mankind during the Anglo-Boer war ...

In the meantime, behind the windows of the bus real mountains began to appear: and soon we found ourselves in the valley of Glencoe: velvety-green and completely deserted. There reigned silence broken only by the murmur of an incredible number of mountain rivers and streams. It seemed very strange that no one lives now in such an incredibly beautiful place, although I well imagined what the harsh winter here must be

like (after all, in Scotland, unlike in Ireland, the snow falls every winter). Nessie told us the story of Glencoe, which explains why this place is so deserted. The blame lies with the same infamous in Ireland William of Orange, when he forced all-Scots Highlanders (who were and are mostly Roman Catholic) to take an oath of allegiance to him by a certain date. The head of the clan MacDonald of Glencoe was too late to arrive to the place the oath by one day. He had to get through the snow-capped mountains, about 70 miles - imagine what it must have been like to travel that distance in winter at the end of the XVII century! Having taken an oath by one day later, he was quite sure that nothing terrible has happened, and returned home. But he underestimated the Protestant Dutch love of timekeeping ..

In February, the joined forces of the Campbell clan sent by William of Orange (already back then they were setting up the Scots against each other, just as they do today with the Irish!) entered the Glencoe valley. Unsuspecting McDonald greeted them with traditional Scottish hospitality and placed them in local homes. Two weeks later, early in the morning Campbells murdered all McDonalds of Glencoe, "Massacre of Glencoe" is preserved in folk memory to such extent, that up to this day in locally there is a pub where the door sign says "No entry in dirty boots and to Campbells!" The Glencoe valley has remained uninhabited to this day. We walked through the mountains which was not an easy task considering my untrained condition, but it was well worth it. The mountains at this season were dazzling green, but heather already began to bloom here there. By August it will turn the mountains into completely purple. Remember Robert Burns' "Heather ale"?"

The history of these mountains is closely linked to the insurgency of Jacobites; in this particular place- of the Catholic Highlanders, supporters of King James (Jacob). All these three days of our trip were filled with stories and legends about them and one of their leaders, popularly known as Bonnie Prince Charlie, who when finally defeated, has fled to the island of Skye. This left a beautiful Scottish folk song: "Over the Sea to Skye". Local people remember those uprisings up to this day, and how could they forget it, if after their defeat, Protestants: the English and the Lowlanders Scots have driven the Scottish Catholic Highlanders from their lands and even forcibly deported them to America and Australia, handing over the lands traditionally belonged to the communities (they have not been in private ownership) to the big Anglo-Scottish landowners to whom - hard to believe, but truth! - the local people are paying rent for the right to live and to work on the plots of land where their ancestors had lived and worked for centuries! That is, in this part of Scotland up to this day remains practically real feudalism! People here mostly keep 10-20 sheep and are engaged in horticulture, they lead very modest, almost "natural-economic" way of life, and their life isn't easy. And the memory of heroic past is reflected even in the names of the local pubs: one of them sported an ambiguous inscription "Jac-o-Bite".

Soon we were at the canal, which connects several Scottish Lochs, which was called Caledonian. Caledonia is the Latin name for Scotland. The road passed through the high mountains, where lakes and canals were shining at the bottom. The banks here were lined with a kind of small stone pyramids, called "craig". They usually are dedicated to the

memory of someone. So, we drove past a craig, dedicated to the memory of the last Scottish haggis killed in these mountains. Once this animal was living here; its meat was very tasty, so delicious that it was a national Scottish dish, until all haggises were killed. I do not know how a live haggis looked like, but for some reason I imagine hedgehog.

Haggis is prepared in Scotland today, but

now it's just an imitation of the taste of that animal. And it is prepared from sheep's offal and various herbs for the taste. A very unappetising spectacle it was when one of the girls from our group ordered it for dinner and then ate it with her eyes closed. But she assured us that if you don't look at it, it is even tasty. On her plate we saw a handful of minced meat with mashed turnips, poured with a sauce of red currants and whisky. Imagine what it looked like?

Another craig was more recent: in memory of the Scottish politician, MP William McCrea murdered in these mountains in 1996. His death is still shrouded in mystery, because the British government, taking advantage of a special law: "Section 9" has banned the media from any publications about his death, except for those offered by the official version. But the official version was - of course, like in all such cases! - a suicide. Interesting suicide it was, if the weapon was found in 50 metres from his car, and was shot in the head! However, everything falls into place, if we consider that William McCrea was a strong opponent of placing on Scottish soil NATO military bases and nuclear testing here and has led an active campaign against the American submarines to be allowed to enter the Scottish bays. Rumour has it that he has been dealt with by the CIA.

Today in Scottish lakes there are many fish farms, and in one of the local rivers there is so much salmon, that it is the most expensive fishing river in the world: a fishing licence for a day here costs about 500 pounds!

Almost near the island of Skye there is one of the most romantic fully preserved and still inhabited castles in Scotland, certainly present in each Scottish post card: Eilean Donan, Eilean in Scottish means "island" and this really is a castle on a small island connected to the main land by a bridge. However, the bridge was not always here. The castle passed from hand to hand: from McDonalds to Mackenzies, and from them to McCreas. At the outbreak of the rebellion that has already been mentioned, Spaniards arrived to the castle- to the aid of Scottish Catholics, with weapons and explosives. But the approach of Catholic forces was delayed, and the castle was besieged by the English. When the Spaniards realised that there was nothing more to wait for, they secretly escaped out of the castle at night by boat, and so cleverly that the English discovered it only a week later, when there was already no one in the castle! They went inside and found that the Spaniards have left the explosives and blew the castle up. Obviously, that was a sign of their high cultural level. Today the castle is privately owned. The owners come here in summer and live in one wing, and everything else all year long is rented out to tourists, and that allows the owners to finance their own life in the castle. You can rent the whole castle - for an even bigger sum - for example, for a wedding or banquet. Such a business-minded family of owners of this castle is - you have probably guessed it- Americans.

...The isle of Skye in Scottish Gaelic (which is still spoken there in daily life) is called by an expression meaning "island of Mist". In total only 20% of the population speaks their native language here, and teaching in Gaelic at schools started only recently. The island offers an amazing "postcard" view from the village of Kyle on the opposite side of the bay. During the war there was a British military base in Kyle, here came the submarines, and from the local railway station explosives and other munitions were transported. One of the Allied warships has sunk in the local bay, and it can still be observed through the transparent bottom of the local pleasure boats for tourists.

For those who have visited Skye, even to travel back to Ireland is a joy. I never thought that there are places in Europe where the weather is worse than the Irish! It turns out, there are. Even the summer on the island was terribly cold. There were practically white nights, and because the tourists only come here in summer, all the village shops, pubs and post office were opened here on a daily basis right up to 9-11 hours in the evening. Today Skye is connected with Kyle village on the mainland by a high modern bridge; it would seem, that the locals should rejoice such fruits of civilisation. But alas, all is not gold that glitters! The bridge of Skye became symbol of the struggle for the rights of the islanders who became victims of the insatiable Thatcherism.

Previously, the Isle of Skye was connected with the main land by ferry. The ferry service was subsidised by the state and for the inhabitants of the island it was virtually free of charge: it isn't their fault that they live on the island. But when the Conservatives came to power, the government of Margaret Thatcher promised the islanders to build a bridge. According to experts and architects, this bridge should not cost more than 15-18 million pounds.

However, Thatcher would not have been Thatcher, if she had done anything good for people, even just "in case." People's needs, as a matter of fact, were the least of her worries: this old Baba Yaga²²⁹ of capitalism has decided to give away this "profitable little business" to the mercy of a private company ...

What were the results of privatisation of British railways, I think, everybody already knows: there is almost not a year in Britain without yet another rail disaster. People get killed, then an investigation is being announced, then, of course, no one is punished, only the ticket prices rise: ostensibly for security, and then everything carries on as before! There was talk that Tony Blair wanted to privatise air traffic control service. Not even rumoured, he really tried to do this, but parliament did not allow him, - at least, for now. I think you can well imagine what would begin with the privatisation of air space control, if even the precise Swiss already have managed to cause a disaster with a Russian plane full of kids²³⁰.. Tony, of course, couldn't give a damn. But the beginning of the privatisation of this scale was under Thatcher. She gave the construction of the bridge of

²²⁹ Evil witch in the Russian fairy tales

²³⁰ The Überlingen mid-air collision occurred on 1 July 2002 between [Bashkirian Airlines](#) Flight 2937 (a [Tupolev Tu-154M](#) passenger jet carrying 57 passengers – mostly children – and twelve crew) and [DHL](#) Flight 611 (a [Boeing 757-23APF](#) cargo jet manned by two pilots) over the towns of [Überlingen](#) and [Owingen](#) in southern Germany. All 71 people on board the two aircraft were killed

Skye into the hands of a private firm, which managed to spent on its construction, despite experts' most daring calculations (see above), as much as 35 million pounds! A fine example of that well-praised "efficiency" of private enterprises compared to the "state-command" ones! In order to recoup their expenses and to make the profits, the new owners began to rip the people of Skye off: a travel by car only in one direction cost about 6 pounds, and travel by bus - about 25! Now imagine how much it would cost you to work outside the island and to travel to the main land every day, and there isn't that much work on Skye, so that's exactly what many islanders do.

In addition to this, in order not to have any competition (so much for the freedom of competition under capitalism!), the owners of the bridge bought off all the ferries and shut them down, not allowing the new ones to open. You can, of course, walk over the bridge for free. But the Isle of Skye isn't too small for walking it, and just try to imagine what it is like to walk on this high and open to all winds bridge in winter, under heavy wind and snowfall...

Residents of Skye, terribly angry at this trickery, found their way to take revenge on the authorities and to protest against the toll payments for their use of the bridge: under the new rules, you could pass over the bridge toll-free, if you were you taking cattle to the market. The inhabitants of the island do not have that many sheep, to sell them every day, but nevertheless, they were taking just one sheep at the back seat of their cars and driving it every day "for a walk" on the mainland, bringing it back in the evening. While showing the middle finger to the bridge maintenance staff ...

Protests in Skye lasted very long. The Labour government of Tony Blair downgraded several tolls for local residents, but the complete elimination of fees was not even considered (for comparison, in Curaçao, which is much poorer than Britain, they still have a free of charge passenger ferry across the bay in the capital). This situation actually violated British law, under which if a private road is constructed for the use of which you have to pay, there must be a free of charge alternative within a certain radius of it. The residents of Skye did not have such alternative

The toll payments on Skye bridge were abolished at the end of 2004, only after the local Scottish Parliament made this decision. The Scottish authorities had to buy the bridge off the private company that was running it. This cost the taxpayer yet another 27 million pounds. For the time of exploitation of the bridge its "owners" have "earned" another 33,3 million pounds from it..

The island of Skye is home to about 5,000 people, 2000 of them live in the main town on the island, Portree ("Port Royal", translated from Scottish Gaelic). The Gaelic is still spoken by about 30% of the population of the island. However, demographic data show that the Gaelic culture is under threat, mainly due to the large number of older Britons who choose to live here after retirement. Gaelic began to be studied at school only in 1996.

The next morning petty, nasty rain was lashing, but Nessie has forced us to wash our

faces in a cold mountain stream, after telling us the following legend. The island of Skye has long been home to two families: McDonalds (it is home to the Supreme Leader of all McDonalds to this day!) and McLeod. They had long been at war with each other, when McLeod finally decided to make peace and offered to the head of McDonalds clan their most beautiful woman, Margaret, as a wife. Margaret McLeod and Lord McDonald fell in love with each other, got engaged, and then Margaret went home before the wedding, to visit her relatives. But at home, sitting next to the fireplace in the evening, while she was knitting, she inadvertently gouged her eye by a knitting needle. When Margaret arrived in such state back to lord McDonald, he decided that the McLeods were mocking him, got terribly angry and sent Margaret back to her family, on an one-eyed mare and accompanied by an one-eyed dog. On reaching the river, dividing the lands of McDonald and MacLeod, Margaret sat on the shore and began to cry. Then the "wee people" ("little people", in which the Scots believe just as the Irish) appeared and asked her what was her grief. Margaret told them everything. "Do not worry, Margaret" - said the wee people to her. "Just wash your face in this river for 2 weeks every morning, and your beauty will come back to you." Margaret obeyed, and her eye really was back 2 weeks later, plus she became even more beautiful than she was before. Lord McDonald again wanted to marry her then, but she has not returned to him ...

Nessie cheered us:

- Quick, all of you to the river! I'm sick and tired of watching your ugly faces! - And we, amid general laughter, plunged our faces into the ice cold bubbly spring, till we became blue ...

The McDonalds of Skye seemed to be generally pretty unsympathetic people, judging not just by the legends, but also by the reality of modern times: the leader of the clan of all the McDonalds recently tried to sell for over 60 million pounds ... local mountains! Thank God there were no buyers, but the locals all started to hate him after this. "Who does he think he is? These mountains are here for many millions of years, but he thinks they belong to him!" He tried to justify his actions, saying that the money would fix the roof of the ancestral castle, but local residents remain unconvinced. After all, repairing the roof was cost a total of about 280,000 pounds. So what was he going to do with the rest of the money?

Skye is a strange mixture of Gaelic language and traditional Scottish music, on one hand and Masonic lodges and the reactionary "free Presbyterian" church, on the other. Everywhere there are foggy, wet mountains, riddled like with a silver thread, with countless streams, rivers and waterfalls. The sound of murmuring water I will now forever associate with Skye. Strong is the local cider called "Woodpecker." Delicious is local bread and sumptuous chocolate fudge in all colours and flavours. In a cave on Skye lives a gone wild man, completely covered with tattoos, who entered the Guinness Book of Records. Only in winter he comes to the village and spends the winter in the hostel. He is a former SAS soldier. Clearly, gone "slightly mad", this poor Rambo ...

From the northern edge of the island the Hebrides are visible: unfortunately, the only thing that they remind me of, is a native of these islands, the ill-fated Lord Robertson, ex-

NATO secretary general, who was given the title of Lord for the bombing of Yugoslavia
....

We were leaving the Isle of Skye to the sounds of Scottish bagpipes: in Portree there was a festival of Scottish traditional music. Along the roads in several places - and back on the mainland too! - we saw inscriptions on the walls: "Independence Now!". And it is not surprising: if I was treated the same as the Scots were treated by Thatcher and her followers, I would have sought independence too. I say this with full responsibility, as the man who conquered his personal independence in heavy fighting!

The unity of the territorial unit which is called the UK or GB on the world map, is very deceptive. Apparently, that's why it is so important to those who rule it, to retain a long suffering piece of Ireland: because if it will finally lose its chains, the independence movement in Scotland and Wales will be encouraged too, and England will remain alone with its nose²³¹ ... And Scotland - that's not a joke, there is oil and gas there!

On the way back we passed another place of legends: the mountains known as the five sisters of Kintail. It was very instructive legend - at least for me!. There was a father who had seven beautiful daughters. Having seven daughters was considered to be a curse, and he tried to hurry to give them away in marriage. But the girls were very spoiled by male attention and did not aspire to marry, rejecting all suitors. Once two Irish sailors came into the village and fell in love with two youngest daughters. When they went to their father to ask for their hand, he said he would not let the youngest sisters marry until the elder ones will. The Irish men told him that they have 5 older brothers back at home who would happily marry 5 older sisters, and as soon as they will get married with the youngest ones, they will go back to Ireland and bring their brothers to Scotland ...

Without even waiting to hear the end of the tale, I sighed loudly;

- Of course, they never returned, and they did not have any brothers!!

- How do you know? Have you heard this legend before? - asked curious Nessie.

- How do I know? *I live among the Irish, that's how!* - I said, under the friendly laughter of the whole bus, - I do not need to know this legend for knowing that!

- That's true, - agreed Nessie. - The father has long waited for their return, but they never came back. Then he went to a local witch and asked her for help. "My spells do not extend over the sea to Ireland," - said the witch. "But I can make your daughters forever retain their beauty ..." The father happily agreed. And the next morning he woke up and instead of his daughters he saw 5 new dazzling beautiful mountains ...

- Did anyone try to kiss them? "- asked Aaron, the American.

- Yes, they tried. You see, they are still crying, waiting for their Irish husbands, - and Nessie showed us a mountain stream .- And the moral of this story is...

²³¹ Russian expression meaning "without anything"

-... Never trust the Irish! - she and I said in unison.

Not far from Kiltail spreads the world famous lake Loch Ness: long, narrow, with dark blue opaque water. It is the deepest lake in Europe, where a submarine can easily submerge. However, until now no one has found any explanation of the mysterious local events, including shaking of the soil, which the locals believe to be beating of the tail of the famous Nessie.

But no matter how much we have stared from the bus window, alas ... When we got off the bus on the shore, two guys from our group even tried to swim in the icy water, while we were standing at the bank, trying to call out Nessie on the surface with some sort of ritual cries. But to no avail. -

-The very atmosphere in Scotland: the dismal weather, fog, rain in summers, snow in winters,- helps all kinds of grim tales, which are unlikely to have been born somewhere in the Bahamas, - said her namesake, our guide .- For example, in Scotland at one time there lived a man , who wrote "anti Bible" and was worshiping the Antichrist. Once he and members of his sect were found on the farm dead of a heart attack. No one knows why ... This farm was purchased by a well-known musician from the hard-rock group "Led Zeppelin". And almost immediately, the daughter of one of those musicians, a little girl, too, was found dead ...

And I remembered the famous French film with Jean Marais and Louis de Funès - "Fantômas contre Scotland Yard"²³², full of ghosts and other mysterious things - because it was also filmed here and not in sunny St. Tropez.

... On the fields near the village of Kingussie they still play the national game, shinty, which, as the Scots assure you, became the inspiration for hockey in America, where it was brought by the Scottish immigrants. Full of tourists are the peatlands of Culloden where in the middle of the XVIII century there was the last battle on British soil. So far, at least, because "don't be sure you will avoid the prison and the beggars bag"²³³. It was here that the troops of "Bonnie Prince Charlie" lost to the Protestants, after which he fled to Skye ... And after that the English began - and continued for almost 100 years, from 1746 to 1830 - the deportation of Scottish highlanders, out of Europe. They like branding Stalin's policy on Chechens and Milosevic - on the Albanians, but they keep firmly silent on what their ancestors were engaged in ...

Scotland is an even stranger country than "Ulster". For example, in the store for the wealthy, respectable older "real ladies" here they are selling ... a slingshot, with the inscription, which they sell "only to reasonable and responsible members of society"! Looking closely, I discover that this was a pen made out of twigs in the form of a slingshot ... Amazing!

²³² Fantômas contre Scotland Yard (1967) is the final installment of a trilogy of films starring [Jean Marais](#) as the arch villain. The Fantômas films became extremely successful in [Europe](#) and [USSR](#).

²³³ Russian saying meaning "don't be so sure the disasters will avoid you in the future"

After this visit, Scotland is no longer just a place for me on a map, it has now a face, it has its own smell and colours. The colour of heather, which is made from the legendary Scottish heather. The colour of thistle, which is the Scottish symbol. And the sounds of the rolling Scottish "rrrrrr"-just the same as the Russian one ...

... In the evening when I returned from Scotland, I just fell into bed and got totally disconnected with the world. In the morning I had to get up at 5:30 again.

I do not know what woke me up around 2 am: apparently, there were still some sounds in the street, very unusual for this time of day. In the rear window of the house there was little to see, but I managed to catch with the corner of my eye a fire engine on the side of our house. The fire itself was not visible, no one shouted in panic, and I was about to turn over in bed and continue to sleep, but still decided to go out and to see what was actually burning. From the front garden the only thing visible was a plume of smoke coming from the side of a deaf neighbour's garden, and I felt sorry for him, though, apparently, the fire was already coming to an end. Under the lights of the lanterns, stood several people, among them my female neighbour from the other side, but there was not much commotion. I got dressed and went out, suspecting the worst and already preparing myself for it. And I was right.

Behind the house brave firefighters were hoisting with water the remains of what was my car. I have not even had the time to try to drive it. I was just only taking lessons. An acquaintance from Garvaghy Road was selling a reasonably good old car and so cheap that I could not miss such an opportunity and purchased it recently for a small, but still quite weighty for my budget amount. I did not do it for fun: if it was up to me, I wouldn't want to learn how to drive in my life. That's, if in this country the public transport would have been working properly. But it is impossible to get anywhere from our village after 6:30 PM, and in order to be on time for work in the mornings- because of such a "comfortable" bus schedule! - I had to get up every morning at 5:30 ... I badly needed my own transport also in connection with a thousand of other reasons, which I have never had back at home.

I was not insured for driving: was refused by the British companies because: a) I have not had a full driving license yet and b) many British companies do not want to insure those who live in Northern Ireland.

Who then has burnt my car and why did they do it?

The answer was very simple. Local lumpen²³⁴. "Slum proletarians". «Joyriding» is often the only entertainment of Belfast youth, which by that time has also reached our shores. In Belfast this driving with brutal speed on stolen cars already has cost the lives of many innocent people. Stealing my car in this case did not work: because it has stood for a

²³⁴ dispossessed, often displaced people who have been cut off from the socioeconomic class with which they would ordinarily be identified:

long time without moving, its battery was flat. Thus the "brave lads" were upset about it and said like a princess from a Russian folk tale: "So be neither yours, nor mine!..." ..

I was not even upset. What is the sense in being upset by something that can't be changed? Why waste your emotional energy? Instead of this, I tried to get rid of the thoughts about it out of my head, and even joked with the firefighters. And then I saw my neighbour Theresa ...

Theresa's «long – suffering» car suffered over and over again. It's even more ancient than mine was. In winter it has suffered damage in the explosion which was intended for that drug dealer. It was also turned upside down a couple of times by some wags. This time its two metal door handles had melted completely, its wheel had burst, and a metal bar was hanging behind ... Theresa's car stood next to mine, and a neighbour who had discovered it burning, knocked at her door, when he saw that my car was completely consumed by the flames. Brave (or stupid, as she says herself) the woman jumped in and managed to drive her car away. If the flames would have caught it, nobody knows what would have happened with the neighbouring houses, because its petrol tank was full.

Now she was standing under the lantern, laughing nervously and tried to console me by saying that her husband would find me something cheap, when I make up my mind to buy the next car. I could not afford it now, so there was no sense to even think about it. I wondered only where I could park this eventual next one. None of us had a garage, there was no place for them, and it was, as we have discovered, impossible to leave cars in the street. Theresa was just on a verge of a breakdown, but she behaved bravely. She was the mother of four children with various health issues. So she is used to life with difficulties.

All neighbours expressed their sincere condolences and indignation at the police, which was called, but just did not bother to arrive. I saw a giant black burnt spot under the nearest telephone line pole. And I saw it only now, because I was not at home at weekend.

-This Sunday, they crashed into this pole and set fire to another car here, - another neighbour said. - We have been living here for 41 years, but nothing of this kind happened before. That's just like Belfast now!

The police had come only after a long pause on Sunday, but this will do nothing to solve the problem of course. But this time they did not even bother to show up at all...

- If these lads only knew that a patrol car passes here in the evening, they would not do this! – Theresa exclaimed.

- Oh, it is useless to speak about it, because the police here are too busy with other things ...

I just grinned. We shook each other's hands, and I, being not very extrovert by nature, this time spoke a lot with neighbours. I have not spoken so much with them since I came here to live...So, there is always a good side in any unpleasant story.

It was awfully upsetting to pass by the remains of the car in the morning... Omniscient Theresa said to me:

- I'll call the local authorities and tell them to remove it out of here ... I will say that I do not know whose car it is, because otherwise they'll make you pay for the cleanup!

I came to her to have tea that day. I have never done it before. I felt too shy for it.

Theresa looked rather pathetic.

- Yesterday I was more shocked, - she explained. - But now it is finally hitting me... I have such an awful depression. I already visited doctor, took some sedatives and then just started to cry like a fool ... There is such a terrible mess at home. My sister came to visit me, she lives in Belfast. In Poleglass. She came here with her kids to have a rest. "You came just in time - I told her. - it is something like a resort here now...- and Theresa laughed nervously. - Everything is in a mess at home, but I can do nothing ...

What kind of people do this? Well, you can enjoy joyriding, but what fun is in burning someone's car, and especially in burning the car of a person who is just as poor as you?

Well, such people as my colleague Jack: every day he comes to work 10-15 minutes later, with fresh "Sun" and a sandwich under his arm. «Do you like *reading*?» - he asked me sincerely when he saw me with a book . He asked it with such surprise in his voice, as if it was something difficult, like yoga.

There are thousands of people like him in Catholic and Protestant ghettos. There are no books, no clubs or hobbies in their lives. Their life consists of television, drugs, lots of fast food... Jack differs from them because at least, he works. Many of them do not even try to do that. It is rather natural for girls here to have a baby at the age of 15 ("everybody has one», and you have to follow your friends). It is normal for guys to steal cars, to crash them and to burn their remains ... Later many such guys become informants who give "useful information" about "terrorists", even though it is they who really terrorize their neighbourhoods. My friend Tom is still waiting a trial of the person who broke his life. His beloved wife was killed by one of such "heroes" last year. It is interesting that the police knows who is the guilty party, and he does not even deny his guilt.. While the poet Bobby Sands has got 14 years of strict regime for just one old gun in his car ...

Yet, "lumpens" are, of course, not the reason, but a symptom of a deep sickness of this society. This disease will go on for a long time even after the reunification of Ireland. I call it "Topsy's syndrome ." Do you remember the little girl from the book of Harriet Beecher Stowe "Uncle Tom's Cabin»?

Topsy behaved awfully, and nobody could manage her, although she was frequently beaten. But once little Eva asked Topsy with tenderness and kindness why she was behaving like this. Unfortunately I have not got my notebook with Topsy's literal quotation, but Topsy, restraining her tears, confessed that nobody ever loved her. She got used to the fact that she was always abused. She strongly believed that she couldn't do anything good. So that was the main reason of her bad behaviour. "I know that I'm nasty girl" ...

That is the problem of slavery. And that is the effect of slave mentality. There are teens in Northern Ireland, who are just such descendants of slaves, like Topsy. And even though she was nicely treated by Eva in this good book, only good treatment isn't enough for many others. So our Anton Makarenko²³⁵'s genius is just indispensable to bring them back to the normal human condition. But they don't have any Makarenkos over here ...

... – Zhenya, please don't think that it was done because of you ! These fools do this with any car. This morning old John came to Mary. She is 85 and she does not go out, she has a sore hip. He told her that they were like a swarm of bees and nobody knew where they would fly next. Mary asked why they burnt cars near the houses. She said, it would have been much better to do this in hills... You do not even know whether to laugh or to cry ... - chirped Theresa, and her hands and voice were still trembling....

It seems to be just a trifle, but the depression swept me with new vigour again after this incident. Life seemed as hopeless as in the moment of my divorce. The only ones who could save us, were the Cubans. If it only was possible to treat Lisa in CIREN Of course, I hoped that Lisa would feel much better after this. But in any case, mum will not deny then that the doctors have done everything they could. Because the Cuban doctors are namely like this.

I started to write a letter to Cuba...

But the nightmares still continue to appear. In them, I was chased by a giant enraged elephant along our quiet Proletarian Quay. Then suddenly that cursed Rotterdam appeared again, as in delirium...

Almost one year passed since Sonny had finished his study and got a diploma. But he was still unemployed. So the dishes and chairs still occasionally «flew» around our

²³⁵ Anton Makarenko (1888 – †1939) was a [Ukrainian](#) and [Soviet educator](#) and writer, who promoted democratic ideas and principles in [educational theory](#) and practice. As one of the founders of Soviet [pedagogy](#), he elaborated the theory and methodology of upbringing in [self-governing](#) child [collectives](#) and introduced the concept of [productive labor](#) into the educational system. Makarenko is often reckoned among the world's great educators, and his books have been published in many countries.

house. But finally there appeared courses from the labour exchange for all unemployed people who had a higher education diploma. Sonny wanted to use this chance. It was really hard work to get the opportunity to attend these courses. You had to pass various tests. But I knew his fanatical love of computers, and I was sure that he would get this placement. I also knew that it would be exactly what he wanted. And I was right. The courses lasted nearly six months. He was promised to be provided with a workplace after that. I was proud of Sonny. I saw his determination. He prepared for exams without having enough sleep. I didn't waste time too. I studied at my university. I decided to pass the Dutch state exam for translators and to become a certified translator of Russian. This exam was really difficult, and even not every Dutch person could pass it. This could give me the right to make official translations. When I told Sonny what I was going to do, he did not even support me, although he was also not against it. He was just indifferent. Any of my activities seemed to him silly, and he even didn't hide it. I had to pay several hundreds guilders in order to be allowed to pass the exam. That is why I started to work as a sorter of post, where the postal code couldn't be automatically read by machine. You had to pass an exam to get this temporary job too. They checked the speed of the sorting. I almost flunked because I was really nervous. But thanks to God, I did it.

It was getting dark, Sonny sat down at computer, Lisa went to bed and I went to work. I liked working with letters. It reminded me the time of my own correspondence with friends in the USSR. One could only imagine what all those letters contained, and how their recipients were waiting for them... By the way, haven't you ever noticed that there is such thing as a national handwriting? For example, I can easily distinguish an envelope, signed by West Africans and or by Frenchmen or by Germans. Perhaps, children are taught to write the same letters in elementary school differently in different countries ...

It was big luck if I stayed for the whole night at the manual sorting. But sometimes I was put at the sorting machine and had to look at the screen where the letters appeared, and enter their postal code on the computer. The letters there went too quickly for me. But it was not really so terrible. I have passed the exam already and got the job, and nobody would fire me because the whole job was only for 3 weeks. Plus, my work was going to an end. And if you didn't manage to "catch" all the letters, they came back into machine for the second time.

The building of the sorting office was really very big. There was always a dim light in this building, and the radio had been playing for the whole night. I remember the song «Unbreak my heart" by Toni Braxton, which had always been played there. There was a day-and-night canteen and the food was really very delicious. People who had been working there full-time, treated us kindly, but they were afraid that they would be replaced by such temporary workers like us.

We finished working at 6:30 am. I came back home at 7.30, rubbing my watery eyes with hands, It felt as if all these letters and numbers still stayed in front of my eyes. Sonny and Lisa were still in bed, and I, trying not to wake any of them, went to bed too.

Sonny got up at 8, had breakfast and went out, and Lisa have been sleeping till 9.30. When she woke up, my day began again ...

Lisa liked to crawl into our big bed in the morning, but Sonny strictly prohibited her to do this, and she usually climbed into bed from my side. She stopped hiding there only after having seen that dad wasn't at home. Of course, I allowed her to pile in, and she sat near me and played with her dolls quietly till I got up and cooked breakfast ...

By that time I actually lived in two houses: the university provided Lisa and I with accommodation. But there were many reasons which inhibited my divorce from Sonny. I felt sorry for him: I could not leave him in such difficult time, but also he himself did not want to let me go. Although it was obvious that he couldn't endure me any longer. I could not understand why one has to endure a person whom one obviously didn't even like, why he had to torment himself and me too. But Sonny didn't even think about divorce. Yet, he hated me. Thank God I had a place to hide when Sonny had such a phase (though this only prolonged the agony of our marriage.) Fortunately, my house was quite far from Rotterdam. It was situated in a "white" village about forty minutes away from the university. There was enough space, lots of greenery. There were no migrants and supermarkets for the poor people such as «Aldi». Respectable Dutch ladies with powdered faces dressed up in designer clothes have been walking along the quiet streets with their dogs. They bought things only in the «Albert Heijn²³⁶». Lisa was there with me. Everybody was attracted by her. "Oh, what a cute baby!" –they often told me in the street, having leant over to Lisa and touching her cheek as a sign of liking. (The Dutch have such a strange way of doing such things with other people's children, not even asking their parents). But I had nobody to mind Lisa when I had the lectures and I still had to take her to Sonny's relatives in Tilburg. I spent the whole weekend with her in Rotterdam . And I spent all those Christmas days there too, even though I had to work.

I passed the state exam at the first attempt, and I got really high scores for some of its components. The lowest score I got for the subject 'knowledge of people and country. " Because when the Dutch examiners asked me about life in Russia nowadays, I honestly described to them what I saw with my own eyes in my hometown. Closing factories, crumbling buildings, drinking workers who were not paid salaries for many months, signs «Vodka 24 hours non -stop ", prostitution, street children and refugees ...

The Dutch were disappointed by my answer.

- *Maar Moskou floreert*²³⁷ -! They started to correct me. So I said everything I thought about it...That's why I've got a low mark. So much for their "freedom of speech"! The Dutch always think that they know much more than other people know, even though they have never been in those countries.

Let it be. I passed the exam, at least! I was very proud, and even Sonny went with me to court for my swearing ceremony. But it changed nothing in our relationship. Our

²³⁶ Middle range Dutch supermarket (more expensive than Aldi)

²³⁷ But Moscow flourishes! (Dutch)

marriage was just dying ...

I still hoped that my relationship with Sonny could be saved. Perhaps he also hoped that.

- I do not want to beat you, - he said - I know how to make your life miserable without it.

He said the truth. He did his best to make me miserable without beating. Sonny was just ignoring me by the time he started working. I was like an empty space. He kissed Lisa loudly and greeted her when he came home from work, while my greetings were not even answered. I just had to prepare his dinner in time. I had to phone him at work, not later than twelve o'clock but not before half past nine every day, and to ask what he wanted to eat this evening...

I couldn't live like this any more. I wanted some human warmth, at least, a kind word. It was really necessary for me like sunlight for plants, back then. I wanted to feel love. I wanted to hear some praise from time to time. In honesty, I still do need it, but now I'm at least able to live without it. But then I could not. I felt like sinking in a swamp without love, like my favorite Lisa Brichkina of "The Dawns Here Are Quiet ...".

- Sonny, treat me nice! – I almost begged him. And he shrugged his shoulders again. What else do I want from him? He does not drink or smoke, he works hard . He never fools around (he still couldn't forgive me my tears about the past, he thought that I missed Volodya Zelinskiy, missing USSR was beyond his understanding). Sonny often said that other women could only dream of such a husband as he was. I strongly believed in it, but it didn't make my life any easier. The atmosphere at home was as cold as *le congelateur*.²³⁸

«I would rather prefer you to drink or to fool around, but to be kind to me!» - I said once. These words offended him awfully. To tell the truth, on the extremely rare occasions that he did drink, Sonny became very kind and calm...

I thought it was evident that we were unhappy. It was also obvious that for some reason, Sonny couldn't start a new life and continued to hate me for whatever he had imagined. We had no common interests or beliefs. It was evident that we both suffered and that I could never cook the dishes the way he wanted. Wasn't it better to divorce and be friends than to live with such hatred towards each other? So Lisa and I went away to my accommodation. Once I even went to a lawyer to find out more about divorce. (But I didn't dare to go any further and, of course, I never said a word to Sonny about it).

But when I made an effort to leave him, he started to panic and did everything to get me return back home. By the way, I never forbade him to see Lisa. I still can't understand why he wanted me to stay. He went to me by taxi to my place at midnight, just to tell me that his bicycle was stolen and he couldn't be alone. He wanted me to cheer him up. I wanted the same from him, but Sonny didn't notice it...

²³⁸ Freezer (French)

I cannot say that Sonny was a bad person. He behaved like this not because of malice. He had a great responsibility on his shoulders for his family, it was necessary for him “to be successful”. He was a victim of racism in the society. He saw how his father was dismissed by the employer after a serious illness, without having reached pension age. His mother left his father when he had become poor. It was his greatest fear to have the same destiny. Sonny was ruthless towards himself and society. Have you stumbled? Have you shown the slightest weakness? Then it’s your fault in being homeless and begging in the street. You have to be strong! He was the same towards any other human weaknesses. It was useless to tell him that we are not wild animals, but people, that we should help the weaker ones, instead of finishing them off ...

We just didn’t match each other. I couldn't be myself with him. He didn't want me to have any friends, even female ones. He constantly said that I was silly; that all my deeds were absolutely useless. He was responsible for everything, he solved all problems, but he also took away my right to make any decisions.

It was impossible to live like this any more. I had to do something about it. I slowly but surely was sinking in this marriage like Lisa Brichkina from that film. *«Liza saw this dark blue sky. She was wheezing, spitting out mud. She was trying to reach it and believed ...She believed that the next day would come ...»*²³⁹

Just before the «the thunderstorm» broke out, my mother came to visit us. She was completely fascinated by both Holland and the Dutch and she couldn’t understand why I was so unhappy. She thought it was rather funny that there was a sex-shop with a rather explicit shop window just near our house.

- So I won't be mistaken at what stop to get out of the tram. When I see a huge *** it means that I have arrived

To me it didn’t seem so funny.

- It’s good to be a tourist! - I told her, quite upset, – You’d better try to live here and understand first what they actually say. Just try their racism and conceit and then you can make your deep conclusions.

My mum didn't want to believe that my life had come to a dead end. Sonny seemed to be the ideal son-in-law to her.

- You know, you are not exactly a God-sent-gift either, and not everyone can manage to live with you. But this guy is positive, clever, good-looking ...

She began to understand all the seriousness of the situation only after being the witness of one scene. I have prepared some pasta, Sonny didn’t like it. He started to eat and then he suddenly threw the plate on the floor, I began to sob, rushed to a bottle with liquor (it was coincidentally at hand), drank half a bottle; Sonny ran out of the room, locked himself in

²³⁹ From B. Vasilyev’s famous Soviet novel about WWII, “The Dawns Here Are Quiet” (1971) . A film of the same name was produced in 1972.

a toilet and also began to cry. My mum was frightened and ran out too, to calm him (not me!). Sonny cried behind the closed door, sitting on a toilet bowl.

- Zhenya doesn't love me!

Though it was not clear how pasta could have caused such thoughts. By that time I started to feel sick (the liquor was very strong) and Sonny, being already calmed by my mum, looked after me all the day long.

During all that time Lisa was just watching « *Schneeweißchen und Rosenrot* »²⁴⁰ on video tape next to our room...

Having looked at all of this, my amazed mum said:

- Yes, there is really something wrong with you two! ...

She left for Russia in a week. And Sonny has persuaded me to give up my student accommodation and to return to our house for good.

– You'll soon finish study! And I promise, our life will change... But you have to change yourself too....

I already have been writing my final thesis, and I would have to leave this apartment soon anyway. I agreed with Sonny, being pleased by Sonny's tenderness towards me while I felt sick. But after I have given back the keys from the flat, I found myself in the street

...

These two months were full of complete misery. Sonny absolutely stopped to talk to me.

– Sonny, I am so lonely ... I feel so bad ... – I told him many times. At last he brought me a second-hand computer. He showed me how to use the Internet and said:

– You are lonely? There is nobody to talk to? Just find yourself somebody on Internet and speak with him as much as you want!

That had the same negative effect at me as my phrase that it would be better if he smoked and drank had on him. I was completely hurt and disappointed. And I found a person who I could speak with. I have started to correspond with an Irish fellow called Bernard.

Bernard was a student of German at the well-known Trinity College. He knew German language perfectly, but he also knew Dutch. We have begun with linguistic themes. I told him nothing about my personal life because there is nothing worse, than to complain to a stranger and because I just tried to forget about it, at least on the net. And when I had told him that I would like to move to Ireland, Bernard sincerely supported my intention and, being the real patriot, started to praise his country. His letters became more and more romantic. Bernard was not Lovelace, in real life he was not even able to communicate with people, but he had a certain talent in an epistolary genre. He wrote and in an Irish way, himself believed in his own compositions. Ah, he wrote in such a wonderful

²⁴⁰ Popular German fairy-tale

manner! It is a pity that there is nothing left of those mails to quote here. I would like to hear all these words from Sonny – but there wasn't any chance, so I was glad to hear them at least from someone. I cried over his letters! My soul was so devastated that I even started to read cheap ladies' novels which were published by series: four novels a month. Earlier I even couldn't understand, how it was possible for anyone to read such rubbish. The majority of romantic heroes in these "masterpieces" for housewives were Irish gypsies. All these facts strengthened the romantic aura around Bernard ...

Once Sonny has unambiguously let me know that he wanted me to stay at home after I graduated at the university.. But before our wedding he didn't even hint that he wouldn't allow me to work. And he knew that I couldn't even imagine my life without work.

I have studied for many years not for staying a housewife! I have never thought of it! Our Soviet women are not brought up to depend on someone.

I imagined for a second my life without any means of my own, even a student loan. I would live like a bird in a cage, without even having the possibility to visit relatives. It was then that I understood that we have to divorce ...

I didn't want to argue, but it was impossible to avoid. I would like just to disappear. But Sonny himself wanted a "straight talk" ...

He was shocked that I decided to leave him when he had finally found a good job with good salary. He couldn't understand why I didn't leave him when we were poor students. He couldn't understand why I have decided to leave him at the moment of his "success".

Sonny cried, stood on his knees, begged. I've remembered a fairy tale about the boy who shouted: "Wolves! » too many times. I just couldn't believe him anymore. I have already heard this all, and not once. I tried to calm him, by saying that we would remain friends, that Lisa would come to him at her vacation if he wants, that it would be better for both of us to divorce and that I saw his sufferings when we were together But Sonny was inconsolable.

But in some days he calmed himself down, became silent and appeasable. I thought he has reconciled with the inevitable. It was really hard for me to remind myself that pity couldn't save our marriage any more.

It was Friday. It was the eve of some religious May holiday in Holland. I can't remember its name. I only know that the following Monday was the day off. It was rather hot, the weather was wonderful. I was preparing for the next lesson of Russian which I once a week gave to Adinda in Almelo. I always took Lisa with me, we had our lessons in a cafe in the shop "Hema", where Lisa ate cake, and then ran and played round a table. But that day Sonny took a compensatory holiday. He said that he felt sick and wanted to have a rest.

– Let me look after her today! - He told me. I wanted to stay friends with Sonny and if I had refused, he would think that I didn't trust him. And it was really hard for Lisa to travel through half of the country on such a hot day by train.

- All right, – I said.

When I left the house and went on a tram stop, Sonny stayed on the threshold and looked at me with some unusual sadness. It seemed to me strange, but I didn't think too much about it. Don't I know him after almost 7 years together? We are both sad and that's all. The lesson has passed as usual; I returned to Rotterdam by the evening, but it was still very hot, people sat in front of cafes on the chairs, music sounded from open windows. The weekends came. I arrived home as usual, inserted the key into the entrance door, and ... the key didn't turn. Being confused, I tried once and once again. Then I started to knock on windows. There was just no reaction, but silence.

I pulled the door and suddenly noticed fresh sawdust at the steps. The door was drilled. The lock was changed. I could not understand anything. I felt that I was sinking in some cold and awful horror.

I faced the closed door of my own house. I didn't know what to do further. My imagination drew the most awful scenes. Were Sonny and Lisa still alive? Where were they? What did he do to her? There are many cases now when men kill their own children during the divorce and then commit suicide. Could Sonny do this? ... No, it's impossible, it's impossible! Suddenly I remembered his sad glance, with which he looked at me when I was leaving. He wanted to say goodbye!

And I resolutely went to the next door neighbour: that coffee-shop Moroccan owner, who recently had helped me to carry a Christmas tree to my house. Nobody else could help me.

– May I call the police from here? - I asked him ...

Chapter 13. I am Soviética!

*“Cuba es mi amor,
Isla del alba roja.
Pueblo escucha nuestra canción!
Cuba es mi amor.”*
*(From a well-known Soviet song)*²⁴¹

I don't remember what I told the police on the phone. All that was happening was like a dream shrouded by fog, because it just couldn't be real! My legs felt as if they were made of cotton, my tongue couldn't move. I felt like I was drunk, though, of course, I wasn't. Do you remember how some of us used to like to read the judicial chronicle in "Literaturnaya Gazeta"²⁴² when there was no gutter press in our country yet? To tell the truth, I read it too from time to time. What for? To tickle my own nerves? To be glad that misfortunes happen other people and not me? No. I just wanted to imagine the feelings of people who have had everything suddenly crash down around their shoulders. But it was hard to imagine. I thought if I were in place of those people, I would just break down in hysterics. And now I even don't have to imagine how it feels. Now I know. But there are no hysterics. There are no tears. It is just very scary. It feels as cold inside of me as a freezer. I try not to think the worst, but it's rather difficult, because I don't see any other explanation for what had happened.

The police arrived quickly enough. But they apparently had no rights to break the door for me, and it was better not to attract attention. So they took me to their office and asked me to explain everything that happened, one more time. And I did.

– Have you got the telephone numbers of his relatives? – They asked me. I gave them the numbers and they started to call. Then they passed me the phone. It was señor Arturo. He was very angry and was asking why I called the police. He spoke neither about Sonny, nor about Lisa.

– I can say nothing - He said in a tone that told me he knew something and that at least they both were alive. – Why did you call the police?

- But what else should I have done? - I was surprised and angry. I am worrying sick here if Lisa and Sonny are alive, and he worries about his reputation! – I came home, the lock was changed, and both of them weren't there ... I was scared. Sonny is very emotional and you know that our life lately wasn't going exactly smoothly ...

It was the truth. Señor Arturo knew it, and Louisa knew it too. She tried not to choose sides and she even talked to Sonny, hoping to help us to sort out our relationship. Unfortunately, it didn't help.

²⁴¹ «Cuba, my love,
The Island of dawn crimson ...
People are listening to our song:
"Cuba is my love!"» Popular Soviet song about Cuban Revolution, written in 1962 for the occasion of Fidel Castro's visit to Bratsk (by A. Pakhmutova and N. Dobronravov)

²⁴² Literary Newspaper - popular Soviet and Russian weekly, founded in 1929

Señor Arturo said nothing, but asked me to give the phone back to the policemen. Strangely, I simply physically couldn't be hysterical. I behaved like a robot. If he didn't want to tell me anything, at least he could tell them. And what is the sense in arguing with him, to get answers?

The policemen spoke with him in another room, and I was very nervous and just waited. I tried to wait and not to think about anything. A Dutch policewoman sat next to me. I really needed somebody to embrace me at that moment. Like a family member would. I wanted to hear some kind words, something that would calm me down. I needed it as much as I need oxygen! Probably, she felt this. And, being a real Dutchwoman, she offered me the extent of her kindness:

– Shall I bring you a glass of water? – and she ran out of the room as quick as she could. I nearly moaned through my clenched teeth. All these benevolent people were so indifferent! They couldn't understand such elementary things, that for us are so elementary. She was afraid that if she put her hand on my shoulder, I would sue her for «ongewenste intimiteiten²⁴³»!

I remembered how Sonny, Lisa and I were waiting for a tram last winter. It was terribly cold on the street, with no tram in sight. A police car stopped for us. The policemen passed by and felt sorry to see a small child in the street, so they gave us a lift home! There are kind people among the Dutch too ... When we approached our house, one of the policemen suddenly said:

– I know this house. I rented a room here in my youth. A friend of mine lived here too; he committed suicide ... - and he began to talk about it in detail.

I wonder if the Dutch actually understand that it isn't always necessary to tell about every detail of events, especially if nobody has asked for it?

So I was sitting there now, having remembered that conversation and I wondered if our house had an unhappy aura. I always felt depressed there.

The police girl returned with her glass of water.

- Both of them are alive, they are both all right. But we can't give you more information. It can't be considered abduction because the child is with her father. Do you understand? There is nobody to deal with this at the moment, it is a bank holiday. Come after Monday to your local police office. You have the right to break the lock of your door, but we haven't. Just call the locksmith. However, it will cost about 300 guilders. Have you got a place to stay? – She asked me.

Suddenly I returned back to reality. I had only 50 guilders with me and nothing more. I didn't even have a jumper in case of cold, no bank card, my old one was being replaced because it was broken. I ordered a new one, but it would come only after the holidays. And Sonny knew about all of this! He knew I had no money for a hotel. And there was a long weekend ahead. He knew it. I started to call my acquaintances, but nobody was at home. Everybody was away for a short break for holidays.

The only one I managed to contact, was my solicitor. I previously had discussed my divorce with her. Mrs. Doorson was a picturesque figure. Even without knowing Sonny she hated him fiercely. So much that even I was shocked, because I have never hated him. I was confused by her hatred for an stranger. Maybe that was the reason I

²⁴³ Unwanted intimacy (Dutch, judicial term)

postponed my divorce. I decided to finish my diploma thesis first, and then ... But now ... How can I think about the diploma thesis when I even don't know where my daughter is and what will happen tomorrow?

I told her what happened.

–I am not surprised. - She declared, – One can expect anything from men *from our part of the world*.

She spoke as if she had also experienced something like that in the past. Maybe it really happened to her too. *Mevrouw*²⁴⁴ Doorson ran her office from home, and I have noticed that she lived with her daughter - probably, she was also divorced.

- I will make a hotel reservation for you, I will pay for it, and you can pay me back later, – she said, – I will try to help you. How could he take the child away from her mother?

I went to her place by train. I went to the town where I was studying. I was sitting in an extra seat between the train carriages all the way long. I couldn't even cry. I couldn't understand anything. All I knew was that Sonny was hiding somewhere with Lisa because he didn't want me to divorce him and it was the only way for him to stop me from doing this.

The hotel was rather small and old. It was situated on the bank of a canal. It seemed to me that there were no lodgers there except for me, in spite of the fact that these were holidays. I was tossing and turning in bed, fully dressed. I was absolutely exhausted by all that had happened. But at the same time I felt that I couldn't sleep. I felt as if I was suffocating. The grief and powerlessness were strangling me. All night long I was wandering around the room, like a tiger in a cage. At three o'clock in the morning I wanted to speak to somebody. I went downstairs and told my story to the receptionist, feeling confused and repeating it all over again. Poor fellow, I probably disturbed him! It is not socially acceptable in Holland to tell a stranger about your life. It was just pure heroism on his part that he actually listened to me ...

I barely slept; I was waking up every ten or fifteen minutes in a cold sweat and again was absorbed by the upcoming nightmare. I can't express in words what I had thought during that horrible night..

It was sunny in the morning, it was warm. Cheerful people were walking around me as if nothing had happened. I couldn't eat my breakfast. I phoned my only acquaintances in Rotterdam who could help me break the lock of my own house. They were a Russian professor couple. I had met them some months before. Sonny, Lisa and I sometimes visited them and once we even came to their place ... for a bath! It was too cold in January, and the water froze in our house pipes (in Holland pipes lay not inside the houses, but outside, along the walls!). I remember that Sonny was surprised, when Tatiana Sergeevna, the wife of professor Vyacheslav Fedorovich offered to us to come to their apartment to have a bath. It is just impossible to imagine such an offer in Europe!

²⁴⁴ Mrs. (Dutch)

But once having accepting it, he even liked this. After a warm shower Sonny drank liqueur with the professor and ate Russian snacks with great pleasure. Then Tatiana Sergeevna took a photo of Sonny and I together. It was our last photo together ...

... Yes, they were definitely not Dutch, and Tatiana Sergeevna understood everything, and came to meet me at the station and embraced me directly on the platform like a mother. I began to sob for the first time, without paying attention to people staring at us “*Autochtonen*”²⁴⁵ ...

Tatiana lent me money for a new lock and the locksmith. Locksmith came and broke the lock that was inserted by Sonny, and put in a new one. I gave the new key to our frightened to death and confused little lady neighbor from upstairs, who said that she had not seen Sonny and Lisa since yesterday. Sonny said nothing to her, just that he was changing the lock (and also gave her a new key).

In front of our door, I hesitated, as if I had to dive into a vat of acid.
- I'll go with you, - said Tatiana - Who knows what's in there; just in case ...

And I was very grateful to her for it. If I were on my own, I would have probably died of a heart attack. Both rooms had been completely ransacked. Everything was dumped onto the floor, from the drawers and wardrobes - as if *Genghis Khan*.²⁴⁶ had been here with his troops. Furniture was turned upside down. Tatiana immediately offered to take pictures of all of this just in case we needed to show to the authorities what state Sonny was in and what he was capable of. So we did. I would not even have thought of doing this - I was too shocked. But the main shock was still waiting for me: While going through my things, I found that my Russian passport had disappeared, along with my notebook with poems that I wrote since my childhood, and my old laptop on which I was writing my thesis. And this was just a month before it had to be submitted!

What happened after this, what she was saying to me, somehow has fallen out of my memory. I do not remember how long she stayed with me. I remember that when she was gone, I still could not gather the strength to sort things out and get the room in order. I could not sit still, I wanted to talk to someone, but there was nobody to talk to, and I started to phone all my friends in turn, telling them what happened - and every time as soon as I hung up, I again felt so bad, as if I could not swim and then suddenly realized that there was no ground beneath my feet in the water. Again and again, I grabbed for the phone and called someone else ... anybody. I also managed to phone my relatives. They, also, were in total shock, and assured me that Sonny will come to his senses. I could not phone his relatives, after yesterday's conversation: that was beyond my strength. I was afraid to break down, to go to Tilburg and cause an even worse disaster.

²⁴⁵ Ingenious population, ethnic Dutch (Dutch)

²⁴⁶ Genghis Khan (1162? – 1227), born Temujin, was the founder and [Great Khan](#) (emperor) of the [Mongol Empire](#).

This expression in Russian (using the name of Genghis Khan's grandson Mamai) means “there is complete disorder, terrible devastation (in some place): it is as if an army had marched through (it). Russia was under Mongolian rule for 200 years.

Then Tatiana phoned me and invited me to stay with them. I really was afraid to stay in this empty and cluttered house alone, where at any moment my angry husband could appear at the front door (I was pretty sure that if he will appear, Lisa will not be with him. I was even afraid that he took her to Curaçao!). And I just opened my mouth to accept her offer, when Vyacheslav Fedorovich took the phone from Tatiana and said to me in a completely Dutch tone of voice that I should not leave my house, or Sonny would return again, change the lock, and I would be homeless, and homeless people do not get custody of their children. All this was so incredible to listen to, that it just did not fit into my head. So, if you are kicked out of your home, then you're also to blame for this? And now I will have to sit tight as if in a fortress under siege, afraid to leave it even to buy some bread?

I heard how somewhere behind Vyacheslav Fedorovich, Tatiana was crying out loud: crying and screaming at him, with curse words that I never expected to hear from a PhD and professor's wife:

- You, heartless bastard! - It was the only reasonably acceptable expression of what she was shouting through her tears.

And Vyacheslav Fedorovich, remaining polite and correct, was apologizing to me, covering up the phone with his hand, and I heard his muffled voice:

- Tanya, Tanya, stop your tantrums! Stay out of other people's lives! You'll help her today, and tomorrow they will reconcile, and you will be to blame...

Oh yeah. So that's how it is then. Well, thank you very much, my dear compatriot ...

- In a word, hold on, Zhenya! - He said cheerfully, returning to the phone. And I thought that now he would add "I am mentally with you."

- Thank you - I said, pretending that I did not hear everything that was happening at the other end of the phone. - I will.

And when I hung up the phone, I started to cry with renewed vigor. Never in my life have I felt so alone.

The second night was just as bad. Things were lying everywhere, and among my papers scattered by Sonny, a mouse rustled throughout the night. The houses around our house were already being knocked down, and all the mice from them must have rushed to ours. Our house was full of small holes, and there was no way to get rid of the mice. It would be silly to try to bring in a cat just a couple of months before the demolition. By morning, I almost started to go crazy with this rustling, insomnia and the fact that I could not eat anything for two days. But the lump in my throat still would not go. I realized that I would not be able to stay in this house: Sonny could move back in and state that I have left here voluntarily. Another such night, and I would just kill myself, as that policeman's friend did many years ago. I still wonder who he was and why he did it?

As soon as I realized which way my thoughts were beginning to turn, I immediately called my friend Petra from the university: the same tall, red-cheeked, very direct Petra, who was so fond of the Russian Empress Elisabeth and giving me her old clothes.

During those terrible months, I truly learned about both human meanness and human kindness. I learned who my true friends were, who was "neither a friend nor an enemy, just so-so²⁴⁷," and who turned out to be, oddly enough, even my enemy. Petra was up to 200% in the first category.

Peter understood everything perfectly.

- Sit down, do not go anywhere, Filaret and I are coming now.

Filaret was her son who was only 4 years younger than me. Peter named him in honor of our church leader whose name was "awfully beautiful", she said.

Where would I go? ... I decided to collect at least some personal belongings to take with me, some personal papers - and at the same time I looked all around the place for my passport. But the passport was not there. Most probably, Sonny had locked it in the safe: the safe I got from the university with the old discarded office furniture, which my dean allowed me to take when Lisa and I had moved into a separate apartment, away from Sonny. When I so recklessly gave that place up, all the furniture was moved to Rotterdam, to Sonny. He liked that safe very much, and so, I gave it to him. Together with its keys ...

No, I didn't find my passport, but in the chaos I found some notes in Sonny's handwriting. He wasn't writing to me in it: apparently, he just decided to put down on paper all that bothered him so much, and what I never managed to get out of him all this time. *"I loved her, but she ... She did not even want to go anywhere with me when we were in Russia - because she was ashamed that I am black ... I loved her and loved, and then suddenly my love turned into something very ugly and venomous "...*

It is hard to put into words what I felt while reading these lines ... Oh, Sonny, Sonny ... Why, oh why didn't you tell me how you felt? So many misunderstandings could have been avoided if only we could talk to each other and listen to each other ... I have tried. But every time I came across a wall of silence.

By the time Petra arrived with Filaret, I somehow managed to tidy the rooms and gathered some of my stuff into two small bags.

- Let's go by the police station on the way, just in case! - Petra said to me. - Maybe there will be some news ...

And even though I was sick from all of this and just wanted to wake up out of this

²⁴⁷ Words from Vladimir Vysotsky's "Song about Friend"

nightmare, I agreed. Perhaps, indeed, if a real Dutch woman spoke to them, and not I, they would become a bit more helpful ...

My hopes were in vain. A policeman once slyly grinned, looking at me and saying that after the holidays, I will find out everything. His malice was not lost on Petra, who gave him a rather harsh piece of her mind, expressing what she thinks of the local policemen and their attitudes towards people. However, this did not change anything ... and nothing else was left except the unbearable: to wait.

... On Tuesday I was at the door of my solicitor at exactly 9:00 am.

- Sit down, - she asked me, after I gave her the photos of what our house looked like after I was forced to break in.- - I am not surprised. Typical super-jealous man from the Caribbean. It's good that you have these photos. If there is evidence of how he mistreated you, bring it in!

Well, what evidence would there be, if I was not just ashamed of it, but was even hiding it from my Dutch friends- because I did not want to hear: "But you know *what we think of them*" ?..

- I also found out something - she said to me, - He is not going to divorce you, but he wants to take parental rights from you.

To say that all inside of me froze, was to say nothing.

- And what is the reason? - I managed to squeeze out of myself, - Am I an alcoholic or a drug addict?

- He claims that you were planning to take the child out of the country, and as evidence he brought your e-mail exchange with a certain Irish student ...

- What?

It became black in my eyes.

- Yes, his solicitor has sent me a copy of the fax, I have read it ... It looks, indeed, very convincing. Well, what is the real state of affairs?

I was not expecting such a stab in the back from Sonny. So, it was in search of this that he rummaged through the house? And this is after such a long time when he was constantly showing me that he does not need me, and I was not hiding from him that I started this correspondence with Bernard - on Sonny's own advice.... Not trying to justify myself, I told *Mevrouw* Doorson everything as it was- how I gave up the apartment and went back to Sonny, once again believing that our marriage could be saved, how Sonny did not talk to me for several months, in response to my desperate requests of at least some communication, how he advised me to start corresponding with someone and even gave me an old computer, how I cried over letters of Bernard, while hoping to hear such words from Sonny, how I wanted after my graduation to go home with Lisa (well, how

could I remain in Holland after all of this?), and then to find a job in Ireland and to move there ,with Lisa.

- I do not understand how I did that could be illegal. I was not going to hide the child from him - on the contrary, I told him that Lisa could be with him on all vacations ... And Ireland is not on the edge of the world, it's just a bit more than an hour flight from Holland, and he would not need any visa for it.. Do I have to remain in this country for the rest of my life just because *Meneer*²⁴⁸ wishes so? And this is called "freedom"? That's worse than serfdom. I just want a normal life for my daughter and for myself, without his threats; I want to live and to work, not to be on the dole for life. Is this a criminal intention? As for the Irish student, I will not hide it from you, I had intended to meet him in the future and to get to know him better: would that be also forbidden for a divorced woman?

- Your correspondent seems to be very passionate ... I understand that your spouse has pulled out of his email a phrase: "Come to Ireland, I could raise your child as my own"?

- I too, disliked that phrase. I did not agree to this. After all, I had never met him - only corresponded with him. And I clearly wrote back: "Thank you for your kind words, but my child already has a father!" Or did my husband not show this to his solicitor?

- Ach, how could you be so gullible? He knew this and he has prepared and thought it all out in advance. I won't be surprised if he had provoked you deliberately to start this correspondence.

Well, I couldn't believe this. Sonny was impulsive, vulnerable and emotional, but it was impossible to imagine him a calculating villain! But I also trusted him and everything he said to me just because I thought that I knew him ... and now I was not sure whether I knew him, after all.

- It's OK. It's OK. It is important for you not to worry. She is a young child, you were looking after her all this time, and he, of course, is not going to do that himself. So you have strong chances ... - but what she told me next, sounded in my ears like the muffled ringing from the song called "The Evening Bell"²⁴⁹, and barely reached my mind.

I had to wait for the court sitting. But if you think that this was going to work fast, you are wrong: no matter how my solicitor insisted on the fact that a long separation of a young child from her mother would cause this child a psychological trauma, we could not get a hearing earlier than in a month's time ...

- Maybe it's a good thing - my lawyer said, as it seemed to me, almost rubbing her hands, - at least we will have time to prepare a solid file.

She was turned very aggressively against Sonny. I wasn't aggressive, I was just crushed

²⁴⁸ Mister (Dutch)

²⁴⁹ Evening Bell (Вечерний звон) is a popular Russian song written in 1828 by [Ivan Kozlov](#) and [Alexander Alyabyev](#).

and heartbroken by what I perceived as a betrayal on Sonny's part, although I was well aware that he was free to interpret my own behavior as such too. But I was far more tormented by how Lisa was feeling now, rather than what he thinks of me or what would happen to us or even me personally. What might she be feeling and thinking because of me not being around? We had never been separated for so long. What have they told her about me? She probably was wondering where her mother is. And Sonny and even his parents have just one answer to everything - shut up, shut your mouth, it's none of your business ... I so vividly imagined how Sonny was intimidating Lisa, and she softly (so as not to anger him even more) cries at night into her pillow, that I barely overcame the huge desire to go to Tilburg and break all the windows to our "oma"²⁵⁰ ... or to sit on her doorsteps, until one of them steps outside, and then grab him or her tightly... But I stayed far away from Tilburg, precisely because I could not vouch for myself, and if I did anything like that, I would only eliminate all the chances of my reunion with Lisa ...

I was not sure that Lisa was at Louisa's place: to all my telephone inquiries she still replied with: "I have been told not to say anything." My mother-in-law would not even confirm that the child was OK. Sonny stubbornly avoided me on the phone. Naturally, he again broke into our house in Rotterdam, and again changed the lock in there, as I had predicted (I can only imagine now what our neighbor thought, but that was the last thing that was on my mind then). But I was not a bit sorry that I had left the place: I would have really done something to myself, if I had stayed in that house. A couple of times I phoned our upstairs neighbour and asked her to go down to Sonny and ask him to come to the phone, but he refused to talk to me. That was the main difference between Sonny and I: I would not have been able to treat him the way he treated me, because I would always have felt guilty about how he must feel...

Now began a long row of endless days, filled with despair. At night I could not sleep, during the day I could not eat. Even the sleeping pills, which I for the first time in my life was prescribed by a doctor, helped me only in combination with a small bottle of red wine. This does not mean that I ruined myself by drink: in the afternoons, I did not drink a drop, but to get sleep without this tool simply did not work. And the sleeping pills were usually only enough for half of the night. I woke up every night at 2 AM feeling as if an invisible cold hand was squeezing my heart, and then I could not sleep for two or three hours.

As soon as I started to think about what was happening and figure out where Lisa is now and what to do, I began to pant like a drowning man, whose head was about to be covered with a wave - and these are not just words, but what I felt physically. At night, there was nothing that I could do, but to take another pill, but during the day at such times I started convulsive floundering, for example, collecting evidence about how my marriage was. Needless to say, my compassionate friends, not knowing anything about my marriage, were willing to confirm whatever I would have asked them. It was not very honest, but on the other hand, it wasn't necessary for me to invent anything. Yes, to be honest, my friends were not aware of all these things, but they actually took place.

But I really had to know that Lisa was OK! Just in order to stay afloat and not to lose my

²⁵⁰ Granny (Dutch)

head completely. Thank God I found an unexpected ally in Sonny's cousin Harold. Plainly he was afraid to say too much, but he was also very sorry for both Lisa and I.

- Zhenya, you know that blood is stronger than water ... they are my family and so I can not tell you much. But if I was Sonny, I would never have done this. I can not tell you where Lisa is, but you yourself think about it logically: where else can she be, if Sonny is working ...?

Logically, she could not have been anywhere, except with her grandmother.

- Well ... I do not know why they can not tell you at least that she is all right. It is very cruel. I saw her recently, she looked fine.

I was so grateful to him! Harold was the only little thread that connected me with my daughter.

My other unexpected ally was one of Sonny's colleagues, Helena, a Welsh woman. I think she did this not because she disliked him and not so much because she was on my side: there is just such a type of people who terribly love different adventures and gossip. And what was a drama for us, for her was just an exciting adventure. Helena had promised to inform me as soon as she learned anything new and told me that I can call her at work, under the code-name "Brenda". She also told me some unexpected things. It turned out that in those days, when Louisa was busy with something, Sonny used as a nanny Anyuta from Schiedam. Yes, that very one Albino "Democrat" who voted "with her heart" (or whatever she had in her chest instead of it) for Yeltsin, "for the good of Russia" and calmly took off back to her Holland after that ... Sonny was pleased: he would not have to look for an interpreter if Lisa again would ask for "kurotchka & kartoshka²⁵¹." But it was more than that: it turned out that Anyuta translated for Sonny, at his request, my poems from my childhood notebooks (poor fellow, even there he was looking for "something fishy" that could be used against me in court!).

It was evil of the purest degree: especially since she had not even tried to hear my side of the story, and I mentally cursed the red-haired witch with all my might. Now I understood why every time when I tried to phone her she "was not at home", according to her husband! And you must once again understand now why I was not so eager to communicate with my compatriots abroad.

After a week, just a shadow remained of me, even though after the birth of Lisa I was vainly trying to lose weight for more than three years. Here it is, the recipe for a perfect diet, for all those desperately trying to lose weight ladies! But God help you if you really lose weight this way! Not only did the thoughts of Lisa torment me, but also the thoughts of how Sonny treated me. I felt almost physically abused, after he had given to strangers my teenage poems and notes about what was once making me so happy allowing me to be carried away into the heaven of dreams. Suddenly, it was as if these dreams were spat upon all at once, as if someone was grabbing them with dirty hands ...

²⁵¹ Chicken with potatoes (Russian)

At Petra's I spent a few days: it's very hard to travel anywhere from her village without your own transport. Buses go there once an hour, and then only during the day. Early one morning, when I was in a fog in the middle of the field waiting for a bus, a huge truck pulled next to me, a trucker jumped out of it and in broken English he tried to find out his route. I tried to explain it to him, but he did not understand, and who knows how it would have ended, if the fog had not cleared away for a while, and I did not see his truck's Russian license plate!

- Gosh, you should have told me you are from Russia! - I blurted out in Russian. The trucker frantically looked at me for couple of seconds, and then we both burst into laughter. I heard his laugh as if from outside my own body, like a stranger to myself, and wondered: how can it be that I still can laugh at anything in my situation. Then I explained to him the way, he thanked me and left. And I thought that I must go to our embassy: to ask them for a new document with which it would be possible for Lisa and I to return home, when we find ourselves back together. Sonny's deed only gave me more determination to flee this country at the first opportunity. It was better to burn in hell, than to continue to live here, no matter how wonderful were Petra, Adinda and Hendrick, Katarina and my other friends.

The embassy, to my surprise, met me very kindly. I was expecting the usual bureaucracy like at home, but no: I was met with humane care. I had to wait for a long time in a queue, but that was a mere trifle. ... As I stood there, I started to tell the woman next to me (our compatriot) my story. She listened to me, holding her breath: as if I was Agatha Christie, right in the middle of composing one of her famous detective stories.

- Oh! Wow! And what happened then? - she exclaimed every minute with sparkles in her eyes.

On one hand, it flattered my talent of narration, but on the other hand, it hurt me: just like Helena, this woman did not seem to realize that this was not about some characters in a novel, but real human beings and their suffering. And most of all - about the suffering of a little girl who suddenly lost her mother, and nobody was telling her what had happened, and when she would see her mother again.

The embassy staff treated me with compassion. They gave me a document for Lisa and I to return home, which I had to take to the local OVIR²⁵², in order to make a new passport. There was just one thing left now, I thought unhappily- to get her back.

In order not to break down mentally and to sustain myself I began to give myself a full workload: I started working on the new diploma thesis from scratch (I had just a couple of weeks to complete it) and started looking for work. At least then from 9 to 5 my thoughts would not be constantly fixated on the same thing, I thought ... But in the meantime I still went over what had happened, about thousand times a day in my head, and it was getting harder and harder for me.

²⁵² Internal Affairs Ministry department responsible, among other things, for issuing of travel documents in USSR and until recently Russia

I moved to Katarina's place in Amsterdam - it was easier to find work there and to travel in any direction, too. I was really touched when she not only allowed me to register at her place, but also said that I could live with her as long as it will be necessary, and she would not take any money from me for it. For the Dutch this was hospitality of unheard of proportions - although in the Soviet Union that would have been quite normal. And after nearly 8 years of living in this country, I was able to appreciate it fully!

Katarina by then was separated from her boyfriend Wendell from Suriname, but managed to give birth to a charming little girl called Charlotte. Charlotte was a year younger than Lisa, and I was seriously afraid at first, how would I react to living in the same house with a small child who would always remind me of my own. Especially because just a couple of months before this the two girls have played together, and Lisa resorted to me to complain about Charlotte that she "bites and fights" (Lisa herself was in this respect, like a little angel).

But everything went well. When I dropped my bags at Katarina's door, Charlotte looked at me askance and demanded an explanation, where is the girl with whom she had played? Katarina explained it to her as much as she could. And I felt a surge of unspent maternal feelings, and if not for Katarina, her baby would have been spoiled rotten, by me.

Katarina lived in an old corner house on one of Amsterdam's canals - in such a place that is usually meant for shops, so her housing had a very unusual layout. Where you would normally place the shop, just at the entrance, there were windows on two sides - it was cold, unheated in winter, with clothes and belongings that littered the hallway. From there, a staircase led down into the living room, which was in the basement, and the other staircase led to the top, to the bedroom. A small partition separated the living room from the kitchen, from where another staircase at the back led upstairs to the toilet and shower, and up there, the circle was closed: next to the toilet and the shower was small dressing room, which was now converted into a tiny bedroom for Charlotte, and the bedroom of the mistress herself, which could be entered from both the hall and the kitchen. The hall had huge, store windows, covered with tight white curtains, and the windows in the living room were on the level of pavement. In the evenings the living room was very comfortable. We sat on the floor near the gas stove with a glass of wine, and I once again told Katarina about the years of my marriage to the man whom she had met just once, at our wedding. Katarina was able to listen surprisingly well. Her own experience with Caribbean men and her lack of racial prejudice probably has helped her to understand me so well.

- Zhenya, my poor thing! - She said to me and hugged me like a real mum. - It will be all right at the end, you'll see!

I slept on the floor in the living room. In the morning, Katarina went to work in her library and took Charlotte to the nursery. She worked now for 4 days a week, with additional day off on Wednesdays.

It was very good to be with them - and at the same time I did not want to disturb them, because they also had their own lives. And so when there was still one week left before the trial, I decided not to be annoy Katarina by being constantly in her way with my suffering, but to go to Ireland. The same Ireland I was accused of wanting to run away to.

The bus went to Dublin in the evening. I remember that when it drove out of town, and I saw a raging sea of green fields and flowers, I suddenly finally realized what just never came into my head while I was living at Petra's: that summer already has come. And I did not even notice how For the first time in 30 years of my life I was absolutely not delighted about the summer. I felt no heat from the sun or smell of flowers and I did not hear birdsongs. Everything around me seemed frozen as in a photograph.

Ireland was beautiful. Oh, how beautiful it was ... At the time I saw almost the whole country for the first time, driving from Dublin to Westport and then along the West coast through Limerick to the South to Cork and back to Dublin on the East coast. I stopped into a B&B, breathing fresh air, helping farmers to drive cattle to another field (with surprise discovering that heavy-looking cows could run like real sprinters!), I climbed the cliffs of Moher²⁵³, visited the spot of death of Michael Collins²⁵⁴ (it looks completely different than in the movie!) and even pinched as a souvenir a little stone from the stone walls of his native home in Clonakilty²⁵⁵ ...

I admired the country of my then dreams, but felt no joy. Instead, at every step, I imagined my daughter. I was imagining her even among pale as death and freckled Irish children. Maybe I would have been happy in Ireland - but only if I could share it all with Lisa! What is it all to me without her?

All my senses were sharpened to the limit, and it is probably why, therefore, although I'm not a believer, have never been one and never likely to become it, but in Ireland there were two strange cases, which I can not fail to mention. First, in Westport in the early days I had several times heard the cry of a banshee. Seriously, I do not know what it was, but never before or after have I heard this high and plaintive sound not like anything else. And I did not see anything or anyone anywhere around, who or what might be making such a sound. The second case occurred in Knock - a holy place of pilgrimage for Irish Catholics, where the whole village seemed to live from trade with holy water and images of crucified Jesus, bleeding so natural that it was even scary to look at it, never mind to hang it on the wall. When I was crossing the street there, I suddenly felt that something has touched my hand - it was not a human touch, but something soft, like a fur, and at the same time warm. And in this touch, I felt a sympathy towards me, for some reason. Around the fountain of holy water, I was approached by a man who gave me some

²⁵³ The Cliffs of Moher are located at the southwestern edge of [the Burren](#) region in [County Clare, Ireland](#). They rise 120 metres above the [Atlantic Ocean](#) and reach their maximum height of 214 metres (702 ft) eight kilometres to the north. The cliffs receive almost one million visitors a year.

²⁵⁴ Michael Collins (1890 – 1922) was an [Irish](#) revolutionary leader, Director of [Intelligence](#) for the [IRA](#), and member of the Irish [delegation](#) during the [Anglo-Irish Treaty](#) negotiations. He is widely regarded as the inventor of modern urban guerrilla warfare.

²⁵⁵ Clonakilty - town in West Cork, Ireland, native town of Michael Collins

pamphlet with prayers for the seriously ill and dying. I do not know why he gave it to me, and he had only one of these pamphlets. But strangest was not even that. When I turned away from him just for a moment he was gone - as if has vanished into thin air, although there was absolutely nowhere to hide ...

I often thought later about these prophetic meetings. But I still explain them by my much too sharpened at that time apprehension. Although the Irish, most likely, will not agree with me...

... I cannot now, as before, tell this whole story in one go. I squeeze it out of myself, drop by drop, as Chekhov²⁵⁶ in his letters to Suvorin squeezed a slave's blood out of himself. It is locked in my memory, with powerful emotional "safety barriers" erected around it. This required at one time a great effort, and even now when I lift the barriers, the painful memories threaten to burst out like pus from a punctured abscess. No, worse: like a flood that threatens to sweep away everything in its path, so that I have to immediately "close the dam." This is somewhat similar to the way war veterans remember their past. It was also a kind of war for me - unintentionally ...

This time "slamming doors " was helped by the fact that my train was approaching Dublin. Thank God! I sighed with relief when I saw outside small houses near Connolly Station, shrouded in the evening haze.

I traveled to Dublin from Belfast after work to give a lecture on the Soviet Union for the veteran Republican organization of Fionntan. I was very afraid -firstly, because I'm not used to speaking publicly, and secondly, because I did not know what kind of questions they would ask me, and if I can convey in a few words the atmosphere in which we have lived . After all, the lecture was not about the "Brezhnev doctrine", but about the very thing they know least of all over here - about our Soviet daily life. I might even say that they rather do not know anything about it at all, except for a set of stamps inspired by Western propaganda and its movies like "Rambo". But, alas, many here believe that they know everything about it.

I was so nervous that in my thoughts I even wished no one would come to my lecture, even though then it would be that I was doing my best for nothing.

My prayers seem to have been partly heard, because on that day in Dublin there was a football match, and all the youth, including the Republican ones, went to it. But still, a large group of republican veterans came to meet me - a very grateful audience who had a fairly good idea of what I was talking about, and wanted just to expand their knowledge. My fears quickly passed when I felt the friendly atmosphere in the classroom.

- If I had to describe the daily life, the atmosphere in the Soviet Union in my childhood and youth in one word, - I started, - I would probably have chosen the adjective "kind".

The audience listened to my every word. I also brought with me some Soviet books,

²⁵⁶ Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860 – 1904) was a [Russian](#) physician, dramatist and author who is considered to be among the greatest writers of short stories in history.

postcards, photographs, and my pride - a photo album with pictures of all my pen pals, from all corners of the Soviet Union ... And the questions I was asked after the lecture were good: deep, thoughtful, and at the same time friendly. There were no spiteful critics.

And then we all went to...- well, you already probably guessed it - the nearest pub to continue our discussions. Among the audience was our true and eternal farmer Frank, who was a little late for the lecture, after driving his cows to the barn for the night. He looked at many of my listeners with considerable respect, although I, of course, as someone new here, was completely unfamiliar with them.

- Do you know who this is? - Frank whispered in my ear in a loud whisper, nodding at my neighbor on the left, a quiet middle-aged man, who asked most of the questions and has been, perhaps, the most friendly of all of them for me, except for Fionntan.

- No, - I answered honestly.

- It's ... - and he gave me some typical Irish name and surname. So common that they immediately flew out of my head.

- I still do not know.

Frank looked at me reproachfully:

- It's Fionntan's deputy from *the Engineering department!*

The meaning of these words, I realized much later. But back then ... It was just a wonderful evening, and I made some new friends.

- A huge thank you, Zhenya! - said to me, shaking my hand goodbye, Fionntan - You can not imagine how important it is for us here to have such conversations. Sorry that the young today weren't here: it's just a coincidence with the football match. If we once again invite you to speak, will you come for them next time?

- I will! - this time I said it confidently.

.....
...Once a month, I took time off work and went to Dublin - to work with Douglas on the issues of party policy towards migrants and antiracist work. Frankly, that socializing gave me great intellectual pleasure. I was on the same wavelength with Douglas. He immediately understood what I was talking about.

- People here often forget that, if you dig a little deeper, you realize that all of us in our island are immigrants, - he liked to say.

Probably because Douglas, an Irish patriot, fluent in Irish, was of Scottish settlers' bloodline. But he had even translated his last name - quite common in Scotland - into Irish. To do the same to my own name would have never even occurred to me. In my opinion, that is the same as to put on a T-shirt with some revolutionary icons - for your views to be seen a mile away. I thought it sheer childishness, going into overdrive. An adult person with deep convictions does not need to prove anything. But Douglas was just like that. Always making a statement, to the point of overacting. Sometimes he even deliberately appeared on the cheap side intellectually: for example, when I had brought

him a very revealing Belgian monograph of interest to both of us and tried to present it to him in front of some witnesses, Douglas said, intentionally rudely, not even glancing at the book, that it was too tricky for him. Apparently, he was used to pretending to be less educated than he really was - to be just 'one of the boys' among the rank and file activists.

But he was still disliked by many. But not for his higher education, as he thought, but for that slight affectation of his. Try as he might to be 'one of them', walking daily about working-class districts (sometimes even with deliberately dirty fingernails, to look like a real working man!), still he had a certain kind of detachment from the real life of the masses. Actually, I was not a 'multi-task weaver', a real working class representative, either, having grown up a softie, and when we did the industrial practice at a factory after 9th grade at school, I was afraid to come up to the drill press for a long time, but much water had passed under the bridge since then, and so many places I had worked at... I thought that in order to fully understand the needs of others, we must, of course, live their lives, while pretending we were someone who we really were not would only alienate people from us, because they felt falseness all too well.

Those were trifles, and, by and large; Douglas, I thought, was the right person, working in conjunction with whom it was possible to overcome the traditional attitudes toward immigrants as 'our smaller brothers', which prevailed even among the progressive-minded left forces. For me, that attitude was very disappointing, and even more so that it came at the hand of those progressive forces. I myself had faced it quite often. For example, when they talked to you deliberately slowly. Or when they tried to put another word in your mouth. Or even when they on a regular basis 'forgot' to call for you when it came to a meeting in a neighboring village, although they had promised to...

My consultations with Douglas had become standard practice, and together we had developed a number of recommendations, which could have been embraced not only by Sinn Fein members, but even by many local authorities, for example, getting special practical guides for migrants, which would contain useful information for them: where and to whom to apply in all cases, the local systems of education, health care, banking, etc. Douglas was already dreaming and imagining such 'clinics' for migrant workers - points where they could go for help and information, set up under the auspices of the Party at least in Dublin - when our dreams were dealt a crushing blow...

I did not suspect anything, when one of those days I took a day off and went to our next meeting. They were held at the headquarters of the Party, and there were usually 1-2 people from the Dublin asset. But this time I found the door closed, and no one knew where Douglas was, and his cell phone was disconnected. I had already started to worry when the local secretary came to the door.

- Hey, Zhenya! - he greeted me, - Douglas fell ill and could not come today.

- But why didn't he call me? - I was surprised - He has my mobile number. I took the day off at work, had to travel by bus for three hours... Now, I have to travel back for

another three hours as well...

- Well, I do not know... His wife has called and said that he was very ill.

I was most hurt that Douglas had not even apologized. He could at least have sent an SMS so that I should not have to travel that far?

That happened on Friday. Over the weekend there was still no apology, he kept silent, and I decided that he must have been taken to hospital. And when the next weekend I went to visit Fionnuala and Fionntan, and was going to ask them about him, Fionntan began telling me about a Republican rally at which he had been a week earlier, on Saturday, and began to show some photos. In one of them, at the edge, I was surprised to find Douglas, thoughtfully walking away into the distance with a baby carriage. The next day after he was 'terminally' ill!

I do not like liars.

I asked for that one and a few other photos from Fionntan, without telling him why I needed them. Returning home, I scanned them and sent them to Douglas by e-mail with only one phrase: 'Yes, you really looked very sick. Well, are you feeling better now?'

The answer surpassed my expectations. Douglas exploded. Rather than simply ask forgiveness, that he had not notified me that our meeting had been canceled - what I actually would have been quite satisfied with - he came at me, like 'Karlson on the Roof²⁵⁷': 'What, can I not, like other people, just be sick?' - and began to describe in detail and colour, where, when and what exactly had hurt him on Friday, as if finding excuses for not having come.

And I did not need his self-justification. I would have rather heard the word 'sorry' from him. But apparently, that word was not included in the lexicon of that proud Irish Republican...

I was seriously offended by it and told the whole story to my mother when we were talking the next time.

- Henpecked! - was her verdict.

... Summer was coming to an end, and I still had not been on vacation. I just wasn't in a hurry. And where would I go alone, and what for? I've noticed that since I have settled in Ireland, I did not really want to go anywhere. And even if I had to, I just looked longingly at the green fields behind the airplane windows saying to them: "I'll be back!" I guess, that's why I decided to take just one week off at work and to spend it in the place where most of the Northern Republicans go on their holidays: in Donegal. It was Fionntan who gave me this idea. I rented a cottage for a week in a small coastal village, from where I

²⁵⁷ Swedish children's book, by Astrid Lindgren, extremely popular in the USSR

could see Tory Island in the Atlantic Ocean, and was already preparing for the trip, when one more extraordinary event happened ...

That day, I, as usual, went to bed early. At about 2 AM my mobile suddenly buzzed: it was a text message from Dermot.

"Have you seen the news?"

"No, why?"

"Turn on the TV, it's on right now"

Barely having managed to open my eyes, I went downstairs and turned on the TV. From TV screen Fionntan was looking straight into my eyes, with some sort of tension. For some reason he was handcuffed.

Handcuffs? I felt as if I was still dreaming.

Where is he? What happened?

I turned on the sound, listened to what they had to say and just sat down on the floor. I had absolutely no idea that the man who became over the last year and a half became as close to me as a family member and was so close to me politically (secretly, I almost saw him as my father: at least, in spiritual and ideological terms), apparently, was now thousands of kilometers away from me. In distant Latin America ...

Everything else was unimportant: that those who have arrested him, have not figured out yet who he was, or what he did there, or what fairytales the TV and the newspapers will now tell about him. Knowing Fionntan not from their tales, I was absolutely certain that whatever he was doing over there, was a useful thing for the revolution, to confront those who bombed Yugoslavia and have ruined my own country under beautiful slogans of "freedom and democracy." Fionntan was not from the ranks of vain talkers and silly dreamers. I felt proud that I can call such a man my friend. And how I have underestimated him, thinking that he had long since "retired"!

Important now was only one thing: that he was over there, overseas, in prison, in one of the most rabidly anti-communist states on that continent. And it was unknown when he could return to Ireland. And I could not help him with anything whatsoever .

Of course, none of us, even his closest family knew about his trip. Fionnuala with her children at that time was traveling around Ireland by car, and they learned about what happened when the next morning they went to a village for some shopping in the local grocery store - and saw the newspapers' headlines

Fionnuala was very angry and refused to talk about Fionntan. When her friends pestered her with silly questions like "Oh, I am so sorry! Did you know about this? ", she, knowing that all the phones were tapped, just exploded:

- Of course, I knew it. If you want to know , I sent him there myself!

But behind this flash of anger she was hiding, in my opinion, her real fear for him. And, frankly, in a country like the one where he was thrown in jail, there was a lot to fear.

That day I was in absolute prostration at work. Of course, I could not tell anyone what had happened. Of course, from the news they all already knew it, but no one knew that I was familiar with this man, and more than just familiar.. It was good that my vacation began the next day!

... I'm lying in bed by the open window, behind which the Atlantic Ocean rustles gently, like a lullaby. There is not even the slightest breeze, though this morning, while being battered by sand and splashing on the beach, I thought that I was going to be blown away right to Tory Island: The night seems to be warm, almost tropical, and the landscape - very southern, as if from some advertisement. And though I know it's not warm (I just went out into the street in an Aran jumper), but by Irish standards it is summer outside, and having lived here, you learn not to worry about such trifles, like a couple of degrees of air temperature up or down or a handful of rain splashing right into your face.

I am in Donegal. In that most mysterious, mystical Donegal, that seems like a paradise to my Northern friends. I just went outside to look at the myriad of stars in the sky, which can be seen so well, despite the beacon light from Tory Island - the only street light here, that is reflected on the ceiling of my room. I wanted to find at least one falling star to make a wish that all would end well with Fionntan, on whose advice I am having a holiday here. I think about him all the time. And when, if not in August, should one look for shooting stars in the sky?

Let everything be well with you, *mo cara mor*²⁵⁸!! When you will return home to your native Donegal, I will speak in your native language, I promise you.

... Donegal is also Ulster.

You wouldn't think about it at all when you come here. In fact, geographically, it is the most Northern of the 32 Irish counties. This is also where the most northern point of the island is situated: Malin Head. Donegal, once so strongly affected by the "potato famine" that it lost much of its population through both death and emigration, was actually "lucky": its Catholic population in the early 20th century continued to exceed that of the Protestant colonists and because of that Britain did not want to include it into "Northern Ireland". Although there are some Orangemen marching here once a year in one of the local villages, it is a harmless exoticism for the local residents. The Orangemen constitute an insignificant percentage of the population, and most Protestants here consider themselves to be Donegal Irish, and in Donegal's Gaeltacht you can often see signs in Irish on shops with names of clearly Scottish origin: McIntyre, McFadden. Donegal is a classic example that the representatives of both communities can live well in peace side by side, if British imperialism does not incite them.

²⁵⁸ My big friend (Irish)

A significant number of Protestants are living in other counties of Ulster that have remained in the Irish Republic after the partition of its territory: Cavan and Monaghan. And although I know of a couple of "Romeo and Juliet" cases in Monaghan (on the basis of origin), they were far from being so dramatic and usually end peacefully, but to my question whether there is any friction between communities in the border counties, farmer Frank replied that there is probably none. Except for the fact that Protestants -out of feelings of solidarity - prefer to shop in shops belonging to one of their own community. But does this come even close to compare with that zoo, into which the 6 counties were converted by Britain?

During my time living in Ireland I have traveled almost all around it. Donegal has been one of the few places unfamiliar to me. I wanted to come here a long time, to this county - a sort of "Republican Riviera". If somebody asks them in September, where they have spent their holidays, almost all the Republicans say that in Donegal. This beautiful, rugged region, looking at which I cannot help thinking of the Kola Beldy²⁵⁹'s song: "If you have fallen in love with the North, this love will never cease!", provides all of them with a new supply of energy for the coming year.

This was one of the reasons why I wanted to see Donegal with my own eyes: what's so special about it that gives so much strength and inspiration to these people in their difficult struggle? I wanted to feel for myself what it means for a person who comes here from the 6 counties.

Another reason, as I said, was Fionntan's advice: he was one of the few people with whom I could share my innermost thoughts, feelings, and even frustrations.

- I'm tired of being a sort of "exotic animal"! I just want to be one of you! - I told him at the kitchen table when he, as usual, was making for me a cup of tea. And he, himself a native of this place, advised me to spend my holidays in Falcarragh²⁶⁰, to talk to visitors and to the local people here in pubs and on the streets.

- You'll see, everything will be different after this! Everything will be fine! - his quiet calm voice still sounds in my ears.

He is not here. His life now reminds me my own a few years back, when every day seemed to be a bad dream, a bad expensive Hollywood film. But all the nightmares come to an end some day, and I know it now. And I was looking for a falling star in the sky tonight - so that his bad dream would be over as soon as possible.

What is Donegal famous for? For its long sandy beaches that on the postcards look so similar to the West Indian ones (if it weren't for the old thatched Irish cottages in the

²⁵⁹ Kola Beldy (1929 – 1993) was a Soviet pop singer of Siberian aboriginal [Nanai](#) ethnicity

²⁶⁰ An Fál Carrach (anglicized as Falcarragh), is a small [Gaeltacht](#) town in northwest [County Donegal, Ireland](#)

background.) Of course, for its Gaeltacht²⁶¹ in Donegal, along with Connemara, the greatest number of areas are preserved where people still speak Irish! This gave rise to this present pilgrimage of those who seek, against practicalities of today's life, to learn their true language - the language of their ancestors. In summer special schools open all around Donegal: for both children and adults, who can update their knowledge of the Irish language there, or start learning it from scratch. Also people from America, Holland and other countries come here for this. For teenagers in Donegal's Gaeltacht there are special summer courses in which during their stay it is prohibited to speak English. An error is only forgiven for the first time: those caught the second time are mercilessly sent back home, and there is no greater shame for an Irish family, than a premature return from such course!

Sometimes strange things happened: as Mary, one of my friends, told me, when she in her adolescence was in Donegal at that course, one of her friends had an attack of appendicitis. No one knew how to say "appendicitis" in Irish, and the poor fellow almost died until Mary finally screamed: " *Dochtúir! An ospidéal!*"²⁶² , and the teachers finally figured out what was going on.²⁶³

You think this was extreme? And are you familiar with how "nice and very civilized," as we assured in our media today, the British forcibly weaned the Irish off their native language? 100-150 years ago Gaeltacht was much bigger. According to the English writer Liz Curtis, in her book "*Nothing But the Same Old Story: Roots of Anti-Irish Racism*," in 1831 the British introduced the so-called "national" education system - called by the late poet-revolutionary Padraig Pearse a "murder weapon": there was no room for the Irish language in it anymore, and it quickly began to die out. Irish children had to wear a special neck plate: each time a child spoke in Irish, it was marked down on the plate, and at the end of the day the child was punished according to the number of marks on it. And children also had to inform on each other - so that not you, but another one would be punished harder.

My first day in Donegal passed chaotically: as everything is always chaotic, where farmer Frank is involved. He volunteered to be my driver for the day, and we agreed to meet in the main town of Donegal - Letterkenny, to where I could at least go by bus. To my surprise, this time he arrived on time. Frank often behaves like Karlson On The Roof, "*I told you that I would come approximately. And that's how I came: approximately!*" and it is just impossible to become angry at him after that.

And this time he was, as usual, full of plans. I just wanted to get to my destination and to have a rest, but Frank offered to "show" me Donegal. That took him half a day. One can only hope that his cows did not suffer from his long absence!

²⁶¹ Gaeltacht is the [Irish language](#) word meaning an Irish-speaking region. In [Ireland](#), the Gaeltacht, refers individually to any, or collectively to all, of the districts where the government recognises that the [Irish language](#) is the predominant language, that is, the [vernacular](#) spoken at home.

²⁶² Doctor! Hospital! (Irish)

²⁶³ Children in Gaelic summer courses at the time were not allowed to use English language for the time of the course

For the start, we tried at least five times to get out of Letterkenny. Every time I was telling him gently that he was picking the wrong way, but every time he just grabbed his head and made a sound similar to Yuri Nikulin in "The Diamond Arm"²⁶⁴ when it was indicated to him that it was useless to hide the pistol under a summer cap. Frank is one of those who is sure to get into an ambush, even when there is none.

He is a sort of personification of the slow, unhurried rural Ireland, and with him you must have an angel's patience if you are a city dweller who is always in a hurry. True, he drives his car almost like Schumacher: the wind whistles in your ears and you begin to feel sick in your stomach. While he is carried away in a conversation, he periodically removes both hands from the steering wheel, describing something, but when the car almost ends up smashing into a pit, he is forced to press on the brakes with such force that just by a miracle you do not fly through the windshield. But getting angry at him for this is impossible too - because he immediately comes up with a disarming "Sorry!".

When we finally succeeded to get out of Letterkenny, the weather turned bad. I wanted to see the most Northern point of Ireland - Malin Head on the Inishowen Peninsula, and we rushed there through such narrow roads that I was sure that we would be lost. However, my Susanin²⁶⁵ did not let me down! Three times we still crossed the border into the North, because we could not find the way around Derry to Buncrana. The border here is even less noticeable than on the way from Dublin to Belfast: here it is practically non-existent. No wonder that Derry's shops accept Southern money, and even at the rate of 1:1: it would be more trouble for them with the exchange.

Malin Head itself disappointed me. We took pictures of the weather station and went on a headland on which there were three ugly concrete structures, resembling the abandoned bus stops of Khrushchev era. Why they were built, did not become really clear to me. Perhaps, so that the tourists could hide from the rain? At the bottom I could see Malin Head itself to which only the most fit visitors could get. A giant "Eire" was spelled out with stones on it, along with the names of many visitors, including an unknown "Elena" signed in Russian letters.

When we came out of Malin Head, it began pouring rain. Mountain feral sheep trotted slowly down the road, not paying any attention to the cars that beeped at them. Inishowen

²⁶⁴ Famous Soviet comedy film (1969)

²⁶⁵ Ivan Susanin (died 1613) was a Russian [folk hero](#) and [martyr](#) of the early 17th century's [Time of Troubles](#). There were many Polish detachments roaming Russia in 1613. They supported [Sigismund III Vasa](#), who [refused to accept defeat](#) and still laid claim to the Russian throne. One of these discovered the news and sent troops to Kostroma to find and kill the young tsar Mikhail Romanov. It is said that they did not know the road very well, so they started to ask the locals for directions. In woods near the village they met a logger, Ivan Susanin, who promised to take them via a "shortcut" through a forest. The enemies followed him and were never heard from again. It is presumed that Susanin led them so deep into the forest that they could not find a way out, and they perished in the bitter cold February night.

as a whole looked pretty bleak, and I was glad when we left it and Buncrana behind and headed for the more colorful parts of Donegal - Ratmullen, Milford and Portsalon. The weather also improved, the sun came out, which allowed me to appreciate the beauty of the local coastline in full. This indefatigable Frank still managed to get his way and to bring me to an ancient monument between Derry and Letterkenny: a circular fort of the late Bronze - early Iron Age, the former residence of the kings of Ulster O'Neills. It was standing on a hill, a high white stone building that looked a bit like our old Kremlin (it was possible to climb the walls and walk on them; from above you could see at least half of Donegal), only much older. I froze almost to death on these walls, and warmed up again just closer to Dunfanaghy.

Donegal really is beautiful, but I could not appreciate it fully until I spent a couple of days there. For example, the town where I live is beautiful too, and for a long time I could not understand why every one of my friends, without exception, wanted to relax in Donegal, when my town is just as beautiful and much closer to home for them. Only on the third day of my stay in Meenlaragh (that was the name of the village in which I rented my "dacha" for a week) I understood, when I was fully filled with the serenity of these places. All that was left behind, in some other world, which was now like a bad dream: loyalist pipe bombs exploding daily and nightly, thrown through the windows of those who "did not conform," the daily roundup of depression: beatings and burnings, threats of parades, the very feeling of oppression, hanging heavy in the air, when you can not say aloud what you think, when you walk down the street, internally strained, when all around you NATO armored cars scurry back and forth.

If I had come for a holiday in Donegal from Dublin, and not from the North of Ireland, I could probably never understand what it meant for my friends - FREEDOM!

The normality of life as it should be for everyone. And how life, without doubt, would have been in the North - if not for "pious" British "peacekeepers" with their inciting of people of different ethnic groups against each other, with their centuries-old experience of succeeding in this, from Ulster to the Middle East, from Zimbabwe to Fiji!

It was already getting dark when we got to Falcarragh - the village, which Fionntan was advising me so much to visit. Somehow it was hard to think that we were so far to the North: such a southern, such resort-like atmosphere was all around, from Falcarragh to Gortahork, the place with summer homes of many famous figures of the republican movement. Gortahork is a small village on the banks of a bay, almost closed as a circle, which during low tide almost becomes dry. According to census data, there were only 123 people living here. Of course, everyone knows each other. It is so exciting when you pass through lush Gortahork and find yourself on the mountainous, almost like the Crimean, roads, with a view of the vast expanses of the Atlantic and the long, dazzling yellow Donegal sandy beach, without a single pebble ... If only the water was warm!

Meenlaragh is only 5 kilometers from Gortahork. A small village, it is divided into Upper Town (above the road) and the Lower Town (below the road, closer to the ocean). Between Gortahork and Meenlaragh there is a small pier, from where boats leave daily to Tory Island- one of the most interesting parts of traditional Ireland.

The cottage, where I was to spend the week, was quite new. In these harsh Northern

areas, as well as in our Crimea, local residents are trying to earn for the whole year ahead by letting of accommodation for tourists during the summer. I decided to take up the room in the attic: from there not only could you see the ocean, but if you slept with the window open, you could even be lulled by its sound. I was hoping that for this week I could really disconnect from everything, but I continued to follow the news. I wish I could be at least a week in a place where there was no TV, no radio, no newspapers! And even though I purposely tried not to turn the TV on, Dermot still found a way to inform me of the latest news - on the phone.

By the evening of my first day in Meenlaragh I slept like a log after all the fresh air, firmly intending the next morning to explore on foot all the neighborhood and go to Tory Island.

But nothing came out of my wishes the next morning. I was awakened by howling, almost gale-force, winds, the crashing of waves and the sound of rain on the roof.

The views from my window picture reminded me of an old nursery rhyme: "*The sea is worrying once, the sea is worrying twice*" There was nothing left, but to wait at least for the rain to stop. I did not bring a raincoat with me, and a city style umbrella under Donegal's weather is pure suicide. It's not that the experienced villagers would laugh at you: the fact was that even if you weren't knocked down and taken away into the air like Mary Poppins, your umbrella would not last here for more than just a couple minutes. It will be pulled inside out and back in different directions in your hands a couple of times and then broken into pieces. And you will still be soaked up to your underwear.

I honestly waited until the rain ended. When the gentle sun lit from all sides and the sky remained cloudless, I cautiously opened the door ... It's warm! Hooray!

The first boat to Tory Island departed on schedule at 11:30, and I hurried to the harbor. There was a breeze, but, in general, it was, in my opinion, tolerable. Great was my disappointment when I saw a piece of paper on the doors of the barn, where tickets were sold for the ferry to Tory, on which it was written that today all sailings were canceled due to the adverse weather conditions! I, of course, blamed it on Yemelya²⁶⁶-like Irish laziness and grumbled dissatisfied, walking in the direction of the beach: at least, I could go for a walk along the ocean, if there was nothing else to do. The ocean looked almost serene, and I honestly could not understand what was so adverse about these weather conditions, to justify the cancellation.

But just 20 minutes later, not only did I understand the wisdom of the Irish and admit to myself that I am not really a sea person, but I was cursing my decision to go for a walk: the wind on the beach was almost of hurricane force. And I really almost could not see the waves in the ocean for one simple reason: because the wind was blowing from the opposite side and blew them back before they had time to reach the shore. But if you tried to turn around a boat, even a small fishing one, in such weather, it would most definitely overturn and sink! As I walked towards the sand spit almost connecting the coast to the

²⁶⁶ Russian folk hero known for his laziness (Yemelya The Lazybones)

island of Inishbofin, on which I could see a dozen little white houses, walking was still possible. But when I turned back, despite all the water around me, I quickly began to feel as if I was in the Karakum Desert²⁶⁷: my feet were stuck in the sand, the wind was pushing me backwards after every few steps, and a wonderful "wet" drifting sand flowed down the beach: as snow in Russia in February drifts on the roads on a windy day, so here there was a mixture of water and sand. I could see how water "ran" to meet me, and occasionally, when it became drier around, it turned into streams of sand, which lashed with incredible force into my face. One of my ears was completely clogged with sand, the other was filled with water. The sweetest part began, when all of this went on- with a continuously shining sun! - , and from the sky mizzling, nasty rain started to whip, insufficient for opening an umbrella (especially since I did not want to risk being swept into the abyss!), but well sufficient to getting soaked to the bone! The wind changed its direction with every outburst. Imagine all this at the same time, and those of you who have ever used hairspray, will be fully able to imagine in what condition I reached home

...

No wonder I scared even an experienced local fisherman, who was sitting on the shore, up to his neck in a wooden box full of huge live crabs! He was retrieving those smelly creatures out of the box one by one and throwing them into an ice-filled chest: they had to stay alive all the way to Spain. When I passed by this fisherman, he was about to dive into his box with his head! No, Donegal definitely does not allow a city woman to keep her good looks.

By the time I got back into the house I was all battered by rain and wind. It felt like every bone in my body was broken. Climbing up the hill from the pier, I finally couldn't care less what somebody else would think of my looks and, to relieve stress, I moved to "grassing". The entire slope was tightly overgrown with thickets of blackberry - a bit like raspberry, only black and sour - and I was not paying any attention anymore to my stuck together hair and wet shoes, filling my stomach with berries: A cold rain with sunny skies as the day before, helped me to calm down and to start thinking soberly again. And after coming to the house in squelchy shoes and continuing to shake the water out of one ear and sand out the other, I firmly understood that no Latin American jail can break those who grew up in such weather conditions!

By the next morning, the wind calmed down completely and the ferry resumed its sailing to Tory Island. This boat - a small, blue one - looked like a cutter from our cartoon with the song about Chunga-Changa²⁶⁸. It was almost like a living creature.

I came to the pier too early, so I decided to walk back along the beach. Well, I could not believe that my nasty experience from the first day could be repeated!

In fact, the wind was much weaker, although it continued to buzz in my ears the whole way. During the night a lot of cobblestones were brought to the beach by the waves, and quite heavy ones. There also lay some unusual algae, as big as whole trees! I wanted to get to the very edge of the beach, to the point where the dunes break off, leaving a sand

²⁶⁷ The biggest desert in the USSR, now in Turkmenistan

²⁶⁸ Song from the Soviet cartoon "The Little Cutter"

spit in the ocean. Because of this, I almost missed the boat, although I did reach that edge and became aware that beyond it things were just becoming more interesting! My "long road in the dunes²⁶⁹" had to be postponed till the next day ...

With shouts of joy, some German tourists leaped from a boat onto the ground, whose "Volkswagen" stood on the dock here for a couple of days: they had been stuck on Tory because of the weather and, judging by their faces, already had lost all hope of returning to the "civilized" world! While they caressed their car, which, of course, no one even touched (in Meenlaragh nobody even locks the doors of their houses!), I was just in time to buy a ticket in the barn and to run to the boat's deck.

It is mainly tourists who visit Tory, and fans of the Irish language. Those who want to learn a little more about its past, may refer to the preface of a book by Kevin Toolis, whose ancestors were born here - "Rebels Hearts." There he talks about how Tory was the last piece of land on the West coast of Ulster, to where the most proud and defiant of its inhabitants who had survived, were rounded up, and about how they managed to survive there throughout the centuries: men went to work in Scotland, for almost 9 months of the year, came back with money in the summer, gave it to their family (which usually by then had a newborn baby) for the year ahead, and when the summer ended, off they went again, while women and children of Tory were often forced to survive in winter by begging²⁷⁰ ... The island often had famine. This is not surprising: the land here is almost solid rock, even trees do not grow here. It is surprising even today how people can survive here.

But they do! In summer the cutter arrives here several times per day, in winter – depending on the weather... Now the Irish government plans to begin winter flights to the island with the help of a helicopter. A recently repaired building of local school has opened. However, there is a drastic need for teachers here. The inhabitants of Tory use Irish language in their everyday life till these days. Here I heard it for the first time, – and it was not just some learnt by heart "dia duit²⁷¹" which I heard on the road to Meenlaragh from teenagers sent there for summer!

It took approximately fifty minutes to travel to Tory by sea. I stood on deck, and cutter was rolling downwards and upwards, though the waves were small. At first it was somewhat inconvenient, but at the end I really liked it. On the pier of Tory we were awaited by the old local "sea wolf" who welcomed the newly arrived with "Failte²⁷²". The majority of tourists stay here just for a day, but some of them stay even for a week. There is one hotel on the island, one hostel and a couple of "B &B's". In the evenings people kindle peat fire in the hearth and begin the party of local folklore in a sole local pub, which reminds one of a shed... You won't find a pub like this in Dublin clogged by tourists or even in Galway! People not only sing and dance, but also tell stories and

²⁶⁹ Name of the popular Soviet Latvian film

²⁷⁰ All information about Tory Island is taken from Kevin Toolis' s book " Rebel Hearts"

²⁷¹ Hello (Irish)

²⁷² Welcome! (Irish)

legends, – and all of this in the Irish language: so, it is worth staying here at least for one evening!

At night the island is absolutely isolated from the mainland which is called here just "Land": the last cutter casts off at 6 p.m. However, at night Tory is illuminated with the electric fires of lanterns: from its one settlement, the West Town to the other, East Town. It is not that hard to get from one to another on foot, though some tourists hire bicycles from the islanders. Everything – the main harbor, a little shop, hotel, cafe, club – is concentrated in the West Town. East town consists of just a few houses near the "wild" part, almost separated from the rest of the island. Its steep rocks are even more beautiful than the well-known Cliffs of Moher.

The islanders also drive cars. There are only about ten cars, the majority of them are too old, that's why it wouldn't be allowed to use them on the "main land", they are both with Southern and with Northern license plates. It seemed that these cars were constantly circling around you. It can be explained by the fact that local teenagers learn to drive in such a way. What else could you do here for fun in the afternoon, except for "shadowing" tourists?

My first impression of the West Town was the rural shop, "*Siopa An Phobail*²⁷³", as a signboard proudly said. It was really similar to our Soviet village shop, where everything was sold in a heap. It was dark inside, a smell of bananas was everywhere. The shop assistant, a handsome, curly dark haired middle aged man, talked with the customers in Irish. I also tried to "be served" in Irish. Fortunately, I knew the numbers and how to say "thanks". In reply I heard from the seller's and other islanders' their benevolent "*Maith thu!*"²⁷⁴

"*Siopa*" was closed at three o'clock, and "*siopador*²⁷⁵" flashed by me on an old jeep when I was coming back from the East Town to the harbor. He took one hand off the wheel to greet me, as it is a common way to greet the passers-by in Ireland, both familiar and unfamiliar.

The streets on Tory are not all paved, many houses are abandoned, many are just under construction ... The island is famous for its local artists, and also for the fact that a special sect once lived here which taught people how to relax ... by shouting. According to its members' opinion, they got rid of negative emotions in such a way. They were called "The Screamers"²⁷⁶ and they used to live in a field between West and East Towns. Not all inhabitants of Tory liked this, and the sect was eventually "expelled". All that is left from that group on Tory today, is one of the thrown away old caravans on the stony field where purple heather grows... And the sect has gone off to Latin America where its members have since organized their own organic farm.

²⁷³ Folk shop (Irish)

²⁷⁴ Well done! (Irish)

²⁷⁵ Shopkeeper (Irish)

²⁷⁶ According to some information, they actually were placed not on Tory, but in another location in Donegal

The remains of a lofty tower dominates the middle of West Town. Such towers can be seen in all Ireland, for example, in Glendalough. There was also a pair of other ancient monuments, an old cemetery for local residents and a church. At the end of the street there was a cafe with a menu common for any Irish small restaurant. Outwardly it reminded me our rural cantines from those times when we were going to work in the collective farms. Only two women served the tourists. They were fast, dexterous, quick, and looked almost like Russian rural women, "the very picture of health" or, as they say in Russia, "blood with milk"

The club was the last building in the street. Behind it there was a deserted district, with the lighthouse whose light shone at night into my window in Meenlaragh. Tourists dispersed along the town, some wanted to have a bite to eat, some – to buy a picture, some – simply to lie down on the grass, and very few people ventured to go to the East Town: only the greatest adventurers reached the rocks. But that was a pity. In my opinion, it was the greatest natural beauty spot of this severe island. Moreover we were lucky to be here in good weather, so it was a sin to miss such a chance.

"Waves break roaring against the rocks..." These first lines from "Aria of Varyag Guest" from the opera "Sadko"²⁷⁷ came to my mind when I reached this uninhabited part of Tory – the rocks. And it was marvelously easy to walk on them, gray stones under my feet were covered with pink heather, and all I had to do, was to jump from one stone plateau on another. Two or three tourist were in front of me at some distance. They gallantly left each other some space, so that we all could feel like lonely wanderers, catching sight of a gentle violet on the horizon²⁷⁸. Several small pyramids have been made from flat gray stones at the top of a stony slope. Nobody knows whether it was done by ancient inhabitants of local places, or by some romantic tourists who tried to imitate them. Every person, reaching the top, put a new stone on a pyramid ... The slope was flat enough and glinted in the sun because of the streamlets flowing down between branches of heather. The sun reflected from these flat stones and absolutely unexpectedly managed to burn the skin on my face! I found it out only in the evening, in Meenlaragh.

It was hard to imagine that when you reach the top, quite easily, on the other side a real precipice over the deep ocean abyss is waiting for you! When I got there and looked down, towards the sea, I felt very dizzy ... Rocks the height of a seven-story building just dropped off over dark-blue waves with white combs somewhere far below ... They formed freakish bays, cut off the ocean from three sides into which the waves rushed with a roar. The rock sticking out in the middle of one bay surprisingly looked like an emerging submarine ... The rocks were all plastered by the great number of screeching birds of all kinds.

Tourists preferred to admire all this beauty staying at some distance from each other. On the other side, another "set" of steep steps began below under a slope, as if in a puff pie. There was also a silent bay with a small pier stage for fishermen of East Town.

²⁷⁷ *Sadko* is an [opera](#) by [Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov](#). (1867)

²⁷⁸ From the Russian version of "Charley's Aunt", film "Hello, I'm your Aunt!" (1977)

What a perfect location for shooting some film!

Once in the 1970s the Irish authorities had tried to move the inhabitants from Tory to mainland, but this started such heated protest actions that the idea had to be abandoned. At that very time "the commune" of artists-primitivists was formed, which still live and work here now. Also they sell their pictures for tourists, and exhibit them in the local art gallery.

I was nearly late for the sailing back as I had to wait for a baked potato in the café too long. If I would have been late, I would have to stay here for the night! All the way back I was proudly standing on the aft of the boat. "*Our proud Varyag doesn't surrender to the enemy*²⁷⁹!" – these words came to my thoughts. I took such a proud position there absolutely in vain, because in 15 minutes our "Varyag" cut the first wave and the water, as cold as if from the basement, poured onto me from head to toe! Old ladies, standing near me, squealed and retreated into the cabin. But I am an obstinate person. I continued staying there until we reached the coast. I was been poured on again and again for at least five times and there wasn't a dry thread on me... But I didn't feel cold: after all I was burnt by the sun on Tory, so I felt a bit feverish!

When we approached the coast, another "pleasant surprise" was waiting for us: ebb tide began with such ferocity, that the pier was bared almost to the bottom, and there wasn't any possibility to approach it. The cutter quietly dropped an anchor somewhere about a mile from the coast, and a small fishing boat was directed towards us, into which we were supposed to get in order to get back on dry land.

We were told to put on the bullet proof ... excuse me, life jackets. And then fishermen helped us, and we jumped off one by one into this boat from a short flight of stairs. I was scared quite a bit, when I was sitting in this boat, and somebody else jumped into it: it tilted on one side so heavily that it seemed, just one more movement, and we would repeat the destiny of "Titanic"!

We were crammed into this boat like sardines (it had to make three or four trips in total), it plunged into the water almost up till its rands ... But the fishermen remained imperturbable. When it finally seemed to them that "Bolivar cannot carry double"²⁸⁰, one of them wound up the motor and we took off with a jerk. Some elderly Americans behind me nearly fell overboard.

- Well, Sally, this isn't the Caribbean for you! – said one of them to his wife who nearly lost into the ocean her set of false teeth. The next ten minutes seemed to me as eternity. Though full calm reigned at the ocean, and the gentle waves tenderly splashed on board, each wave seemed to us like a real tsunami! At last we got off this boat on shore and many people had trembling knees...

- It was so exotic! – Sally exclaimed.

²⁷⁹ Russian song "The Sinking of "Varyag" (from the Russian-Japanese war time at the beginning of the XX century

²⁸⁰ Quote from O'Henry's short story

When I was back at the house, I did not want to do anything else, just to reach the bed and have a deep sleep for the next 3 days! But I overcame my tiredness and turned on the TV ...

... "Last night loyalists detonated a bomb in county Antrim. Police confirmed a sectarian motive for the attack. A Catholic church was set on fire in the morning ..."

Goodness me! I looked at the lady from SDLP on TV screen, who was asking with a perfectly serious, deadpan face: "So what really happened there, in South America? It's so important to know the truth for the Peace Process!". I thought to myself: I can't believe that in a few days I will have to go back into that menagerie!

My Meenlaragh landlady was a nurse. She told me that there was a bus too in Meenlaragh. Two times per day!

On Thursday morning I woke up with the firm intention to visit Falkarragh and to make a "pilgrimage" to Gortahork. When I went down to the kitchen to have a cup of tea, I realized that the beautiful seashells - pink, yellow, striped - which I had gathered last night on the grass, came to life! Yesterday they seemed to me dead, but today their residents woke up and crawled out of the shells to stretch themselves... It turned out that these were not clams, but ordinary snails! I started catching them with a desperate scream, and I tried to throw them out of the window. It took me about 15 minutes.

The bus in rural Ireland is also very slow. When I got up into the "Upper Town", I saw a lonely Irish farmer with a tanned face. I asked him when will the bus arrive? He didn't answer, just muttered out something like old men in "White Sun of the Desert" to comrade Sukhov: "We sit here for a long time....".

I went to the post office and the only shop in Meenlaragh, hoping to find something interesting. There was nobody inside the post office. The bundles of money could be seen through the window. In our country or even in Dublin, this window would have already been smashed! It was crowded in the shop, and some quite exotic provincial newspapers were offered for sale. People in the shop spoke Irish. By the way, my landlady told me that the school pays a few hundred pounds a year to her children for the knowledge of the Irish language, and those who decided to settle in the Gaeltacht, can get grants for housing as a help from the state.

The bus came at 11 o'clock instead of 10. It was an old bus packed up with Irish-speaking elderly ladies who went shopping to Falkarragh. All these ladies spoke fast, I did not understand a single word from their speech, except for "agus" (and) and "go maith" (OK). The sun shone through the windows, traditional cottages passed beyond it one by one. In ten minutes we were in Gortahork. Gortahork and its neighborhood are called "Costa Del Provo" in folk's language. Last year I had such a feeling about

Gortahork as "*to see Gortahork and to die*²⁸¹", but everything had to be done in its time, and now I was even surprised not to have any feelings about this place at all...

Falkarragh was a sort of "return to the civilized world": shops, in which you will definitely be shortchanged! Fionntan had advised me to visit these very pubs in the evenings. But alas, I didn't have such an opportunity because of my lack of transport. I bought different "goods of civilisation" which were not available in Meenlaragh, such as ready-made fried chicken.

I didn't really have a rest in Donegal. Instead of sleeping late in the mornings and communicating with holiday makers in the pubs in the evenings, I constantly tossed in bed, counting the stars in the sky through my window in the roof. I woke up too early in the morning and wandered aimlessly everywhere, eating huge quantities of blackberries.

I tried everything: I went to Tory Island on a boat, climbed the rocks, wandered along the endless Gulf of Gortahork that is hiding from the ocean wind behind high dunes ... But nothing could help me. I thought only about what happened to Fionntan. When stars appeared in the sky, I was thinking about him and his comrades. When I woke up in the morning, I wondered how soon we would be able to see him again.

So there was nothing exciting about my holiday. I did not relax, could not calm down.

I really missed Fionntan. I missed his wise advice, his calm tone, his confidence that justice will prevail on our planet.

When I returned, it was very difficult to be at work after being in that quiet, sleepy village with its only shop, combined with the post office. Even though I moved to the North some time ago, only now I began to feel how insane was the world in which I lived: as soon as you cross the invisible border with the South, you immediately feel a relief. The North was a world where such things as burning, shooting, beatings were absolutely normal (I think, nothing else but these things are shown in the local news) - and it was impossible to express here openly your own thoughts. Here you could get for it not just some "clip around the ear" at a Party meeting, but a bullet in your forehead. It was difficult to get used to it after my life in the Soviet Union and even after the Netherlands. But I had to get used to it, in order to be able to help to change it for the better. And I continued working, recording my interviews, making mental notes in my memory. I didn't show open anger when I came across pure intellectual and moral medievalism ...

... Willem was tall and thin. He reminded me of the evil sorcerer Koshchey the Immortal from the children's fairy tale film "New Adventures of Masha and Vitya", but he was not as cute. He sat by the window, smoking and drinking coffee in Dutch style - strong, with milk, but almost black, with just a bit of sugar.

²⁸¹ Gortahork is the place of summer residence of Sinn Fein's leader

Living in Holland, you would inevitably begin to think that the Dutch are stingy about milk or sugar. But they really like to drink their coffee this way. But Willem and I were not in Holland at this time. We sat in the lobby of the most frequently bombed hotel in Belfast.

Willem was flattered by my attention. I found him myself over the internet and decided to interview him for the Irish radio. After all, although he considered himself a radio journalist, his true profession was a radio engineer.

Willem was a Dutchman, and we spoke in Dutch. To his great delight, far away from his home country he met me - a stranger who suddenly appeared to be able to talk to him in his native language.

Willem began to tell his story. He started with memories of his childhood in a distant Dutch provincial town. Then he talked about his work for the radio. In the Netherlands Willem was a socialist. He supported the Dutch "Labor" party. In Northern Ireland his sympathies turned to the local fascists. I am not afraid to use this term and to call a spade a spade.

He came here for financial reasons: where else should a "free-lance" journalist work? In Israel all the "places under the sun" were already taken by other Dutch journalists. That's why Willem decided to try a less hot spot: Belfast.

- Well, and do you earn well here?

Willem did not feel the irony in my voice. The Dutch usually take everything literally - even I had to struggle with this feature after living in the Netherlands for many years. But it is a big "no-no" to take everything literally in Ireland. At least, if you really want to understand this country.

He enthusiastically began to tell me about his earnings. When something happens - like some powerful explosion, another "crisis" in the peace process, with its regular suspensions of democratically elected local authorities - Willem can quickly sell his report and get good money for it. Sometimes it is difficult to make a living - when things are peaceful and quiet for a while. But today he has enough money. And he orders me some Irish coffee, to demonstrate it to me.

After the second cup of Irish coffee the Dutchman obviously wants to impress me. He tells me what local celebrities he had the opportunity to interview. Trimble, Paisley, Sammy Wilson, Lady Sylvia Hermon, Nigel Dodds. I notice that there are only Unionists among them. Most of them are quite extreme in their views. If Willem can interview any Republicans, they are usually the dissidents.

- Well, and what about you? Whom did you manage to interview? - he asks. Of course, I downplayed my achievements and modestly said:

- Well, for example, Mary Nelis²⁸².

- That's a tough granny! - Willem says with respect in his voice (respect not for Mary, but for me, because I "managed" to speak to her, one of the friendliest and nicest persons I met here!). And then he begins his monologue about who are, according to his opinion, "hardline Stalinists".

- Oh, Willem, you haven't seen the real Stalinists! – I sigh. Because for me they are exactly not "Stalinists" enough.

But he still understood nothing, and still wants to impress me. He tells me about his place of living: in the center of Southern Belfast, in the area which is probably even more dangerous than Shankill - the Village. A loyalist village. Everybody knows each other here, and any newcomer is checked thoroughly. The Village has become "famous" for the fact, that recently there was an expulsion of an African family which couldn't even suspect into what nest of vipers they were put to live by the authorities. When I remind Willem of this, he only waves it away with his hand dismissively. He also invites me to interview Paisley-jr. with him tomorrow:

– I will introduce you to him! – Willem obviously thinks that I should die of happiness on the spot!

– You know, Willem, I have quite other ideals in my life, - I dismiss the matter with a joke. - When I was young, I dreamed of meeting Patrice Lumumba ...

– Lumumba? – exclaims already drunk Willem. - He was a nasty piece of work! But he doesn't explain why he thinks so.

He is in a hurry to speak about himself. He worries that I won't have enough time to fully value his talents; after all, it is time for me to go home. When he came to live in the Village, the permission from the high meeting of local Loyalists was required for it! And they did give him such permission! Now he hasn't any problems, his relations with people there are just fine.

-Well, and what about those Africans, Willem? – I ask, but he vaingloriously doesn't listen to me. Those Africans, that's a mere trifle! After all, there are such "heroes" living there around him!

When you start reading his articles more attentively, it is clear that Willem is not so neutral towards the local conflict as he wants his audience to believe he is, and as it is required from a Western journalist. It is very evident during the conversation with Willem. Especially if you don't tell him aloud you own views first...

²⁸² Mary Margaret Nelis, was a [Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly](#). She was born in the [Bogside](#) area of [Derry, Northern Ireland](#), in 1935. She left school at fourteen to work in the Hogg and Mitchell shirt factory. She became active in the civil rights campaign demanding equal rights for the people of the city in the 1960s

In his "balanced" articles Willem goes even further than the British mass-media or the North Irish police. They know exactly that for slander and unfounded accusations they could be held accountable under the law. That is why they camouflage their propaganda under the words: "we believe that" or by using many conditional inclinations of verbs. He just strongly believes that none of his victims can read what he wrote about them in another language.

In one such report Willem has accused Fionntan and his comrades of "training Latin American terrorists in manufacturing of car bombs in exchange for drugs". What are you talking about, Willem? Fionntan and drugs go along about as much as George Bush goes along with reading the complete works of Lenin. This is some very non-scientific fiction!

At that time the local police found and confiscated the largest consignment of drugs in the North. By the way, it belonged to those very people with whom Willem so zealously sympathizes: the Loyalists. But they write about it here only in small letters. And Willem himself, naturally, is rather silent about it. It is better not to spoil the relations with neighbors!

It was the Queens Day, a national holiday in Netherlands. Willem was one of the main initiators of celebrating it for the local Dutch community ... in an Orange Hall ... It would have been hard to choose a more racist and sectarian place!

But what about your "balanced and neutral approach"? What about "journalistic professionalism", Willem?

Everybody knows that "neutral" journalism doesn't exist. It is a myth created by capitalist apologists in order not to allow journalists to have and to defend their civic position. But for such journalists as Willem there is always the green light by their media.

For example, the Soviet journalists always expressed their position openly (it is impossible to be "neutral" with evil and it is impossible to sympathize with racists, if you are not racist yourself!). But such journalists as Willem aspire to poison their unsophisticated readers with their writings, behind the false mask of a "balanced approach".

-They are such people here! One of a kind! - Willem says with deep feelings about Unionists-Loyalists. – People just don't understand them! People underestimate the depth of their feelings and the depth of their spiritually-emotional bond with Britain!

... And in my mind there are crying little girls from Catholic school who on their way to school were spat at, stoned and pelted with bottles filled with urine- by Willem's "sensitive" and "spiritual" friends ... Who flatly refuse to recognize that someone else can have feelings too, except for themselves.

I wonder, by the way, how would Willem's lovely neighbors react if they would have learned that he is a Catholic? Oh, I suspect there would have been quite some feathers flying around the Village ...

... Summer came to an end. Gradually I forced myself to get used to the working routine again, and again gray and monotonous days have begun to follow each other: waking up – bus – work – bus – house – sleep – waking up ... That was my life. I still looked forward to hearing from Cuba. Dermot has been informed that the things were moving, but when would we get the answer, nobody knew. I tried not to think what would happen, if this answer would be negative. And what if there will be no cure for Lisa? And what if she won't ever start talking again? Will we have to live our whole lives separately? Is that why I was fighting for her life so hard?

During the summer I seldom saw Dermot. Even when I was in Donegal, very close to him, he didn't find a way to visit me - he didn't have his own car. Moreover his American mother-in-law arrived to visit them and she wanted to be entertained.

Did I feel guilty, having a relationship with a married man? Yes and no. I felt guilty because it was way against my upbringing. And at the same time I didn't feel guilty because I wasn't going to take him away from his family. Moreover, my own divorce and Lisa's illness have damaged me emotionally in such a way that I fully ceased to trust in «happiness in personal life», as they wish on birthday cards. (I couldn't even watch lyrical films at all – I switched them off at once.) Additional «softening» my guilt factor was in the origin of "our" wife.

I didn't have any special feeling towards Dermot's wife and of course didn't intend to steal him from her: what would I need him for in my life full-time, even if I did? From the very beginning I understood that he wasn't going to leave his family. That suited us both. However, I felt irritated when he started trying to convince me of his eternal feelings and that I was the only love of his life. Perhaps, he thought it would be pleasant for me to hear such words, but I only shrugged: firstly, I didn't believe him (when there is SUCH a big love one would probably leave the wife and even children), and secondly, I didn't need such words and they didn't give me any pleasure. The only thing is that they warmed up my vanity: even here we managed to outride «the Yanks».

If it was the truth that he was telling, then it was even worse, because I have never had such ardent feelings towards Dermot, that is why it was a bit awkward for me to listen to him. Therefore I tried to tell myself that he was just saying these beautiful words because that was what a man was supposed to say to a woman. I respected Dermot a lot, it was interesting to socialize with this clever and well-educated man (a big rarity here!), and he was for me just a sort of an older friend here. Also I was very lonely ...

I started to feel negative emotions towards the unknown wife of my «LFC» only when her native country committed another and yet another dirty trick on the international scene. It started happening more and more often. In those days I angrily said to Dermot:

– Shame on you! How could you marry a woman from that nest of vipers! I wouldn't marry an American even if he was the last man on the Earth. Perhaps I could make some exception only for Dean Reed²⁸³.

Joke is a joke, but there was a lot of truth in it. After Yugoslavia I was overwhelmed with such indignation that if I happened to be near any Olympic champions in athletics from that country, I would win the running contest with them just because of my rage.

Dermot shyly tried to assure me that his wife was in fact Irish. Oh yeah, in this case, I am Georgian too— because my foster grandfather was...

It was a social phenomenon in America and in modern Ireland: the Yankees who imagined that they were Irish and decided to devote their life «to the struggle for Irish independence». In Dublin I have got acquainted with one representative of this group of people who was born and bred in Boston – a city with the big community of «American Irish». It was a loud blond Barbie with inevitably American «r» and with an invariable cigarette between her teeth. All her manners reminded me of Bulgakov's «woman dressed up as a man» from the book «Dog's Heart». The only one Irish thing about her: her name. Although she had an Irish name, it was a male one: her parents, in their "nostalgia" for Ireland where they have never lived, didn't know it was a boy's name when they were choosing the name for their daughter.

– I am Irish! – she stressed even when nobody asked her about it. She arrived in Dublin three years ago and already was haughtily trying to teach everybody how they should live and what's even funnier, how they should struggle. I have an impression, that Americans suffer from an inferiority complex because of their own ethnic origins: as a result we see their passionate bent to "searching for their roots": after all, we, all those who precisely know where we come from, and who were our ancestors, even if they came from different parts of our country and of different ethnic origins, do not suffer from such things. For example, I don't need to prove to anybody that I am partially Cossack by swinging a sabre from right to left.

–

– And then... I came to the police station in Crossmaglen²⁸⁴ and started banging on the wall and screamed: «Open it, I want to see your boss! » They were frightened and opened the door. I could see only the dark corridor, and the door started closing behind me ... Then I grabbed a cobble-stone and put it quickly under the door! They yelled at me: «Close the door! », and I yelled back: «I won't! » ... – that's how the American madam told us the story about her "heroism". And she added proudly: – The army has taken 3 films out of my camera! – as though somebody should give her a medal «For Courage» because of this.

²⁸³ Dean Cyril Reed (1938 – 1986) was an [American](#) actor, singer and songwriter, director, and social activist who lived a great part of his adult life in [South America](#) and then in the [German Democratic Republic](#). He was hugely popular in the USSR.

²⁸⁴ The biggest town in rebellious South Armagh region where presence of security forces was especially heavy

I also was in Crossmaglen and also took photos of different objects. I don't know why nobody took away my films, and why the English soldiers never asked me to take off my shoes and to step out of the car into mud ... I just silently did as I wanted. "Much ado about nothing" isn't for me. Somehow I don't think anybody's life became better in Crossmaglen after the visit of this noisy Yankee who quarreled with local policemen. It is only for fake Irish their "heroism" is measured by the number of decibels they can produce. But this has allowed her to feel that she is a «true and fearless revolutionary».

In my opinion, the reason of this pseudo-revolutionism is in the guilty conscience of Americans. Participation in liberation movement of «the ancestors' countries» allows them to muffle their sense of guilt caused by their state's behavior towards different countries. These very things they strenuously prefer not to see: not without reason Conor from Portobello, when he came back from America, told me about his great amazement that the Boston Irish don't see any similarity between the independence struggle in Ireland and the struggle of the Palestinian people for self-determination.

Also those «American Irish republicans», unlike the real ones, are oh so afraid for their lives! If there is a slightest threat to their precious selves, these «freedom fighters» immediately run to complain to "the Big Brother» from FBI!

Dermot's wife— whose name before she decided to turn into an "Irish revolutionary" was Jane, and I will always call her so, instead of her Irish "pen-name" — sharply started imagining herself to be Irish when he appeared on her horizon. Well, love is an evil thing: Sandra Roelofs now also sings "Suliko"²⁸⁵

...
Being at home, Jane lead a «tireless campaign for the Irish reunification»: it never went further than a website where she printed names and addresses of the members of the local Orange Order. It allowed her to feel herself a true revolutionary, as Sofia Perovskaya of the local scale. Full of heroic promptings and anticipation of adventurous life, she has left her native warm shores and moved with her heroic spouse into his native land: into a rainy Northern Irish old town. And here it appeared that she wasn't quite ready for such a "revolutionary" life.

First all went smoothly : Jane wrote appeals to the newspaper, in between her cutting and sewing. However soon a bitter after-effect came: somebody started to threaten her.

Any republican in the North of Ireland is inwardly ready for this as many of them receive deaththreats every month. But my God, just you try to threaten those "fearless" Americans by showing them even a finger! That's probably our fault, at the end, - the fault of the rest of the world: Americans and other Westerners are now so used to sticking their noses into another's affairs and are so used to getting away with it! They are invariably released from all captivities uninjured and safe, so much that they have really began to believe to be «untouchable» and above any punishments. They were released from Yugoslavia and even from Afghanistan. In my opinion, such humanism towards

²⁸⁵ Georgian popular folk song. Sandra Roelofs (b. 1968) - Dutch wife of the Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili

them was shown in vain, in the naïve hope of reciprocity – in relation to the innocent civilian population in these countries, at least to children. But sometimes it is useful to teach those uninvited visitors a good lesson, so that the next time these "benefactors" would stay out of other countries!

Jane got "the cake from her own dough", as they say in Holland: on a website of the American republican dissidents (there are apparently such people as well!) somebody published her home address and the license plate number of her car and «expressed a threat» to her life and safety. She didn't start thinking of how the "exposed" Orangemen must have felt: in a panic she took the first plane back home and rushed off to the... FBI. To demand from them to close the website of her "political enemies» ... «And that was the whole story!» – as the hero of Nosov's "Dunno" Ponchik used to say ... There are two wise old proverbs. One of them says: "When in Rome do as the Romans do", another – «Tell me who is your friend, and I will tell you who you are». I think that everything is clear about the "revolutionism" of those who ask the FBI for help: that very FBI which terrorized, humiliated and tormented, among others, the great daughter of American people, Assata Shakur.

But the "revolutionary" Yankees continue going inside the Irish monastery with their own set of rules. They think that for the sake of their dollars the Irish should tolerate their sermons and allow them to dispel their own sense of guilt and shame for their Empire of Evil. It is easy «to struggle for freedom» without getting out of the armchair and by abstractly arguing about evil Loyalists. But when they are forced to get out of their cozy armchair and come anywhere near the real struggle, they remember at once that they are Americans, and ask their mummies and the Federal Bureau of Investigations to take care of them!

If Dermot wanted to get my sympathy towards the person who complains about her problems to the FBI, he got it all wrong. So I do not know why he told me this story. Actually, I preferred not to think about Jane at all, so as not to tell him anything unpleasant. Sometimes she phoned him when we were together in a hotel and she spoke so loudly that even I could hear her. Being loud-voiced seems to be their national feature. Once Jane was really overly excited on the phone, – not about Dermot, but about builders who were doing some work on their house and probably have bungled something. Jane was shouting into Dermot's handset, Dermot tried to calm her, and I suddenly burst into laughter and almost crawled away into the bathroom: Marshak's lines came to my mind: *«On the car, those angry Yankees, Pinched the tail of their monkey! »*²⁸⁶

I almost split my sides with laughter, rolling on the floor, covering my mouth with a towel in order not to let my laughter to escape, as it was just bubbling inside me. I do not know how I managed to survive this ...

According to Dermot, the British were the main villains in the world. And the Americans were only naive, unsophisticated simpletons. I think that such point of view of the world

²⁸⁶ From S. Marshak's "Mister Twister" (see references earlier)

arrangement of imperialistic forces is also specifically Irish. The British are more crafty than Americans in inflating of all sorts of disgusting intrigues and the organization of provocations and in unscrupulous lies, but the Americans quickly and successfully learn their lessons. As for physical, military, economic and other forces, John Bull in comparison with Uncle Sam at this moment in time is just a toothless old man. Everybody knows that his time is over, only he still doesn't believe it, with enviable obstinacy. And he yelps behind the Americans like your jackal Tabaki. That's the only way for him to stress his own importance on the world scene.

On these subjects I could argue with Dermot for many hours: heatedly, but without insults. And then he usually again started to tell me entertaining stories from his life - for example, about his detention by the British at the entrance to the Eurotunnel when it wasn't yet officially opened: Dermot at once demanded to have a lawyer, but they answered that he wasn't arrested. Dermot asked, pretending to be foolish: «If I am not arrested, does it mean, I can go?».

I was asking the questions about what I didn't understand in republican tactics. Although his every answer sounded quite logical, sometimes I thought: if to step from this logic on a step aside, then this logic chain will fail. Do they have a plan "B"? For example, Dermot assured me that for Sinn Fein at that time the most important task was to overtake the SDLP in results of elections: then nobody could ignore their positions during the negotiations as it will be the party representing the majority of the Catholic population of the North. Is it logical? Yes, it is. Well, but what if they would still be ignored? Or if such victory would be achieved by enticing the voters SDLP which would mean transition to "middle class" positions, and as a result, the party regeneration into an ordinary reformist: a la «New Labour» in Britain? Then why wouldn't the British take such positions into account: they could only dream about such evolution! And why are the Republicans so sure, that this won't push away from them those who have always supported the party? Or, maybe, the opinion of these people on whom the movement have been relying for so many years, now became unimportant? Why can't they have clear program-minimum and program-maximum instead of just making their program-maximum more and more modest (and their demands were becoming more and more modest, as fast as the diminishing of the infamous pebble-leather)? I asked him all these questions.

I wanted to believe my Irish comrades 100 %. I agree with need for political flexibility, but I am firmly against the lack of principles. Where is the line between the two? The example of unscrupulous treachery of politicians in our own country was alive and kicking in my memory, and the trauma caused by it was so deep that it was very difficult, if not impossible to believe any slogans and statements with full confidence. Should one be surprised then that we, Eastern Europeans, see a lot of conspiracies everywhere? But, as one Irish republican fairly told me, «If you think you are getting paranoid, it doesn't mean that they are not watching you»!

I wanted Dermot to disseminate my doubts. As Alla Pugacheva sang, «Calm me down, my darling, calm me down ...» Well, to use the term "my darling" for Dermot, as I have

already explained, would be too much, but nevertheless I hoped to be calmed. Dermot managed to do it often, and I then calmed down for a while, but sometimes he couldn't.

After my divorce something broke in me. During my marriage I was meek and mild and tried to hide my emotions in public (often so as not to annoy Sonny), but now my character became irritable, quarrelsome. I didn't keep silent any more because I promised myself that I am not going to suffer injustice only in order to be perceived «neutral and balanced». No, now I have the same motto as Karlson On The Roof: «I have sworn, if I notice any injustice, then I will rush at it as a hawk, that very moment »! And especially my friends suffered from this, those with similar views, because I really worried, if according to my opinion, they were making a mistake. I remembered the price of similar errors so clearly and wanted to prevent them from making them. Should I explain to you that such frankness hasn't added to my popularity? Sometimes, I thought with a sad smile, that probably I have inherited this from my grandfather: instead of grabbing the thief silently by the hand to shout at him: «What are you doing, bastard?»

Dermot was one of the few who understood that I was acting so emotionally because I sincerely took to heart all that was happening. (If I was indifferent, I wouldn't waste my energy on that). He understood me and consequently tried to explain to me some complicated republican «chess games».

That day we just finished a short discussion. The subject was: can a present revolutionary be a “Star Trek” fan? The matter is that Dermot was crazy about this serial and never missed it. When it was time for TV, he acted like an ordinary capitalist consumer, the only difference was that he had predilection for political programs, with giving his own comments during the program, just like we did back at home. But Dermot had a habit: his TV should be on for 24x7. As for me, I can easily live without it, and when I was alone in the house, without mum and Lisa, I didn't need TV at all. I followed the news regularly, but on the Internet: I prefer to use the Internet not only because of the variety of available sources but also because on the news page I can choose only what I am interested in. I don't have to switch the channel every time when there is Blair's cynical, impudent face on it, or to listen to commentators' silly complaints about how the next round of political events «will be difficult for him». I don't know why, but in the British news everything is shown from this point of view: how this or that event will affect political career of this or that politician. Journalists can discuss it for hours there. «And what does it mean for Tony Blair?» My God, we normal people couldn't care less, if it is important or not for his career. Where are their brains, if they think that it is interesting for people? There was even something offensive in it: does that mean, that his career is more important than how his policy will affect our daily lives?

Dermot was a news maniac: even being somewhere at a conference, he managed to read the news hourly from the Teletext on any TV sitting in the hall. He made comments for events so rigidly, neatly and ruthlessly. But when feature films were shown, he was extremely undemanding about their quality. Like a typical person brought up on consumer culture, he could watch any nonsense just «for entertainment» or even «for the sake of special effects», but I – never.

For me, a film or a program isn't interesting, if I can't find in it something informative or something to learn for myself emotionally. I need to empathize with its heroes, not to admire "the sea of blood" that they have produced. (Even our discos in the USSR were educating people, not only just entertaining them). After 5-10 minutes of watching the vast majority of Western movies I become extremely bored. And after 15 minutes I become indignant: who do the authors of this idiotic junk think I am? Some sort of creature with a unicellular brain?

When I was going to the movies with Sonny, I often spoiled it for him. We would go to the cinema, and I would predict what was going to happen on the screen. In the majority of the American films it is so obvious that, it seems to me, even a kid can foretell the next scene. Sonny was angry because I didn't allow him «to enjoy the special effects», and I was angry too - because he invited me to see such silly films, which have «nothing for mind, nothing for heart». But he has never seen any others ... Even already in his 20s.

Before my 20s I didn't see any American films, except for «The Sound of Music» and «Funny Girl». As I already said, I liked «The Sound of Music» so much, that I even seriously considered becoming a nun (at the age of 6)!. But both these films were old and kind. They are a sample of times when ordinary Americans, probably, hadn't become sufficiently crazy yet.

Among foreign films they showed us in the USSR were mainly classical French films: with a noble hero who beats the opponents very elegantly and beautifully as in ballet, moreover, fights were not the main thing in such films, but rather just an element, and it was almost without blood. As a rule, such a hero resembled our heroes in some ways— he also struggled for justice, against oppression, he didn't just try to take revenge on someone because of his own personal bitterness. As for the French comedies, they were incredibly popular in the USSR. Greed, conceit, arrogance, racism and other «bouquet of my grandmother» of human shortcomings were ridiculed in them! We also watched Italian, Spanish, German, Japanese, Argentinian and even sometimes African films (not to mention that both Indian and Arab films in general had enormous success in the USSR!) Now they are very few, and there is no national cinema anymore in the majority of "independent" former Soviet republics. Formerly even Turkmenistan made its own films in our country – for example, "Daughter-in-law" with Maya Aimedova. The whole country gathered around TV screens at home in the evenings, worrying about what's going to happen to the Georgian Datu Tutashhia or to the Tadjik girl Nisso.

The action film «Capricorn One» became the first "real" American film in my life (one of the leading parts there was played by well-known O. J. Simpson. That is why I thought for a long time that he was an actor as I didn't know anything about his football career.) With great difficulty I managed to watch even the first half of it. I felt like crying and wanted to just walk away. It was very depressing on my psyche, all mankind in it were portrayed as real rascals, except for the two heroes, and everything flashed on the screen with an absolutely mad speed. It didn't leave time for reflection, or for intelligent dialogues. Moreover the sheer quantity of victims and destruction made me feel sick. I

felt almost physically ill from the continuous forced intensity in order to raise the spectators' tensions and fears, and disgust towards American cinema accrued in my mind very quickly. I came to the cinema with a natural wish to feel pity for heroes. But the mad rate of developing events on the screen and the spiteful vindictiveness of the characters and unworthy real heroes just could not allow me to feel compassion for them.

My sore feelings were amplified by this: if I don't feel compassions for the heroes, then why am I watching this film? And why do they make such films? I often felt pity for these heroes, but this pity was not compassion, it was closer to being disgusted with their misery. It was impossible to empathize with them as in real life. And as for admiring or imitating such "heroes" ... don't make me laugh!

After a while I noticed that watching of American films makes the viewers block all normal human feelings in themselves. If one would seriously worry and care about such heroes in American films - the way we cared about heroes of our films, as about real, live persons, -one would probably simply lose his mind then, because of all the mindless and aimless atrocities and horrors happening on the screen. Such films intentionally leave nothing for the imagination, and as a result, the viewer not only gets used to «the sea of blood» as "normal", but also persuades himself (just to order not to leave the cinema before the end of the film) that it is for fun, it is only a movie, it is not necessary to worry or to care, everything will have a happy end anyway, even if the hero by the end «will fall into a cooking pan and will be cooked alive in there²⁸⁷ » ... It is difficult to condemn the viewer – in this case it is simply his emotional self-defense that kicks in. But as a result such a viewer kills his very ability to empathize in real life. Then in real life he will see something dramatic and will just say to himself: it is all for fun, it not my business, I am only a viewer here. This is de-sensitization.

I will never forget, how people in Dublin looked at my mum, when she – the only person in all the street! - interfered in a severe fight of two young Irish men. She saw them beating each other and just ran towards them across the road, shouting:
– Hey, what are you doing? Are you crazy? Stop it, stop now!

Of course, she said it in Russian. But surprise, surprise! – they immediately stopped fighting, and each of them started to explain to her why they were fighting in the first place. Of course, in English! But after that, they stopped fighting. My mum behaved like this because she was brought up with our Soviet films and our Soviet reality. She isn't afraid of Terminators and Godzillas. She cares about others.

But there are also worse things than American thrillers. The first time in my life I saw a horror film, was in Holland ... After that I couldn't sleep all night long: first I got scared of a doggie who silently entered the door and whom I hadn't seen coming (the door began to creak and opened as if by itself, and I almost screamed!), and then I was tossing and turning in my bed, trying to understand why any sane person would want to make or watch such films. As for me, watching such a film once was enough for the rest of my life!

²⁸⁷ The Little Humpbacked Horse, poem by Yershov based on a Russian fairy-tale

You just can't compare the American cinema with the Soviet one. I don't care, how much they have spent on their special effects, and how much they are going to earn on it. Such comparisons would be an insult for the Soviet cinema. It is the same as comparing a bum and a ladle only because both of them are round. Heroes of American films are angry lonely types. Heroes of our Soviet films were never lonely in their fight for justice. The American cinema "entertains", the Soviet one has inspired us and brought us up. Our films make you think, feel compassion, care, use your imagination – "their" films kill any imagination with its importunate "naturalism", depreciate human pain and sufferings, teach you to get used to them and to any nastiness and dirt, in order «to tickle nerves». And as for any deep ideas in them- they are always plain absent.

Yes, there are good substantial films in America, but they are far too few. As time goes by, such films become a rarity, and a result, the consumer – sorry, the spectator! – soon will be just unable to understand such films.

If they like such films in the West, let them be. But the problem in this muddy wave of painful teenage imagination flooding our screens, is that we are deprived of the possibility of any choice. There is no choice anymore. I would rather not go to the cinema at all than to watch this. We can still dig out some interesting, substantial films on DVD's, but the further in time, the more difficult it becomes.

– ... Would you have married me if I was not married when we met? - Dermot asked me with curiosity, stretching and yawning. He surely wanted to hear "yes" as an answer.
– Never! - I exclaimed, – How could I marry a person who watches «Star Trek» every day? He should live alone and then he can watch it as much as he likes.
– You are wrong about «Star Trek» ... You see, in one of its series, in 1990, a United Ireland was predicted –as a result of a «successful terrorist campaign», by 2024. So this part was forbidden to be shown on TV in Britain. It's not a joke.
– Well, shall I watch it just because of this one thing? What is wrong with you, men? Sonny also always dreamed to become Captain James T. Kirk – «he has a girlfriend on every planet», as he explained me. I suppose you also would like that, won't you? ...

So we were joking with each other for some time that morning.

– What is going to happen to Fionntan? – I asked him seriously. The thought of him did not stop gnawing at me.
– The trial will be soon. We hope that they will be sentenced only for travelling with false passports, – Dermot answered. – We will do everything that we can to get the guys out.
– We live in a very dangerous time, – he added at parting.

But none of us could even imagine how really dangerous it was going to be...

... I went to work from the hotel in the morning, it was nearby. It was an ordinary working day. I had already become a supervisor in the department and didn't have to spend all day on the phone. Instead I was engaged in monitoring calls of my team and

maintaining relations with the regional office in Holland. Simultaneously I regularly checked my e-mail and was keeping myself up to date with news on the Internet. When I read on the BBC news site that a plane has flown into a skyscraper in New York, at first, I didn't think much about it, except for «What a silly pilot! » None of us knew that in an hour all of us would stop working and would gather in the canteen to watch TV.

Even the customers stopped calling. There was dead silence in the office. But for some reason I remembered our August coup in 1991: I had absolutely the same feeling of a theatrical performance being staged.

When the first building collapsed, I was absolutely sure that everybody managed to escape or that they were removed from the roof by helicopters, as it always happens in those "cool" American action films. Then I noticed people in the other building who leant out of windows and even jumped out of them. At that very moment I was pierced with sharp pity for them ...

I didn't feel at all like jumping with joy on one foot. I didn't want to shout spitefully, like heroes of their thrillers "Yes! Yes!". But looking at the smoking debris, I understood that my feelings were also different from the feelings of my Western colleagues. They looked lost and frightened.

«Well, they certainly have got themselves into a mess ...» – I thought. And I thought again, with a desperate hope: – «Well, maybe now they will at least finally understand something?»

The next day, I listened to the radio, read newspapers and regretfully understood: no, they understood nothing. And my pity, a natural human pity has again evaporated ...

The next day the Irish newspapers (and, of course, the British) were full of condolences and «angry, resolute condemnation». But I hoped that at least one of them would ask a simple question: «Why?» ...

Because not a single world problem can be solved without people asking this question.

After September the 11th I felt out of place in Ireland. No, of course, I am not a Moslem, and don't look much different from the Irish, but an invisible dividing line appeared between us after that day : that is to say, the Irish created it and haven't even noticed it. They have joined the world division into "we" and "them" on behalf of "the civilized" West.

They expect us to put on mourning clothes and to cry over the Western victims though they have never declared even a second of silence in memory of non-Western victims of their own governments who continue to mass murder people on the planet in the name of «freedom and democracy».

If you don't demonstrate this voluntary-obligatory, ostentatious grief, you will be ostracized immediately or maybe even branded a "terrorist".

Let's call a spade a spade: our non-Western victims aren't important to the majority of you in the West, but we are expected to mourn only your victims.

But I refuse to mourn exclusively for inhabitants of the countries of a "gold billion». Despite all the beautiful antiracist rhetoric and glorious praise of Mandela, the West divides people into categories even after their death. It creates two categories of victims. The first class of victims are inhabitants of the rich countries who, according to the Western view, deserve minutes of silence, days of national mourning, mass organized rallies with candles in hands, oceans of tears, Hollywood screened stories and million of indemnifications. But there is also the second class of victims: we, the rest of the world. Thanks to President Clinton, the "Peacemaker", we are known as "Collateral damage".

What I am going to tell now, won't make me popular here. But my pain and anger towards the double standards of Western "public opinion" are too great, and I am too sick and tired to continue to be silent.

The ashes of "collateral damage» of the Western "civilisation" are pouring into my heart.

To kill women, old men and children in other countries in the name of "freedom and democracy" is a normal thing for you. And this is the essence of your "civilization". Today, in the XXI st century, just as many centuries back, it is obvious that *«quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi»*.²⁸⁸

Who are you trying to fool? Your war is conducted not against Milosevic and not against terrorists. Your war is conducted against people of those countries who have dared to choose a course independent of the West. If one follows the logic of Western mass-media, then it is logical, that what happened on September, the 11th, was not war against the American people, but war against international policies of the Western leaders. So what is the difference?

The difference is that Western public opinion gives different values to human lives of the different nations. And on September, 11th this fact was harshly exposed.

Just ask the victims in the New York Twin Towers' "collateral damage" of the world's struggle against Western domination and against Western state terrorism. They will explain this difference in no uncertain terms somewhere in a police station of some "free" state ...

The assumption that not all human lives are equal is purely low, vulgar racism.

Western governments and mass media don't just assume this. It is their vision of the world. And it is abundantly clear from their actions on the international scene, no matter what they say. It is just a fact to them, something that doesn't need to be proven. That is

²⁸⁸ *What is legitimate for Jove (Jupiter), is not legitimate for oxen (Latin)*

why their leaders ,who should really be in prison of the Dutch Scheveningen, are still welcome in Ireland as peacemakers.

... On that day when we were expected to grieve, I purposely took a day off from work and went to Dublin; it would have been silly to hide in the bathroom during the mandatory "minutes of silence".

The first thing that amazed me in the Irish capital was that it was impossible to find a place to eat, and even an open public toilet. Why was it necessary to close all public toilets in Dublin in connection with the death of people in New-York? It remains a secret to this day.

Not realizing the whole depth of the Irish grief, I didn't have breakfast in the morning, and my stomach was quite empty by noon. But it was impossible to buy even a bun or a sandwich anywhere.

In despair I entered a hotel in the city center. To my relief, I saw a manager who was watching the news on CNN, devouring a huge juicy sandwich. I asked if it was possible to have a bite to eat there.

– Everything is closed in connection with mourning, – he said, not taking his eyes off the screen showing the ruins of both towers, and continuing to chew.

– And why should people be hungry because of it? – I couldn't resist asking.

– Shame on you! - He jumped indignantly, still chewing his sandwich – People have died in America!

- It's you who should be ashamed – for all those who were killed by your America in Yugoslavia, on Grenada, in Korea, in Vietnam, in Iraq ... Take that sandwich out of your mouth, before you choke! - I advised him.

And he couldn't answer me anything because there was already that minute of silence. I saw only how he flushed, raging. I just laughed and went outside ...

Down with this exclusive grief!

After September 11th when Mr. Bush gave us a choice: either with him and his idea of freedom (that is, the freedom of one single nation to bomb any other, without any reference to international law and to intimidate those who doesn't agree with it), *or* ..., I feel more and more that it is better to choose *or* ... than such freedom.

How could I be on the West's side? I have just been clearly reminded that people like me aren't considered equal here. For many Irish a mass murder of people becomes a terrible tragedy only when there are people of Irish origin among the victims. Rwanda doesn't mean anything to them.

So I am a *non-Westerner* here. I didn't choose it; this is just what I am. Yes, I do feel pity for the relatives of the victims in New York – just because I know how painful it is to lose your loved ones. At last America as a nation has finally experienced this too. But

do you think that America began to understand sufferings of others after this, as it would have been logical?

What America committed in the world after September, the 11th was not a retaliation. If such a retaliation had been done for the Western crimes against humanity in all other countries, the West would be already razed to the ground. What we see is the resurrection of colonialism, back to the world scene. The saddest fact is that even some countries which have experienced it themselves, have joined this “crusade”.

"Retaliation"? For what? We didn't do anything!

The Dutch newspaper "Volkskrant" quite seriously wrote on October the 10th, 2001: *“A happy Afghan managed to catch one of 37,500 food packages today, dumped by the Americans in the first night of food drops. He found there: some brown beans, rice, strips of dried fruits, peanut butter and strawberry jam. There are enough calories (2200) for one person for a day. No meat so as not to cause possible religious objections. ... Packages were dumped from such a height to prevent the gunning down of planes, and the bags had plastic “wings” to soften the fall. A note with the American flag has been enclosed in each package. There was also a picture with the image of a little man eating from a package and with words in English, French and Spanish languages (3/4 of the Afghans are illiterate): “This meal is a gift of the United States of America ”. “It is our way to show that we are friends of the Afghani people, ”– president Bush declared last week ...”*

A happy Afghan? May you feel the same kind of happiness sometime, our "civilized" gentlemen!

America and others won't live in peace until they stop raping the whole world.

Being bootlickers won't help those who hope for "promotion", just as the useless packages with leftovers from their own pantries ,including quantities of stolen goods were distributed in hopes that these trinkets would lull their victims into silence.

Later I was again asked to keep silence in memory of the Americans – this time at a party conference of Irish Republicans. And then I began to really wonder if I had anything in common with these people. Nothing on Earth would make me act against my conscience: no dollar donations, no "political support of the Irish Diaspora", nor any tactical reasons. For “tactical reasons” it would be enough to condemn what has occurred and to sympathize with relatives of the victims. But to arrange for them once again what has never been arranged for anybody else is to insult all other victims on our planet.

That day I stayed at the hotel in Dublin together with Dermot – in the same hotel where other conference participants were also staying. I do not know how we escaped being seen together, but Dermot was reckless enough not to worry.

However, he didn't think about that or even about me with my anger because his father had just died. And though he was already sick for a long time, and Dermot knew that his father was going to die soon, Dermot was still in a condition close to shock. Only by the evening did he understand that he just couldn't stay in Dublin any longer and needed to go home.

Of course I was upset, though I perfectly understood him. It was too late for me to go home alone that evening. But now I had to stay there alone for the night – at that very moment when it was emotionally difficult for me: after all that bootlicking performed by the people whom I thought were my comrades/–I just could not name with any other word. But there was nothing to do about it.

Dermot went away, leaving me in my prepaid hotel room. I tried to sleep to the best of my ability and the next morning I departed early for the bus stop. There I ran straight into - of all people - Hillary!

Hillary, the story of my acquaintance with her, and the role that people like Hillary play in the left-wing movements, is another story.

At first glance she seemed shy and quiet as a little mouse. A little plump brunette with the face of Victoria Beckham and an ever-present artificial tan, elegant, immaculately dressed, driving a posh car, Hillary did not resemble even in my inexperienced mind the image of a typical Irish Republican female - tortured by life mother of many children from a poor urban district, often with a cigarette in her mouth and living in a track suit, not only looking after the family, but carrying the load of the party work as well, and often the armed struggle while the man of the family often was in prison for exactly the same things.

A lot of grief, a lot of hardships fell on the shoulders of these inconspicuous, often rough-looking, but kind, sympathetic and brave, strong Irish women. They did not and do not seek any positions or honors for themselves. Their main care, as a rule, is still their family, and few people are able to persuade them to become professional politicians. Though of course there are exceptions to this rule. From these circles, for example, came Northern Ireland Assembly member Mary Nelis: a seamstress by profession, who brought up 10 children and turned to the political struggle after the arrest of one of them, who so much reminds me of the famous Gorky's "Mother"!

Hillary does not resemble any of those of women. From a wealthy family, she worked in a research institute, wrote her thesis, and before joining the ranks of Sinn Fein she had joined another, very bourgeois political party that represents the interests of large landowners, farmers, and the "new Irish". Membership of political parties or even a simple vote for them in the Irish elections is a hereditary, traditional thing: many generations of the same family usually vote for the same party, because that is a family custom going back through history. Hillary stayed in the ranks of that party for a year, quickly realized that a quick way up in it wasn't possible for her, because in its ranks

were almost all the local elite plus their children and grandchildren, and all the cushy positions were long since divided among them for 10 years in advance.

And then Hillary boldly dared to break her family traditions. The blessing for her was that thanks to the peace process, joining Sinn Fein was no longer dangerous as in the recent past, when you were automatically blacklisted for membership, haunted everywhere by the secret services, and on the streets elderly grannies, after reading all the "establishment's" papers, were branding you "child murderer".

After a long persuasion Peter Connelly took pity and agreed to accept Hillary into our cumann, although Republicans distrust defectors from other parties.

... - I am a political refugee, - declared Hillary with a trembling voice, looking like a lamb at her first meeting with the Women's Department of Sinn Fein, smiling sweetly to the stern, battle-hardened Republicans. And they felt motherly pity for her.

I tried to push away the unpleasant thought that somewhere I've already seen all this. Back home. In the USSR. In our own Communist Party.

When I reached the age to join the party, I remember, I was ashamed to even think of this. Not because I did not have communist beliefs, or because I was indifferent to what was happening in my country and in the world, but because in our party there was already, in spite of all the right words spoken by its functionaries, something disgustingly false, unnatural, mendacious. And among most of my peers it was really considered to be almost shameful to join it, except for those youth who were pure careerists. As the events occurred within a few years have shown, unfortunately we were not mistaken. Would it have saved the party if many of us would have joined it - determined to fight with such as career makers and high climbers? Probably yes. But it is also possible that to save it by then it was too late, and that they wouldn't have let us join in the first place.

But in relation to Hillary I reminded myself that it's not good to judge a person without giving her a chance. Maybe Hillary really made a mistake when she was young, as to which parties in her native Ireland were progressive, and which were reactionary. At least, we had some political education since childhood, and many of us knew about the Irish parties, perhaps more than the Irish knew themselves. At least in theory, but at least for us it has been clear who was who. Maybe Hillary will work properly for several years, will show that it is possible to trust her that she does have the relevant beliefs, and then she will fully become part of the Republican family.

But she wasn't prepared to wait or to prove. She came "to shine".

The first few weeks Hillary modestly and properly leafleted the neighborhood and stood in the picket lines. But no, she didn't swap parties in order to carry out this sort of work for more than a couple of weeks! The way up in the party of her first choice turned out to be prohibitively longer than that and in this much less populated as well as less educated group of Sinn Fein (due to the social origin of its members, who often simply did not

have the opportunity to get a proper education), the key to the top proved to be very easy: just like in Russia, in Ireland such things are often much determined by personal friendships. Hillary made friends with a daughter of a prominent party figure who was occupying a secretarial position in the party because of her daddy. Through this Hillary became very close with that daddy himself - a man in a mid-life crisis with dyed hair ... And ta-da! Less than six months after the poor girl had to exhaust herself with leafleting in some lower class neighborhoods of Dublin, "the Daddy" declared her "our rising star." And a star must shine .

The American embassy in Dublin. Torrential rain. Israel has only recently virtually wiped out the Jenin refugee camp. A group of Irish speakers is protesting against the American support - despite the pouring rain. At the gates of the embassy, the crowd is dispersed and drenched with water from a puddle by a posh car, driven by Hillary. Our "star" came to represent the party at the Embassy party celebrating the 4th of July. One of the protestors, recognizing her, shouts to this representative of the left, progressive party, in Irish - a language that the Republican leadership always protects and promotes:
- Come and join us!

But Hillary does not know a word of Irish, although she regularly throws some Irish words into her speeches, memorizing them. She turns away in bewilderment.

The party didn't dare to decline the invitation to that *soiree*. Even though they are in solidarity with the Palestinian people and their struggle, to refuse this American ambassador's invitation publicly was not acceptable; so, they sent Hillary, and she happily went "to shine".

You can say that it was needed. But somehow, people like Hillary are just always only at the receptions and parties, on TV and on the radio, while others, humble, not seeking fame and stardom, who were party activists for many years, sell party newspapers, organize a group day-care for children, help each other: in short, do real things, not the party blah-blah "a la the CPSU", that was not going to change anything in real lives.

As for the daily work ... Dermot complained to me how Hillary gave him the wrong date for a very important meeting in which he needed to attend, which caused him to miss the meeting.. Hillary did not even apologize to this well-deserving veteran, without people like whom there would be neither Sinn Fein today, nor the peace process.

Within a few months after Republicans took her into their ranks - with an eye on its flawed political past and probation - Hillary unhesitatingly spoke from the podium: "*We of Sinn Fein ...*" . That reminded me of an associate of Mikhail Gorbachev who after moving to our glorious working class city, on the third day after her arrival already said at a party meeting: "*We, the people of city N ...*".

Hillary slammed enemies of the peace process and her own former party members with such passion and energy that even the delegates congress of the RCP (b) in the Stalin era would envy. Where has this talent been hiding for all those years when members of Sinn

Fein were persecuted? How did the Republicans manage to cope without her all these years, when they were tortured, jailed, when they were dying on hunger strikes and from the bullets of British soldiers?

And of course, Hillary especially advocated "positive discrimination" for women - in order for them to bypass normal election procedures in the party. That is easy to understand, she would then fly even higher. Unfortunately for her, this course was supported only by male leadership of the party who seemed to prefer simply to put a couple of upstarts in skirts who never question any of their real politics to real hard, long hours of work in order to bring women into their ranks (they prefer women who are very visible, but take no particularly important decisions themselves and have no political influence). They do not think that it is enough just to have a look at these female upstarts in order to kill in any normal woman the desire to even try a political career. Would any normal person be willing to take up a particular position, knowing well that she wasn't taken for her working qualities, but simply in order to balance the "gender" ?

As soon joining Sinn Fein became safe, as soon as the party came within sight of getting into power, careerists of every stripe rushed into it. The old, proven activists, fighters for the genuine liberation of the people, didn't have such speaking abilities, didn't have such diplomas, and often just felt confused under the pressure of such people as Hillary, and some of them at first even rejoiced: "*They will speak for us, and we will do the real work!*"

They will not let you do the real work, my good comrades. Before you know it, they will take your party over from you, vulgarizing your ideas, take your places, destroy your struggle Have we not already seen all this in our own country? Is this not painfully recognizable to us - the behavior of this "*professional party whore?*"

... A friend of mine, a Republican who spent more than 10 years in British jails, a thoughtful, sometimes nervous, but awfully nice, firm and strong in character man, listened one day to my arguments (which I have tried to clear from any kind of emotion) without taking his eyes off me. Then, thoughtfully, he asked:

- And what happened to them all, to people in your party who were loyal to the ideals?

- What happened to them? They were kicked out and were laughed at for their idealism and integrity, they were called idiots, who do not know "how to live". Even though they were the very people who have given all their energy for the struggle and have created for us a better life. I understand that every person and party must learn such things from their own experiences, and mistakes of others have sadly never taught anybody anything. I understand that it may be unpleasant for you to listen to me, because I am painting a picture that is far from rosy. But I do not want these types to laugh at you and others like you tomorrow, the same way as it was back at home! They will ruin your cause completely.

... And now this "Etoile" stood in front of me. With her neat folder and politically correct papers in her hands.

- Hi! Shall we go? - She nodded to me in the direction of the building, where the morning session was about to begin.. She said this with such face, as if she were mistress of this building and did me a great favor by inviting me along. And of course, she did not think even for a second about yesterday's inappropriate minute of silence. And how insulting it was for a little Yugoslav girl -Milica Rakic²⁸⁹- killed by an American bomb in her own bathroom. Or for the Iraqi children who have died as a result of UN sanctions. She thought only of her own career.

I do not know how I managed to restrain myself but I said nothing, except a firm:
- No.

And I walked away.

... I stood by the fence, hiding my face and angry tears. Someone touched my shoulder:

- Are you Yevgenya Kalashnikova? - asked an unfamiliar voice in Russian with a slight accent - There is a fax from the Cuban Ministry of Health for you. You can take your daughter to Cuba. We will treat her free of charge.

And I almost fell into the arms of that person who told me this news ...

Surely, we needed some money for the trip itself, that is, for the plane tickets, daily spending, etc., but compared to how much the treatment itself cost, especially at a private Western clinic, it was insignificant. I regained my spirits, focused, and in a month and a half the necessary sum was raised. Yet I would never have been able to do this without my Irish friends' help.

Having learned of our situation, Patricia took up the case; she had been to Cuba before, and she was absolutely in love with the country. She contacted her most trusted friends, an elderly nun, Sister Assumpta, and Danny Kelly, known for his experience in charity work in West Belfast. Every evening, regardless of the weather and obviously sacrificing their free time, the three of them went from pub to pub all around Belfast with... an open umbrella turned upside down. Patricia was well-known in Belfast. She would tell the people our story and they threw money right into the umbrella. Danny published a short notice about Lisa in the local newspaper asking the people for help. In Dublin Fionnuala arranged a charity event in an Irish-speaking restaurant to raise the money for our trip. Some other friends of mine also helped.

I remember the four of us sitting at table in a small Belfast café counting the funds. Sister Assumpta was very different from a typical – classical - nun I used to imagine; she was a cheerful elderly short-haired woman, dressed in trousers. She had spent long years

²⁸⁹ During the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (1999)

working in Africa and, having noted my surprise, told me that she had already ‘done her bit’ in the struggle for a more liberal dress-code for nuns.

- We used to wear such funny hoods... We weren’t allowed even to belt our cloaks so as not to reveal any of our figure. I used to carry the belt in my pocket and put it on as soon as I went outside the convent...

Danny told us several stories, from which the conclusion was that those with less money turned out to be the most sympathetic.

- I used to know an Irishman who earned 25.000 pounds a week. So what do you think did he do when I asked him to help a Bosnian girl in need of an operation? He rummaged through his pockets, fished out a one-pound coin and handed it over to me in the most solemn way imaginable: ‘*Here you are!*’. So I, in the same extremely solemn way, handed it back to him, saying, ‘You seem to be in greater need of it than we’”.

Danny also told us that even though sometimes local hospitals promised free treatment to children from Eastern Europe, in reality they turned out to be far from free.

“The only free thing is the help of the consultant. But you’ve got to pay for the stay in hospital, and for using the operating theatre, which makes it all in all over 3000 pounds a week! There were cases when the so-called ‘free’ operations cost in effect thousands of pounds. Neither the child nor the parents can pay such bills, so we’ve got to beg wherever we can, little by little...”

Listening to Danny I felt sad. Because I knew and remembered the things the local people couldn’t even imagine, namely, what medical service could be like, that it must be equally available to everyone who needs it without painfully thinking where to get the money, or begging the moneybags for one pound out of their ‘hard-earned’ money of 25.000 a week.

And I refuse to be impressed by the fact that we also used to have the so-called ‘Kremlin hospitals²⁹⁰’. To begin with, we did not live under such a scandalous state of things as the following classical case illustrates.

Martin Clifford, 47, a Derry resident, fell ill after Christmas. He consulted his GP complaining of colic. The doctor sent him to a specialist who in turn asked him to have a scan at the local hospital called Altnagelvin.

²⁹⁰ Clinics for members of the Soviet government in Moscow

It was already May by then. “I thought it would take just several weeks to wait” , Clifford said. “And then I found out that the waiting list for this simple scan was so long that I would have to wait 9 months, no less!” At the end of July he saw a notice in *The Daily Mirror* that in the Blackpool Zoo there was a gorilla suffering from a similar condition. The newspaper stated that the gorilla got the scan within a week, with the state health-care system paying the bill. “I was shocked. The gorilla couldn’t scan himself. So I filed a complaint against the local hospital with the Association of Patients.”

After a while Martin Clifford got a response which said the representatives of the Association of Patients “*do not comment on why Blackpool gorillas receive medical servicing faster than people residing within the administrative borders of Northern Ireland*”.

Yes, British “experts” on local life do not take local people into account. That people here seem to be deserving of less care than a gorilla in an English zoo is confirmed, for example, by the fact that British Telecom, despite people’s protests, continues to build its phone masts all over the area. The masts, a necessary technical part of modern mobile communication, can cause cancer; yet they are installed right in the middle of residential areas, even though there are lots and lots of empty fields and mountains around...

-And do you know why they do it?”, Sister Assumpta concludes. “It’s because it’s cheaper: you’ve got to pay the farmer for the use of his land! Britain, the democratic Wonderland, where everyone has equal opportunities, does not have the money for health care, but has no problem finding it to bomb Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan; so, if this wonderful state does not want to take up the responsibility of caring for the sick, then Northern Irish businesspeople would not turn poor by helping them...

Take for example the hotels of a well-known local chain; the hotel famous for being the ‘most targeted in Europe’ is one of them. Its profits are so high that it has to pay the Loyalist racketeers for ‘protection’. This ‘sensitive’ matter which has cost the hotel so many respectable customers, came out when Patricia, constantly “monitoring” Loyalist websites for threats to her clients, discovered something very peculiar. First, she found some website of the people who repeatedly terrorized small Catholic girls at the Holy Cross school, then she noticed that the website mentioned the hotel as those people’s ‘sponsor’...

The hotel managers were very embarrassed when this information was leaked to the press, as they never wanted to advertise racketeering as ‘sponsoring’...

- They tried to make it look as if the Loyalists used that simple link to their website without permission. In fact, if you look at the search engine at their site – quite powerful, by the way – you will see that it was provided by the very same hotel chain... -, says

Patricia, slowly and coolly.

- Patricia, you've got such an amazing life!-, Sister Assumpta exclaims in amazement. -- You don't take any care of yourself. Which is why they threw a grenade at you some time ago..."

It is true. It really happened quite recently when Patricia was checking if the rules were observed during a Loyalist parade in North Belfast. She stood too close to the dividing line and someone from the Loyalist side hurled a grenade at her.

The grenade fell, unexploded, right at her feet, and Patricia automatically grabbed it to give to a police officer standing nearby... It was a miracle that nobody died. The grenade, she was told, came from the British army arsenal in Bosnia. Yet, Patricia could not manage to get the police to tell her how it came to be in Loyalist possession. The case eventually was dismissed. Though it doesn't take a rocket scientist to make a logical connection here...

-I'm in no way outstanding, or anything..., -Patricia replies.- Brendan is! It is he who deserves real admiration!

Brendan, as you remember, is the leader of Garvaghy Road residents in Portadown, the one who practically on his own transformed the life of that former Catholic ghetto, having created job opportunities, established a cultural centre and given the people a hope for a better future.

- I'll never forget us once being called to Hillsborough Castle²⁹¹; that was at Tony Blair²⁹²'s personal request, we were told... Since then I have such a low opinion of him, after this sad experience of ours. I feel so sorry for his wife; she seems to be a very nice woman, and so in love with him...

So, we were locked in a room and *we were told we would not be let out before we signed a paper stating that we allow the Orangemen to pass through Garvaghy*. At the same time, the media, both press and TV, reported that we "were engaged in talks with the government", from which "rather positive outcomes were expected".

They told us that everybody had already expressed their support for the agreement on the parade, David Trimble, John Hume²⁹³ and Sinn Fein leaders, and that we were the only people remaining. The door was still locked. And then Brendan says, quietly: 'Well, if

²⁹¹ Residence of the British governor in Northern Ireland, place of many official meetings and negotiations

²⁹² Tony Blair (b. 1953) - former Prime Minister of Britain

²⁹³ John Hume (b. 1937)- founding member and former leader of the SDLP, one of the best known Northern Irish politicians, co-recipient of the 1998 [Nobel Peace Prize](#), with [David Trimble](#).

they all have agreed, let them come here and tell us personally why they think this is a right decision...’

They literally turned hysterical with anger. Trimble was already there, Hume didn’t even think of coming, and then McGuinness²⁹⁴ entered the room, looking really sheepish, and trying hard to avoid our gaze... They put us in a closed bus and started to drive us around the grounds of the Castle, waiting for our consent. We were waiting for the Prime Minister to meet us, because that was why we had come here.

Finally, he deigned to appear. Joe from Garvaghy Road presented him with a book which Joe had been writing for two years, local residents’ memories of what they had to suffer.

And do you know what Blair did with the book?- says Patricia.- He opened it up carelessly with one finger – and threw it across the table as if it was something dirty... Joe froze with pain. And so, since then, Tony Blair ceased to exist in my eyes as a politician deserving any respect. Brendan picked up the book in the same cool way and said, ‘Prime Minister, if you had made an effort to familiarize yourself with this publication, then at page 135 (or some other page, he knew exactly where to look for it) you would have found the exact explanation of why we cannot agree to let the Orangemen march through our place under the existing conditions.’ And still looking very calm he returned the book to him, this time open at the necessary page.

Tony Blair turned pale with anger. And Brendan pointed out to him that he was endangering our lives, because it had been publicly announced on the radio where we were at the moment, and that the Loyalists would be waiting for us on the way home.

“‘Oh, I have taken care of that!’, Blair said solemnly. ‘The road will be cleared for you. You will be driven home.’ Which meant it was to be the *British Army* to drive us back! Back to our community after the radio had announced that we were ready to agree on the Orange march through our place!

Brendan rose, and, in the same measured voice, told the British prime Minister that he could ‘shove the army up his arse’.

I’m not in favor of such wording, but I think Brendan was right then,-, Patricia says, also without raising her voice, slowly finishing her tea.

And I look again at the money on the table; the hard-earned money of the working people, raised by not the most prosperous Belfast residents for a little sick girl nicknamed “Friendship of the Nations”...

²⁹⁴ Martin McGuinness (b.1950) is an Irish [Sinn Féin politician](#) and the [deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland](#), former leader of the [Provisional Irish Republican Army](#) (IRA).

By late November, at last day X had come. I was terribly nervous, because it was turning out to be a very difficult journey: my Mum and Lisa flew from Moscow, and I had to join them on their flight in Shannon in Ireland. Shannon is very far from the place where I live and the plane was going to arrive there at three AM, but the indefatigable Frank told me that this didn't worry him and that he will take me there. We agreed that he will call me at 9 o'clock, and I started to wait.

I took a vacation from my work. My colleagues and the boss too made long faces, when I mentioned Cuba, but I knew that this company is not an American one, and that I would not be the under the threat of dismissal. They just knew absolutely nothing about Cuba as, indeed, about the Soviet Union, and they had pretty absurd ideas

It was still hard to believe that this was not a dream. My gratitude to the Cuban people - regardless of the outcome of Lisa's treatment - was so great that I have felt a lump in my throat at the mere thought of it. During the years of life under capitalism, I learned to really appreciate what we had taken for granted and was well aware that Cubans did not have to give a positive answer to us. Especially given the not so great economic situation in Cuba.

Flying to Cuba, I was worrying: What would Cuba be like? Cuba, almost the last country on earth which miraculously preserved and still today faithfully keeps those norms and moral and spiritual values with which I grew up, despite the increasing chaos of the rest of this frantic world. Will I face a "swan song" of socialism or anything that was so dear to me since childhood?

In many ways, my excitement was due to feelings of guilt for betrayal of Liberty Island by my country - or rather, what was left of it, and still more precisely, by a gang of minion compradors, who seized power there more than a decade ago.

Looking ahead, here are the words of my new friend in Cuba - an Irish woman, working in Havana. "You know what is the difference of Cuban government from all others, including yours and mine? The fact that they have the ethics, they do have even in our time, the ethical principles."

Fidel Castro - whom I deeply respect - sees our planet as a noble Don Quixote, fighting with incredible number of hideous windmills. Say what you wish about the social system of Cuba, but it is impossible not to feel admiration for those who, unlike the cowardly, fainthearted and openly bought world leaders, continues to fearlessly speak the truth about the giant neighbor-predator, even to its face. Cuba continues to exist without fear, living under its own laws, under the noses of those who bombed for "disobedience" a lot of states ...

No wonder I used Cuba as an example to my friends the Irish republicans, after they began to justify their moves to disarmament by "the objective conditions prevailing in the world after September 11." This is altogether used by too many and for too much to justify.

... Outside, heavy rain poured down, and Frank did not come. I began to worry even more. He wasn't answering his mobile phone.

Half an hour later my excitement turned to panic. I had imagined that Frank had some horrible accident; and my mother and Lisa, without me, fly away to an unknown Cuba, not even knowing why I had not appeared. At least I somehow can speak a bit of

Spanish, on the basis of my knowledge of Papiamentu, but what were they going to do? Another time, I probably would have cried, but this was no time to be emotional. I had to stop panicking and decide what to do. I had no choice, and I picked up the phone and called the local taxi station ...

I was very lucky to find a driver to take me so far at nightfall. On the other hand, he wasn't doing it out of kindness, a mercantile "kyu" for such "ke-ce"²⁹⁵ would have crawled on all fours even to the end of the universe. A taxi ride to Shannon cost me the same amount as a flight from Dublin to Moscow. But there was no sense in regretting that – after taking off the head, one does not cry about hair.

The driver I got was, perhaps, a Protestant, because he seemed to feel insecure, as soon as we crossed the border, though, of course, no one there would pay him any attention. He was silent almost all the way - another telling sign. But when we got to Dublin, we both began to swear in duo - about the condition of the road signs there. We drove three times past the turn to Shannon - so "clear" it was designated ...

- In Britain, you will never see such a thing! - With indignation, he complained to me. And perhaps the first time in my life, I was ready to agree with him.

When we were almost approaching Limerick, I suddenly heard my phone rang: Frank! It turns out that he came to my house just twenty minutes after I left for a taxi: the neighboring farmer, you see, asked him to go by the way for some tiles to an adjacent county. I did not know what to do, to swear or to laugh. I would swear, perhaps, but still I did not have the right to. Frank did me a favor. But on the other hand, when something like this is promised to someone, they are counting on you! So, it was not a good thing to do.

In any case, now Frank went after us because he still had to give me the money collected for us in Dublin by Finnuly efforts. So, perhaps it was still a rather funny situation!

In Shannon, he caught up with us. I paid the driver, got out of the taxi and immediately ran into him - wet to the skin and very angry, as if I stood him down and not him.

- Was it so difficult to wait? - Frank was indignant. – You wasted so much money!

- And how could I know that you still would come? And what would have happened if I had not got on this flight?

Slowly, we both calmed down, and he saw me almost to the aircraft itself. When I was walking to the plane along the corridor, it suddenly flashed into my head: what if Mum and Lisa were not on the plane? But they were there! Lisa slept in mother's lap. During the time that I have not seen her, she grew a lot.

- Quiet. Sit down, do not wake her up! - Mum told me by way of greeting.

A few minutes later the plane was already running, preparing for the flight across the ocean. And finally a heavy stone fell from my shoulders. Only then did I feel how tired I was. I had been awake since 6 am, and it was already half past 3 the next morning - nearly 22 hours! To sleep, sleep, sleep now...

And it was like falling into some black hole.

... I was dreaming about a show of a Cuban band "Irakere"²⁹⁶, who visited our town when

²⁹⁵ Extraterrestrials language from satiric "Kindza Dza" film (1988), "kyu" - bad person, "ke-ce" - money

²⁹⁶ Irakere ([Yoruba](#) for 'forest') is a [Cuban](#) band founded by [Armando de Sequeira Romeu](#) [Music Director](#) and composer, and by [pianist Chucho Valdés](#) in 1973. They won the [Grammy Award for Best Latin Recording](#) in 1980

I was 15. We went with my mother. Almost all the spectators in the hall were Cuban students studying in our city, and it was so strange to see how they just jumped from their seats and started dancing right in the aisle, because at the time it was not accepted there. Inside of me, too, all was dancing, but I did not dare to stand up and join them - not just because I was much younger, but also because I sort of had built-in brakes. The Cubans seemed to be natural dancers, they were so talented that I was afraid of looking ridiculous near them. I admired them. And when my mother and I started photographing musicians of "Irakere" - without the flash, because we had no one with us - one of them, the older-looking, dark-skinned, noticed this and diligently began to pose for us, causing the audience to laugh.

I had records by "Irakere" at home, though I wasn't used to Latin American music that time. You have to live in the region some time to understand this kind of music. And now, after living in Curaçao, I felt it much better. Also I had annual subscription to the magazine "Cuba" in Russian language. I clearly remember an article about Cuban girl who went to work to Angola. When her fiancé pressed her to choose between "Angola or me", not thinking for long, she said: "Angola!" If I were in that position, I would have done the same. I envied Cubans a little because it seemed much easier for them to go to work in Africa. And also I had books written by Nikolas Guillén²⁹⁷ and I liked Eslinda Nunez²⁹⁸ in the role of Isidora Covarrubio de los Llanos in the Soviet-Cuban production of "The Headless Horseman". I didn't understand how it could be possible to prefer Ludmila Savelyeva²⁹⁹ to her! But I could understand even less, how somebody could like Oleg Vidov³⁰⁰. I worried so much about Cuban sportsmen at the Moscow Olympics almost as much as about Miruts Yifter³⁰¹. When Silvio Leonard³⁰² had been awarded silver in 100 m, I climbed a tree in the yard and wept a long time: I was absolutely sure that he was judged unfairly only to give gold to Scott Alan Wells³⁰³ who had come to Moscow in spite of a boycott against our Olympics by his country. And Teofilo Stevenson, and Alberto Juantorena³⁰⁴!

²⁹⁷ Nicolás Cristóbal Guillén Batista (1902 – 1989) was a [Cuban](#) poet, journalist, political activist, and writer. He is remembered as the national poet of [Cuba](#)

²⁹⁸ Cuban cinema actress known in the USSR for Soviet-Cuban co-production film "Headless Horseman"(1972)

²⁹⁹ Ludmila Savelyeva (b. 1942) is a [Russian](#) film actress and [ballerina](#). She achieved lasting fame in the role of [Natasha Rostova](#) in the 1966-68 film [War and Peace](#)

³⁰⁰ Oleg Vidov (b.1943) is a [Soviet/American actor](#). He appeared in 50 films since 1961. In 1985, Vidov emigrated to the U.S. and began acting in films and television there, without success

³⁰¹ Miruts Yifter (b. 1944 or 1938) is a former [Ethiopian athlete](#) and winner of two [gold medals](#) at the [1980 Moscow Summer Olympics](#).

³⁰² Silvio Leonard Sarría also known as Silvio Leonard Tartabull (b. 1955) is a former [sprinter](#) from [Cuba](#), silver medalist of Moscow's Olympic Games in 1980 (100 m). He came very close to the winner, Allan Wells, and heroine of the book refuses to believe that he was 2nd.

³⁰³ Allan Wipper Wells (b.1952) is a former [Scottish](#) and [British athlete](#). He became [Olympic](#) Champion in the [100 metres](#) at the [USA](#) boycotted [1980 Summer Olympics](#) in [Moscow](#).

³⁰⁴ Teófilo Stevenson Lawrence (1952 – 2012) was a [Cuban](#) amateur [boxer](#). He is one of only three boxers to win three Olympic gold medals. Alberto Juantorena (b.1950) is a [Cuban](#) former [track athlete](#), famed for his nine foot

All these thoughts floated through my head as if I were drowsy, but I heard the arrogant tenor of some “new Russian” passenger through it:

- We have a friend there, he’s already selling cigars, but they don’t allow his business to expand. Never mind! Everything will be OK, when Fidel will be gone.

I tried to open my eyes to see which of these people was deciding for Cubans how they should live. These "New Russians" not only turned their own country into a hellhole, but want to meddle in other countries now. But I couldn't keep my eyes open, so I fell into a deep sleep.

Cuba looked like Russia through the airplane window. But it was only while the plane was quite high over the Jose Marti airport and the coconut palms and banana plantations were not visible yet. We could see only long fences and numerous multistory buildings. At last the plane was descending; we were going out and immediately found ourselves in sticky, humid heat. But my mother and Lisa had felt boots on their feet! Despite that, nobody laughed at them. People were friendly, though, in contrast to Curaçao, they were quiet and a bit shy at first. Even the border guard who was checking my passport smiled shyly.

In the airport we were met by a clinic representative who had a minibus. The man was handsome and grey-haired. We got in the bus quickly, it started moving and we looked out devouringly through the window. What is this Cuba?

To tell the truth, until I visited Cuba and saw it with my own eyes, I had my doubts about it thanks to cynicism, which we all had after 15 year ruling of “minions”. Moreover, Tatiana, our former compatriot, also tried to add fuel to the fire. Having lived nearly 25 years in Cuba with her Cuban husband, a military pilot, and leaving Liberty Island when economic grievances arose there after USSR disintegration, nearly 8 years ago she settled down in Dublin as a political refugee. She blamed all her economical and personal troubles on Fidel (maybe, for her zeal she received the status of refugee, though she is such a political refugee as I am a trolleybus), even her own divorce (allegedly, her husband was ordered to divorce her by the Cuban communist party!). In Dublin Tatiana threw herself into religion and became a sort of spiritual leader of the Orthodox community.

But my attention was drawn to her for another reason. Her first name combined with her Spanish surname seemed very familiar to me, though we had not met before. Only then I remembered that I had seen this name and surname in a newspaper of free advertisements of Russian emigrants which was published in London. It was the advertisement: “*A middle-aged respectable lady wants to meet an English gentleman.*” This was the real reason for her divorce and her religious paroxysm, not the “intrigues of the Cuban communist party”. For this gold-digging madam, Ireland was only a pit stop on the race to her true goal – a well-to-do husband. She had not married an Englishman earlier only because in the Soviet Union years Englishmen didn’t knock about the USSR searching for pretty little foolish girls to decorate their houses. Thus while her Cuban military husband was a good provider, he was also quite suitable for her with all his communistic views. I wonder where she will go, when the economic crisis spreads in England too?

stride length. At the [1976 Summer Olympics](#), he became the first and so far only athlete to win both the 400 and 800 m Olympic titles

To tell the truth, when I saw the glassless windows in many houses, my heart hurt at first. But then I remembered that, we are in the tropics, where blinds are more important than glass and, also that there was a hurricane in Cuba recently!

Havana still shows traces of hurricane Michele – the strongest hurricane there in 50 years. The windows of many houses, especially high-rise buildings, were taped across with brown masking tape. Some windows were broken, and paint was peeling off the walls. But under nearly every window, as a sign of continuing life, clean laundry was fluttering in the breeze.

The evacuation was coordinated so well that Michele claimed only 5 lives. The number would have been much greater, if it were not for that very “totalitarian” Castro socialism. But, of course, the western media prefers not to write about it!

Here it is, beautiful Cuba!

People are not in a hurry, they are leisurely walking, sometimes thumbing rides. The cars are mostly Russian, the usual well-familiar *Moskvich* and *Lada*, *ZIL* and *Kamaz*. For a moment it seems that you are really at home – and especially it is pleasant to see and hear the *Muravey*³⁰⁵ motor scooters, which I have not seen even in the streets of my native town for a long time.

But when a local bus “Cameo³⁰⁶” is driving by, you understand that you are not at home... The bus made with Cuban inventiveness out of a ZIL trailer, which has an improvised autobus body instead of truck body. On a bus like this you don't need to have a sign that says “Do not speak with the driver!” The driver sits far from the passengers, who are crammed together like cucumbers in a jar. The most important thing when riding a Cuban bus is to know exactly where you will get off and to force your way to the exit beforehand. I noticed then that in Cuba as in Russia, people use two typical phrases: “*Who is the last?*” and “*Are you getting off?*” This is in contrast to Holland where you are not asked anything, people just elbow their way through the crowd).

The streets in Cuba are wide, beautiful, planted with palms and you can just imagine how they looked in the years when the island was flourishing, in the '60 and '70s. Today, it is still surprising how this country with its limited resources, now with the strict economic blockade and the betrayal of its former main ally manages to survive and to keep its dignity.

There are many shared apartments in the centre of Havana. In former villas – antique white stone buildings of Spanish colonial style with verandas and wide balconies- several families live together now. This is a sensible way of helping to solve the housing problem. And despite the difficult conditions, building constructions continues throughout all Havana.

Nobody looks impoverished. There no homeless, ragged, famished people, no waifs. There are no pigheaded “tough” guys hanging about every restaurant as a “protection”. And, despite all their everyday problems, there are lively, well-wishing people. And there are many, many theatres, museums, clubs, cinema theatres, Palaces of Culture, concert

³⁰⁵ Muravey (“Ant”) - Soviet tricycle cargo scooter. There were several models derived from passenger scooters, produced by “Tulamashzavod” in 1959-1995. They were widely sold in the developing countries

³⁰⁶ Public buses in Havana known as *camellos* (“camels” or “dromedaries”, after their “humps”), [trailer buses](#) that haul as many as two hundred passengers in a passenger carrying trailer. The *camellos* were phased out in April 2008 with Chinese [Zhengzhou Yutong Buses](#)

halls and stadiums. The streets are full of shouting schoolchildren in mustard-colored skirts and trousers and with real pioneer ties. They are transported to school and back home in big yellow buses.

By this time our bus has arrived to the clinic gate. The clinic was virtually a small town nestled in a wealth of trees. We went into the main building, where we received a cozy, neat room without any luxuries, but with an air-conditioner on the first floor. On the doors I noticed doorplates with children's names: little patients have gathered here from all Latin America and even from other countries, for example, Italians. It was written on our door: "Lisa, 8 years old, *Rusa-Irlandesa*³⁰⁷". Sonny would have a fit from such description of her nationality.

It was Saturday and the treatment would begin on Monday with a full check-up of Lisa. So, we had time to look around and to get used to our new conditions. We would like to see the sights of the city, but we were so tired from the flight that all three of us went right to sleep. I had not slept so quietly and well for several years.

When we woke up, it was too late to go somewhere; twilight was thickening over shaggy palms, cicadas chirred outside. In fact, only one of us could remain with Lisa and I had a reserve place to stay: it was the house of a friend's sister who had the unusual Russian masculine name Ura – possibly, in honor of our Gagarin. But it was already late to look for her today. I hoped that I would not be given a street map today. Indeed, nobody said a word. The cook, who was a plump, dark-skinned woman, brought us the dinner and two portions were quite enough for all three of us.

- *La manzana es para la niña*³⁰⁸! – She said strictly, as it has seemed for us, in Spanish. I translated for my mother. She was surprised – firstly, because we didn't want to take Lisa's apple, and, secondly, why this apple is so special? But I explained to her that there are no apples in tropics; therefore, it is a rarity like bananas were for us back then.

I managed to make myself understood by the Cubans somehow. I do not speak Spanish well, so I used a mixture of some Spanish words, Papiamento, English and Russian for communicating. Not a lot of people really spoke Russian, but a lot of them understood and remembered separate words and aged people greeted me by their stories about how wonderful it was when they studied in the USSR.

Satisfied that we understood her, the cook looked at Lisa with a kind smile:

- Is her father Cuban? – She asked.

- Curaçao, - I showed with the help of the fingers.

- And are you *Irlandesa*? – She asked.

- *Rusa*, - I said.

- Oh, *Soviética*! – The woman was glad. She said this soft word so gracefully, accenting the sound "I", and I remembered how in Holland it had been quite the opposite:

Dutchmen called us Russians and we were surprised and offended. We put them right: "No, we are not Russians, but Soviet people!"

Then I learned that the cook's words were not an exception in Cuba: I found it everywhere – when I said that I was Russian, I was naturally and unobtrusively corrected: "*Oh, Soviética!*" Eventually I began to understand more distinctly that the Cubans were

³⁰⁷ Russian Irish (Spanish)

³⁰⁸ The apple is for the child (Spanish)

right. Unknowingly, they actually drove the point home, having expressed my own essence by this word.

Whatever Tatiana said, there are still such women in Cuba, who marry for love and don't look at their husband's passports. Despite her complaints about us being treated badly here, no Cuban who knew that I am from contemporary Russia gave me a dirty look. On the contrary, everybody was sorry that there are so few Russian tourists here, and remembered their Russian friends, or the years spent in our country with pleasure.

My mother then discovered a TV set in the ward. Unlike me, she cannot live without it. There were quite enough channels. We were surprised that there was even CNN in Spanish language. I say "surprised", not "surprised and glad" because there was nothing to be happy about: first, I had already had bellyful of American propaganda and, second, at that very time there was only bombing of Afghanistan shown there.

Of course, it had started when I was in Ireland. Looking at Americans carpet bombing Afghan villages, Dermot, who had been acquainted with Najibullah³⁰⁹, became gloomy. I remembered our last conversation before my departure.

- Now for a good while you cannot even say that you are a supporter of armed liberation conflict. That was what henchmen of American hireling Ben Laden did! It was America who brought him up and fostered him. Though many nations, for instance, the country, where our Fionntan is now, have no other, peaceful ways to struggle for their rights. When you become a legal left politician and want to take part in elections, you will be immediately annihilated. That is "democracy".

- However, Dermot, I think those guys didn't think their actions would cause such a reaction. I think they did it sincerely.

- That's it! They didn't imagine! They had to imagine! – He was getting excited. - Now they can arrange any reactionary legislation under the slogan of terror struggle in all countries and nobody will say a word. Of course, Americans will not stop at Afghanistan. – He reasoned aloud. – Their next aim is Iraq. Then they will want to grab Iran. But they will run into big troubles there. And if they lay a finger on the DPRK, they would be knocked to kingdom come. Once I was there and I know what kind of people live there. Koreans are not Afghan shepherds who still live in feudalism! And even Afghan shepherds, if Americans are held up in Afghanistan, would exhaust them. Eventually, America will bite off more than she can chew. And only then... Only then everything will fall into its place, including the attitude about armed liberation conflict. But how much blood of innocent civilians will be shed before that happens? Oh...

- Then, in your opinion, it is the Arabs who are guilty for everything and not those who have brought the world to this point. But I'm so surprised – you married one of them.

- Listen, Zhenya, if you are speaking about American Irishmen, I'll tell you what: we are only fellow travelers in one bus. Now both we and they have one way, but we have another ultimate goal. Some of those people think, especially after recent developments and after the actions of Fionntan that they can drive our bus. It is no use to think so....

³⁰⁹ Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai (1947 – 1996), better known [mononymously](#) as Najibullah or Najib, was the [President of Afghanistan](#) from 1987 until 1992 when the [Mujahideen](#) took over [Kabul](#). In 1996 Najibullah is said to have been castrated by the Taliban, and was dragged behind a truck in the streets of Kabul, before he was publicly hanged

- Mum, please, turn this abomination off! – I asked. – You don't understand what they are babbling about and for me it is insufferable to hear it!

Mother obediently switched the channel and this time it was a Cuban one. There was also news about the same explosions in Afghan mountains, but the commentary was different. It reflected my opinion more closely. And then quite different things were shown. They were peaceful. They were not about robbery, fires, killings and violence, not about how this or that political intrigue would be reflected on this or that politico's career. They showed how people conduct electricity to the ends of the island, which new factories are opened, how they restore the country, after the destruction of the hurricane. It was a real pleasure to see such news.

The Cuban news programs made me nearly misty-eyed. And I don't feel guilty to admit it. For many years I had not been seeing the people of labor on the small screen, their progress, problems and happiness! These are the people who hold our planet up. Instead of this, I am stuffed with "news" about the huge salary of some millionaire football coaches (why should I be interested in contents of somebody's purse?) and about "democratic" bombing of the poorest nation by the richest one, about idiotic gossip about the lives of shallow film stars, and worse, this was repeated every hour!

It is much more pleasant for me to see, how Cuban network systems are being restored after hurricane and how Cuban athlete Sotomajor established a new world record in high jumps. The USA and some other countries tried to tempt him by offering loads of money, but he cannot be sold or bought.

Who needs only negative news reports? Only one who is concerned "for his own skin" and who is relieved that for today the danger is over, or someone who is just used to evil. The leading idea of these news stories is the thought that "there is no different life and it will never be". Oh, have you been raped or robbed? So what? So has everyone else! But another life is not only possible – it actually exists.

Walk along Havana to see it for yourself.

We walked along it the next day. The downtown area was away from the clinic – too far to walk. Therefore, we took a taxi. We're not in Cuba every day!

So, we are going along *Infanta* Street, getting sunburned. There are two men, sitting on the pavement and playing chess excitedly. They even have a chess clock. Where else, in which of the so-called "developed countries" you can see such a happy, leisurely situation?

And when we go onto the seafront *Malecon*, where young couples sit on hot stones and boys dive into the sea from these stones and we are showered with sea spray, the scenes of reports from the distant XI World Festival of Youth and Students in Havana 1978 arise in my memory. The 14th Festival in Havana, 1997, I had not even seen. In Holland they do not show reports about such events – it is apparently not as interesting to them as a pornography film competition.

If a western correspondent were here, he would certainly write about the old woman who intentionally limping came to us in old Havana and began to demonstrate, how old her skirt is, demanding the money for a new one.

Yes, there are some adults in Cuba who try to beg something from tourists, especially in old Havana, but it is so-called "vocation" of such people and they use it as extra earnings, not from backbreaking indigence. You can understand that, having lived on the island a

bit longer – and not only as a tourist. And how can we compare it with that number of people which live by begging in other countries – in those, which are named “free countries of market economy”? But to write about that is not interesting for western “smokers”. In the same way they write about “horrors of power failure” in Pyongyang and never mention about the same regular problem somewhere in Conakry³¹⁰. Though both these countries are developing!

But other things impressed me even more in Cuba – things you cannot see in other countries. For example, the absence of commercials on TV – oh, my God, it is such bliss! Also, the first thing I noticed in Cuban souvenir shops, is that there are no obscene beach “erotic” postcards, which shops always have in all the health resort countries, from Italia to Curaçao.

And how perverted, phobic and over-stimulated our minds became during the years of “free life”! A good example of this is my mother’s story, which happened while I was in a book shop, having left her with Lisa near a public garden.

- We are sitting on the grass and waiting for you, when a man and a woman come in the square. Then I see that the man begins to take his trousers off. I thought “Gee, have I come to a bad place? And where can I run away?” Then I see: there are training shorts under his trousers. “Well, – I thought, – “may be, he is feeling too hot.” Then I see that he also takes his shirt off and there is a naked paunch. “Ouch! – I thought. – Where can I still run away? What they are going to do?” But he then puts a sport jersey on. “Well, – I thought, – he decided to change his clothes, villain! Surely, he has robbed a bank! He is changing his image, scum!” But then I see – he gives his clothes to the woman, she sat on the grass and he began jogging! It turned out that he is training!

And now imagine, what did you think being in the same situation? And were your thoughts more different after the years of “democratic” Russian reality?

The books in that shop, where I was, while my mother is discovering the world of socialism again, cost even less than vegetables and fruit on a market. The choice was vast, including the monographs, which cannot be published in Russia now, because they are “unprofitable”.

When we were in Cuba, for 11 million people there were 247 museums, 53 theatres, 150 libraries, 123 Galleries of Art, 354 bookshops and 278 recreation centers. Since 1959 more than 600,000 people graduated from institutions of higher education. In the country there were 1114 kindergartens, which allowed 135.000 Cuban mothers to go to work. That time more than 100,000 grown up Cubans got the second higher education. There were 181 teacher per 1000 people and a doctor per 175 people (in all – 63 483 doctors, the statistics of 1998). Education expenditure accounted for almost 10% of the budget. Also Cuba has the lowest infant mortality rate (6.4 per 1000 babies). The average life expectation of Cubans is 74.7 years. Already in the first months of their life Cuban children are inoculated against 12 diseases (while in the West, Bill Gates is proclaimed as “a benefactor of humanity”, donating a scanty part of “his” money for inoculation of children in Africa!). In small Cuba there is practically no drug addiction and the number of HIV positive and AIDS patients is 1800.

Cuban scientists have invented a potential vaccine against AIDS, which is being tested now. But it is doubtful that even after the test this vaccine will come into the market – the USA will not allow it. Today Cuba, for instance, is the only country in the world, which

³¹⁰ Conakry - capital of Guinea where power cuts are quite common

successfully prevents and treats meningitis. However, the USA does not allow the Liberty Island to patent it and to supply to other countries with medications produced here. Therefore, thousand hundreds people of the world continue to die from meningitis, including those in “developed” countries. Cuba is also a world power in sports.

...When the Soviet Union was disorganized, Cubans invented not only “Cameo” buses made from lorries, but, for example, “collective gardens” – something like a farm for citizens of one block, where they grow vegetables and fruit for their consumption. As opposed to us who try to survive with the help of vegetable gardens and orchards, Cubans made these not private, but collective.

Today’s economic state of Cuba must be seen objectively, in the context of those conditions in which this small country lives, having stood by their principles and high ideals. This is a country where the leaders cannot be bought.

Having been in Ireland, while getting papers for this trip, I got acquainted with a wonderful Cuban woman, who struck me by her humanity and openhearted warmth.

- I have been in many countries of East Europe after the so-called “downfall of communism”, – she told me, - and the things, I saw there, convinced me even more about the correctness of our way. For example, Bulgaria: the country is in ruins. It looks like a war has been there. There is an awful misery and there is no a ray of hope, no light at the end of the tunnel. Nobody will invest money in such an economy and Bulgarians don't even hope for it, though many people mistakenly think it is the solution for the troubles. And the previous markets are lost. When you look at the situation of such countries you think: we have no choice. We have to continue, what we have begun, in spite of all difficulties and problems. We believe in the possibility of socialist community in one country and deserve normal life – not simply enduring existence. We have no alternative.

Certainly, mentally I compare Cuba and Curaçao and I agree with this woman. By the way, Curaçao is not the poorest island of the region: Haitians, the inhabitants of the Dominican Republic, and Columbians strive to migrate there. It somehow resembles Cuba, but there is neither free medical care, nor free education, nor conditions which help to survive, if a person has no job. Plus there are terrible taxes for electricity and water consumption and there is almost total lack of public transportation. Therefore, every year thousands of Antilleans move to Netherlands, where they are met with racist prejudices and hatred and their houses are being bought up for a song by a rich “macamba”... To show that they do something for native people, the Holland government proclaimed hypocritically the “scheme of repatriation”, where every Antillean who could find a job in his native town and who decided to return back from Netherlands would be given 16.000 gulden per family. But it is still not clear, how they can find any work, when jobs are either not created in Curaçao or created but already earmarked in Netherlands for “white-skinned”. And in Curaçao prison is called “*Bon Futuro*”– “A happy future”...

...I am looking through the album “Friendship – Amistad”, which was bought in Havana bookshop. It was published by “Molodaya gvardia” publishing house in Moscow in 1978. The young faces of my compatriots and their Cuban friends, happy, full of ardor and enthusiasm, look at me from the pages. It is unbearably hard to see them today, and to read this book remembering the recent exultation of Russian newspapers. Cuban

dissenters and immigrants in Miami were very glad, when the Russian government had stabbed the back of Cuban revolution. It's a shame, such a shame!

Food for thought:

“The Cuban economy lost tens of millions of dollars and had to trade with geographically quite remote countries because of the American blockade which had been going on for decades, and the imports from this country to Cuba, from an aspirin tablet to a wheat grain, had been forbidden. The blockade also limited the opportunities to buy new equipment for Cuba. In the '90s Cuba suffered economically from a sudden rupture of her lasting economic ties with former socialist countries of Europe, especially with the Soviet Union. The country lost the connections of her foreign trade, her reliable sources of energy and practically all her credit for developing. At the same time the American blockade was becoming draconically stronger. The main sources of raw materials and spares for Cuban industry were almost entirely cut off and Cuban industry was practically stopped, although the negative effect of those events on the labor force was eased due to the social policy of the Cuban government. Despite the negative projections, Cuba stands on her own two feet, thanks to the patriotism and technical knowledge of her people. She maintains her excellent system of free education, public health, social security and other main services. Before the emergency situation in the beginning of the '90s, there had been a period in Cuba, the so-called “special period”, when about 90% of country had electricity, a large road network, highways, railroads, airports and seaports, hundreds of dikes and reservoirs for irrigation were built. Just those conditions helped Cuba to overcome the stage of recession. In 1994-1995 there was a dramatic fall in the sugarcane harvest, because the country stopped receiving about 80% of all fertilizers, herbicides, fuel and farm machinery. In 1994 the country reached the “bottom” in economy: her gross national product was only 0.7%. However, by the end of 1996 the GNP had increased to 5%. After 1991 the growth of tourism was 17% per annual. By 1997 it was up to 46% and the number of tourists went over one million.

Imagine the economic and political hardships that Cuban socialism has had to survive, and all the time living so near the world's imperialist № 1. Now look at our country which is the richest in the world and which, in contrast to Cuba, has all the necessary natural and economic resources for successful independent development, but which came under the yoke of “snickers and pampers” having brought our people to the level of life somewhere in Guatemala or Honduras.

They continue to assure us – and this delusion is wide-spread in Russia – that Cuba and other socialist and developing countries mooched off of us. Today it is not only the capitalists of other countries, who sell us goods of poor quality compared to our own goods, who are mooching off of us, but also our native capitalists, who are making a fortune out of destruction of our industry and agriculture by importing, who greedily cling to its remains (for instance, with the famous “Krasniy Ocyabr³¹¹” factory) and who squeeze out import materials from Russia. Those same things which only recently were our national property! These circumstances have been forgotten by the ardent opponents of internationalism and solidarity: today the army of idlers and parasites, from

³¹¹ “Red October” - famous Soviet confectionery manufacturer

Berezovsky to Chubays³¹², have robbed us. They have negated all our help to fraternal nations during the past, better years! Or do you prefer to feed them, these parasites, Russians! To feed them only because they are “ours, domestic”?

We are going in a taxi through Havana in the evening. “Coco” is a special, purely Cuban kind of motor taxi, where passengers sit behind the driver-motorcyclist’s back, under a yellow half-sphere-roof, inhaling the fresh sea air. The driver is a young, brisk Cuban woman in a military cap, as Fidel Castro had, and with a mop of long black hair, blowing downwind. We are talking with the help of gestures and words, but she still cannot find our clinic. It is already completely dark around. Without any fear she drives up to the first building and addresses the guard, a young man: “*Compañero!*” – “Comrade!” He explains to her, where she has to go, but she does not know this district and asks him to go with us and to show the way. She does all of it without any fear, even without a shadow of a doubt that something could happen to her. This is the same safety and trust as we had in the time of socialism.

At last we found the right street, and she did not take extra money from us.

Before bed, we rolled out Lisa in a wheelchair - to walk more on the hospital grounds, for a breath of fresh air. It was still a little stuffy, but it became cooler, as a fresh breeze was blowing in from the sea. The sky above the palm trees was an inky purple color, and there was a high, dark yellow, almost orange moon the size of a good wagon wheel. We could hear nearby voices from a military hospital beside the fence where they were still playing volleyball.

- *Que linda*³¹³! - Suddenly rang out from somewhere in the corner. Caught unaware, we both nearly jumped. And around the corner came a local guard - a nice white-haired mulatto of my mother's age. And these words were addressed to my mother. I did not even have to translate - my mother guessed that it was a compliment. And suddenly she was shy like a little girl. I did not expect such reaction. The guard blew us a kiss and continued his rounds.

When we returned to the ward, my mother looked out the window before going to bed. The same guard was standing under a street lamp, smiling broadly and continued to blow her kisses, and it looked as if he was going to sing her serenade.

- *I'm here, Inezilla, I'm here under the window*³¹⁴ ... - I sang in jest. Mum blushed, and drew the curtain.

... In the evening I could not sleep for a long time. I could not stop thinking about everything I had seen.

Once we had such a life. Today's young generation, who missed it, has great difficulty to understand and plow through Augean stables of lies and slander, erected on the grave of our country by the "perestroika men". They are especially confused because they don't research, don't ask questions and don't think that the life back then was easier and simpler. Sometimes they just do not have enough imagination to imagine what it really was like, and because of this they do not believe us, those who have personally lived it and remember. It's easier to believe hysterical denigrators - you can see, they are still

³¹² Russian oligarchs and reformers

³¹³ What a beauty! (Spanish)

³¹⁴ Russian romance song by M. Glinka, text of A. Pushkin

dumping biased, negative news about everything, day after day.

They now want to have fun all the time instead of thinking - just like those little men from Nosov's tale on Fool's island³¹⁵. I do not mind having some fun sometimes - but the difference is that I am not interested in the rubbish that they consider fun.. I'm not interested in entertainment which requires no mental effort. I remember back in the summer after fourth grade reading a textbook just for fun. It was a history of the ancient world for the next grade. What a reader I was - an avid one, hardly stopping! I do get bored and sad when I do not have to think. To me, entertainment means an opportunity to use my brains for thinking.

I can not help it: I was brought up this way. Even our circus was not just for fun:

"From the great there is just one step to the ridiculous: One has only to step into the wrong ..." - remember the song from the famous circus show "I work as a clown" by the famous clown Andrei Nikolayev³¹⁶. Representations of acute satire, such that I went to see it 8 times (each time it was a little different) - as a dramatic theater! The clown was the famous comic talent known as Andryusha. His father was a diplomat, he served as ambassador to Austria and Hungary, and his mother was a philologist. Such are the "clowns" we've had!

"No matter how bitter it is, this is the truth: In the Soviet years, our country was proud of its rockets, ballet and circus, which were met with enthusiasm throughout the world. And incidentally, the government spared no means for it. And now, abandoned by "the market", the circus has become exclusively a place of entertainment for young children ... Yes, back then we also had shows for kids – at day; and nights were for an adult, thoughtful audience. In the circus there were often well-known writers, dramatic actors. And now what place is for them there? The circus' young people do not want to learn, but to earn money as quickly as possible and more, such as entertaining the children of "New Russians" on outings. Once Lenya Yengibarov³¹⁷ and I specially went to Krasnogorsk, to a film archive, and gave handsome tips to see movies with the great clowns of the past. Now everything is available, but alas - no one needs it ... " - he said recently.

But in Cuba – people do need it!

That's why I say that Cuba is not a poor country. It is richer than many of the so-called "civilized" ones.

And when the next morning, still in the dark, I was awakened by Hawaiian dogs barking and a vociferous Cuban third cock crowing, my first feeling was one that I have not experienced for many years, since Soviet times - of joyful rest and expectation of a long, long sunny day ...

... - What kind of medicine could they possibly have in Cuba? - One of my Northern Irish coworkers uttered skeptically. The same one who shared with me how the following year

³¹⁵ From children's book "Dunno on the Moon", satire on capitalist society

³¹⁶ Andrei Nikolayev (b. 1938) circus actor, clown, professor of GITIS Theater Institute known as "Andryusha" or «Nico» during his clown career

³¹⁷ Leonid Georgievich Yengibarov (1935 – 1972) was a [Soviet clown](#) and [actor](#), pioneering in his profession in many ways

he was going to vacation in Spain (one of those cheap resorts, where the British usually "knock themselves out,") and how he hopes that by the time "in Afghanistan not one stone there will be left on another" This shows what kind of man he was. Unfortunately, people like him are the norm where I live, and we have them in Russia now, too. For them, just reading newspapers, listening to the television and radio are "thinking". They just repeat like parrots all they hear - it's so much easier to live like that. Of course, they are confident that they know the whole truth, - because they are "following the news" ...

"News: *everything you need to know*" - declares openly CNN in Spanish. That is, the whole point - that the the media dictates what people like Michael should or should not know, or what is even "harmful to know". And that's exactly what people don't understand, and it is largely because they really don't want to understand. After my trip to Cuba, I can honestly wish for this colleague's "Great Britain" (part of which he considers Northern Ireland) to be fortunate enough to obtain at least one public clinic, as the kind I saw here in Cuba. And that they could have doctors like these in Cuba, who really care about the condition of all their patients, not only those who have fat wallets.

... Food for Thought:

"Only the striking results in improving the conditions of Cuban people - by curing or substantially treating diseases - can explain the sharp increase over the past 5 years in the number of foreigners visiting Cuba as part of health tourism. Neither the steadily rising cost of having such treatment in other countries, nor their lack of funds for health, nor their lack of equipment can be cited as critical reasons for this influx (ten thousands) of visitors to Cuba's health centers, in terms of what can be described as a modern pilgrimage to life.

Health tourism in Cuba today brings people from nearly 70 countries.

Both doctors and the organizers of the Cuban national health system avoid the term "miracle", although most patients are completely cured, even those who were considered "hopeless cases", or whose ability to move and the quality of life had been seriously limited by disease.

These results can be explained by the existing network of health care, covering all the Cuban population, and technical and personnel infrastructure (staff scientists and research centers), entirely dedicated to their work. This is not a miracle, but the result of their almost religious devotion to caring for people's health.

It should be added that in Cuba there are 1050 scientists per million inhabitants, and 200 research centers. Another reason for the success of their local healthcare - uncontaminated nature of the archipelago itself: the lack of pollution, the clean air, which is aided by the fresh breezes, direction of sea currents and unusually clean and warm beaches. Based on these natural factors, Cuba has been able to develop a technically well-equipped infrastructure, while at the same time maintaining a system of higher quality health care, despite the current economic difficulties.

This does not mean that the comfortable conditions, low costs for foreign patients and the possibility of combining all this with rest, sea and sun are not the major objective leading the medical tourism industry of the State Company for Tourism and Health Cubanacán. About 200 travel agencies in the world are selling trips to Cuba for health.

The best advertising for Cuban health care comes from patients themselves, their relatives and friends. Cuban health care reaches far - from the general medicine and surgery, dentistry and prosthetics clinic in Central Cira Garcia in Havana, to the most sophisticated and modern therapeutic methods of stunning diversity in the International Center for Neurological Restoration (CIREN). In the Cuban capital there is also a well-known hospital, famous for its transplantation of spinal cord, kidneys, heart, lungs; and the hospital complex, dealing with orthopedic and trauma surgery, rehabilitation and full prosthesis services with stunning results. In the international center "Camilo Sienfuegos" they cure the too common hereditary disease, the so-called "night blindness". There is also the Center which treats psoriasis and other skin diseases. The clinics that treat mainly foreign patients for drug addiction, something rarely found among Cubans themselves. The most famous patient of Cuban doctors there was the Argentine "football king" Diego Maradona, who was in very poor condition when he arrived on the island. "(The Cuban government gave him free treatment, and Maradona was so impressed by Cuba that even wanted to stay and asked for Cuban citizenship!)

After reading all this, one might say: so what? Aren't there enough countries in the world in which foreigners can get quality paid care?

That's the whole point. The uniqueness of Cuba is that the funds received from the treatment of foreigners who can afford it, do not go into the pockets of the owners of clinics but to the state system of free quality health care for all Cubans. Moreover, the same medical services to ordinary Cubans in the same clinics that treated foreigners are free! A friend of mine, an Irish Republican, I remember, was indignant that "in Cuba, local residents are not allowed to stay in hotels with foreigners." I do not know why he was so keen to defend the rights of the few black market cigar vendors and prostitutes that he is ready to turn a blind eye to the other facts of the Cuban reality, including the fact that the locals themselves are treated without problems - and totally free! - in the same hospitals and clinics as foreigners. Tell me that this is important to you, and I'll tell you who you are ...

From early morning on Monday the clinic doctors, nurses and various support staff started to arrive, like migratory birds returning to their homes. They went to work without haste, happily chatting with each other, and - what struck me after so many years of living in the West - all walked together, side by side and quietly talking to each other about life as equals, from the largest health-care expert to the cleaning staff. Nothing like the caste system found at workplaces through the rest of the world. Before, it would never have caught my eye as it does now - and my Mum immediately echoed my thoughts out loud:

- Look, Zhenya! The janitors, and doctors - are all colleagues, all comrades! Wow, how great that is!...

Then a playful energetic nurse with a Russian name Niurka³¹⁸ knocked on the door and vigorously gesturing to us, explained that it was time to get ready for the examination.

³¹⁸ Russian short version of Anna

We did.

At the entrance, yesterday's car was waiting for us and the driver patiently and diligently was assisting children in their wheelchairs. He smiled cheerfully - a sincere smile, not forced, like in American fast-food restaurants - and I noticed how his cheerfulness pleasantly affected the exhausted Latin American mothers.

They had it a bit easier than we, not only could they understand all that the doctors and nurses said and could answer them, but were also constantly talking with each other, and the support from people who understand you means so much! Still, even without being able to properly explain in Spanish, on our way to another building of the clinic, where examination was to begin, I was able to speak to one of the moms, an Argentine.

- *Rusa?* Well, what is life you have there like? - I understood her question.

- To be honest with you, crappy - I was able to explain it.

- We have the same in Argentina, too, - she said by words and gestures. - Now, it seems, everywhere in the world it has become bad. Except here ...

I was very thankful that she did not begin eagerly trying to “prove” to me that my country is now thriving, as did the Dutch ...

The clinic, to which we brought Lisa, had been originally created as a medical facility with the rather narrow specialization for research and treatment of Parkinson's disease. By the way, the Cuban doctors have achieved in this area remarkable success: evidence of this - the fact that, perhaps, the most famous patient of this clinic, suffering from the disease, was former American boxer Muhammad Ali, who could afford any modern and expensive treatment in the United States, but nevertheless came to Cuba.

- After that, we thought: why not expand the scope for our research to other areas of neurological disorders? - Our attendant in the car told us in good English - Today, we have already achieved in this field such success that patients are coming to be treated from across the continent and other continents, too. Among our patients there are many famous people - actors, politicians, athletes. To citizens of developing countries, treatment is given at a deep discount, compared with rates for patients from more economically developed countries. But even the prices for them are nothing compared to what they would pay for such treatment at home. Judge for yourself: Every week of stay in a specialized private neurological clinic, for example, in England (the state there simply does not provide the treatment of such class!) costs about \$ 3,000. Here the highest price per month of stay, a full examination, accommodation and 3 meals a day - about 7000-8000. Most prices are much lower. In particular, special cases, we provide free treatment: For Cubans our international duty is still a sacred concept, like the international solidarity with progressive forces throughout the world. Usually, when the financial balance is done at the end of the year, most of the profit is allocated for the purchase of medical equipment for other hospitals in our country, to maintain across Cuba - including the most remote corners of the provincials - good quality, free health care for all its citizens. Our work is important for the whole country! This year was our most successful in the history of the clinic: we brought the state about \$ 9 million! The remaining money goes to the development of the clinic itself, research and to provide free treatment to certain foreign patients who can not pay for it, but desperately need it.

- Tell us about your little girl - asked the Cuban doctor after greeting us when we entered

the first room. Here we had a translator - a few doctors in the clinic had studied in the USSR and spoke Russian.

- Lisa has a damaged cerebral cortex as a result of food poisoning when she was only 4 years old. She completely lost her speech, has hyperactivity, epilepsy, and is stunted compared to her peers. From being a normal child, in a few days she became an invalid. We tried every kind of treatment, in every place we could. The worst thing is remembering the indifference of the doctors (not only in Russia) and "advice" like "get rid of her", put her in an orphanage for children with dementia! But Liza understands everything, she just lost ability to communicate, and many doctors looked at her with open contempt, as an "imbecile" - although it is their profession to treat cases like this ... - my mother explained in distress, as it was still too painful to me to talk about all this. The examination was thorough. It took several days. Without talking and persuading us that "it is not necessary", and "this will be very expensive" they took all medical images that I had been desperately trying to persuade doctors to do in Belfast. After a couple of days, my mother had such a favorable impression of Cuban medicine, that she began in admiration to write a letter home: "Almost nowhere is there such an approach to patients, as here in Cuba - a comprehensive examination and a comprehensive rehabilitation program. In other countries, doctors are looking at each symptom in isolation: they are like the tailors heroes from the routine of the comedian Arkady Raikin³¹⁹, there is "specialization"! And here - very different. I wish you could just see how they are treating patients from morning to late at night, to the point of exhaustion! And everyone - from the driver, who spends all day loading patients in wheelchairs into his car, to the housekeeping staff, who, with a smile clean our room so well, that it looks cheerful and bright - they certainly have for every patient a kind word, a word of encouragement, support, which gives them faith in themselves and in their power! "

In the yard of the clinic, when we walked out with Lisa, we once met another Russian family, Sergei and his mother. Sergei's family was "new Russian" from the Urals, and was able to pay for his treatment. But his mother was a woman with whom it was very easy to communicate.

- Cuba - it's a miracle! - She shared with us - We've been here almost 4 months, and I can tell you honestly, I do not even want to leave. Sergei fell in the pool when he was 8 years old and broke his spine. Since then, he has been confined to a wheelchair. We tried everything that was available in Russia, the best hospitals, to no avail. Nobody would even agree to operate. But the Cubans agreed! He is currently at a rehabilitation program every day. The program is very intense. What a wonderful people they are here: so good, hardworking, open, thoughtful! When we went to Cuba, we were filled with all sorts of prejudices (from reading our native press!) We expected to see poverty and could not imagine that local hospitals can be so modern-equipped. Equipment - the most modern, and the hospital room is more like a hotel room, and they fed us so much healthy food! - And do you know, what struck us most? - My mother entered into the conversation - When they made prepared Lisa for an EEG, they had to give her a few shots, and then it took time to glue electrodes onto her head, and her curls are so thick. Of course, no child would enjoy this - she began to cry. And then our Cuban doctor turned on the radio and began to sing softly and danced to the tune, while continuing his business! Lisa was so surprised, and she liked it so much that she stopped crying ... Well, you tell us in what

³¹⁹ Most famous Soviet stand-up comedian (1911-1987)

other country there is such an amazing doctor!

During the week we never went to town: we had other things to do. We were anxiously waiting to hear what the Cuban doctors would tell us at the end of the examination - what would be their verdict regarding Lisa's future.

In the morning we went to different doctors, then dinner, then we took a nap, and then started all over again. I have decided to postpone my visit with Yura, at least until the end of the examination: my mother could not communicate with the doctors without my help. In the morning, when we were brought breakfast, I hid in the bathroom, so we wouldn't have any problems from my sleeping over. But there were no problems, even though the Cubans quickly saw through it. The same irrepressible Niurka knocked once on the door, behind which I was hiding:

- Hey, mummy! Come on, breakfast will get cold!

What could I do? I blushed, but got out ...

I tried to move temporarily to Yura's place. Her house was too far away from the clinic, and there I had again to get a taxi. When I got out of it, I had a feeling that all the tenants of the house, in full, got out on the balconies of their apartments, to get a better look. I even felt uncomfortable.

Yura was a pretty dark-skinned single working Mum, 30. It turns out that Yura was really named after Gagarin, but that was another reason: her father was a Russian ... What happened to him now, and where he was, I knew not - for that I had an insufficient supply of Spanish words. Yura's apartment was wide, spacious, thoroughly ventilated by fresh breeze, simply but tastefully decorated, with two bedrooms, a huge bathroom, and had shutters on the windows against the sun. There was no poverty, just no hot water, but this is really not a shock to us, the Russians,

I stayed with her a couple of days, she gave me strong black Cuban coffee to drink in the evenings, and we even somehow managed to talk, but I soon longed for my family. And to get to them was difficult, and how would they manage without me ... and a couple of days later I apologized to the welcoming Yura and moved out - well, they would not expel me from the clinic, in fact ... And I do not eat too much and do not take extra space, either.

Once, the nurse Niurka interrupted our afternoon nap:

- Sovetica! Come to the phone! - She joyfully drummed on the door.

The phone? Who could call me here?

Of course, it turned out to be omniscient farmer Frank ... In Ireland, by the way, it had already been dead of night!

- How did you find out my number? - I asked.

- Asked at the information service.

- And how did they find me?

- Well, they certainly didn't understand me at first ... but with God's help ... Wait till I tell you, madam, - he sounded even slightly coquettish, - You better get yourself prepared ...

And he told me - in Frank's typically "open secret" style - that the auditor- sorry, the Leader was coming to Cuba! As part of a small delegation. My heart beat with joy. For me it was one more proof that I was not mistaken about my Irish friends.

The Leader had never ever gone to any socialist country, and I was a bit sorry in my heart

that he was not able to see our USSR in the best years ... but what is done can not be undone.

To me, a hot head, for a while it seemed that the visit was postponed this long because the Irish "are afraid of angering" their American sponsors - and it made me very angry. I argued with my Irish friends that although Lenin took advantage of the Germans' financial support to return home in spring of 1917, he did not dance to their tune and tell them that their help is needed for the democratic transformation of his country. And on the way to Island of Freedom³²⁰, I sent the leader a scathing greeting card, where I expressed my hope to meet him in Cuba before Christmas - although "it is obvious that it is not one of your priorities". Frank, the cynic, wouldn't believe it, but when he told me his news, I spent some time basking in the pleasant feeling that I somehow influenced the decision.

For me, raised in the USSR and proud of my communist views, a visit to Fidel Castro is something quite natural that should be cherished, and what right has anyone other than the Irish themselves and their Cuban host to say anything at all about it.

I had no clue as to what ostracism the Irish Republican would be subjected to for this visit by the Western media and what hogwash they would throw on the Leader for a completely natural act: a visit to the country which has always been in solidarity with the Irish republican movement, never betrayed them in difficult times and unlike so-called "Irish Americans," never tried to tell the leadership of Sinn Fein, which way they should go. Yes, I underestimated the true "spread of freedom" in Western society. I can legitimately argue that the significance of the visit, and I am not afraid to say, the depth of personal courage of the Leader in this case I realized only after I returned to Ireland and saw the pages of newspapers: Irish, British and American ...

The farmer Frank talked and talked and talked ... until I reminded him that he was not phoning me in the "6 counties³²¹", but overseas, and his phone bill would be astronomical.

... I am walking in Havana with Duncan, a Scot from Glasgow who had settled in Belfast, an incorrigible idealist who doesn't hide his views. He promised to show me a newly built monument to the "brave ten" - the Irish republicans, who died during the hunger strike in 1981.

I met Duncan back in Belfast - he was an active member of the local branch of Solidarity with Cuba. And now in Cuba, I could not miss the opportunity to meet with a "countryman", with whom I have common political views ...

... There is a street in Old Havana, with a completely Irish name - O'Reilly. I heard of its existence the first time from the same indefatigable farmer Frank - O'Reilly was once the governor of Havana, - he told me. - And his roots - from our county Cavan, his father was buried in the village of Kilnaleck.

Maybe not all of us in Russia knew that in the veins of the legendary revolutionary Che Guevara, also ran some Irish blood. His grandmother was Irish by the name of Lynch.

³²⁰ Common name in the USSR for Cuba

³²¹ Irish Republican name for Northern Ireland

O'Reilly was the first street that I wanted to see in Havana. Frankly, the Irish in it was not enough: it is located in one of the most beautiful parts of the traditional, old Havana. But on the wall at one of her houses blazed the inscription: "Two islands - one destiny. In the same sea of struggle and hope" This inscription is made in three languages: Spanish, English and Irish. I would not believe my eyes, if I had not talked about it long before my visit to Cuba. Duncan was a Scot himself, but perhaps more patriotic Irish than many natives of the Emerald Isle³²².

All the Irish, who now come to Havana go to O'Reilly to be photographed next to the trilingual sign. And recently another monument associated with Ireland appeared in the Cuban capital - the Irish Republicans memorial for the 10 hunger strikers led by Bobby Sands³²³, which Douglas showed me on the day before it was officially opened. The honor of unveiling the monument was to be given to the Irish delegation that was going to come. Duncan translated to me a Spanish inscription on the monument - the words of Fidel Castro, spoken about Bobby Sands and his comrades at the same time, in 1981. In it he compared the treatment of the Irish political prisoners by Margaret Thatcher's regime with the medieval Inquisition. Those who read Bobby's prison notes can not but be struck by how true that comparison is, when reading about his suffering. It is simply impossible to believe that this is from our time, and not in the Middle Ages, and in a country which brags about dedication to human rights!

In each corner of this small square there was a monument. One of them was dedicated to the mother of José Martí,³²⁴ and I was surprised to learn that she was from a Masonic family. The mention of the Masons again got Duncan talking about Northern Ireland - for anywhere but there and in Scotland, I have not seen so many Masonic lodges. It turns out that the Masons also exist in Cuba and are not prohibited by law - as all sorts of other religious and cultural groups are not prohibited. Later I saw several Masonic lodges in Camaguey.

On the way to the square we were annoyed several times by taxi drivers offering their services, newspaper sellers and even cigar black-marketers. If I could possibly be mistaken for a Cuban (especially in the company of Lisa), Duncan who with his ruddy complexion could be spotted from a mile away as a European, and he was very sensitive about such attention. To the next Cuban who came close to him, he would say loudly: - I do not want anything, thank you! ... I do not want to encourage begging - as I well know this country and I know that the government here does not allow anyone to starve to death. - Duncan had a very high opinion of the Cuban social system - as I did, too, after what I had seen.

Guidebooks on Cuba, issued by Western publishers, desperately try to find something negative despite all the positive - in this country that refuses to live by their rules. For example, they stress that tourists are obliged to stay in almost complete security in Cuba due to ... "a huge number of police on the streets." But somehow huge numbers of armed police on the streets in the United States is not negative, and incidentally doesn't seem to

³²² Poetic name for the island of Ireland

³²³ 10 Irish Republican prisoners died on hunger strike in 1981 for their political status in a British prison in Ireland

³²⁴ José Julián Martí Pérez (1853 – 1895) was a [Cuban national hero](#) and an important figure in [Latin American literature](#). In his short life he was a [poet](#), an [essayist](#), a [journalist](#), [revolutionary philosopher](#), a [translator](#), a [professor](#), a [publisher](#), and a [political](#) theorist. He was also a part of the Cuban Freemasons

be reducing crime in the United States ... What about that? Or the presence of a number of "armed and very dangerous," police and special forces on the streets of Russia - compared with unarmed Soviet uncles Stepas and Aniskins³²⁵, whom everyone knew and respected during our safe Soviet times? Now the people in Russia distrust the police so much that, as I saw with my own eyes, when a police car was helplessly stuck in a hole in the road, all passersby just silently turned away, preferring not to get involved with police.

It's not the police, gentlemen. The matter is in humans. "Ruins are not in toilets, destruction is in the heads", as author Mikhail Bulgakov³²⁶ said.

- In Cuba, there is no such street robbery, as in other countries, because if someone steals something, say, from a tourist on the street, one would be followed immediately by everyone on the street, not only police, but the entire nation - Duncan told me proudly. I suppose he thought that I could not imagine how this was possible.

But this is exactly the same as it used to be in my country! Only in a "free" (apparently this means free from conscience and responsibility for their actions!) society, people from the childhood are taught: Do not fight if someone robs you. Give him your purse, life is too precious. If you see someone being attacked, call the police, but do not interfere. They teach us the same thing now in Russia today and so we are raising a generation without principles, without a sense of justice and the need to fight for it, with no sense of dignity.

People brought up like this are practically unable to understand why there is so little crime in Cuba, and so they try to explain it in terms their cowardly world, "there is no crime because there is nothing to steal," etc. ...

They understand nothing.

We talked about the world communist movement. Duncan was saddened by the fact that at the Summer school, which he attended last summer in Ireland, the youngest student was 20 years older than him. And I looked at him, a young guy, younger than me probably by 10 years, - and was glad that there are people like him. And he's not alone, though perhaps now he does not notice. Then he showed me proudly the Havana hotel building, "Habana Libre" - "Free Havana" - in which at one time, immediately after the revolution, Fidel temporarily kept offices. Duncan wistfully said

- That's how we should do it. Imagine our leaders *at the Europa Hotel*³²⁷ with AK-47's!

Yes, we are all unfortunate in these counterrevolutionary times. But if the Decembrists³²⁸, or Narodniks³²⁹ had decided in their time, that they could not do anything because circumstances were not just right for revolution, the revolution would have never happened. Each of us can do our best to bring forward the day when humanity finally have a decent life for all our children ... and make it their way, like Leader, and Duncan,

³²⁵ Soviet book heroes-community policemen

³²⁶ Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov (1891- 1940) was a [Soviet Russian](#) writer and [playwright](#) active in the first half of the 20th century. He is best known for his [novel The Master and Margarita](#)

³²⁷ Well-known hotel in the centre of Belfast known as "the most bombed hotel in Europe"

³²⁸ The Decembrist revolt or the Decembrist uprising took place in [Imperial Russia](#) on 26 December 1825. Russian army officers led about 3,000 soldiers in a protest against [Nicholas I's](#) assumption of the throne

³²⁹ The Narodniks were a socially-conscious movement of the [Russian](#) middle class in the 1860s and 1870s. Their ideas and actions were known as *Narodnichestvo* which can be translated as "Peopleism", though it is more commonly rendered as "[populism](#)". The term itself derives from the Russian expression "Going to the people".

and Fionntan - through the jungle ...

Finally the day came when the doctors were to pronounce their verdict for Lisa and predict her future. On one hand, I was very nervous but on the other, after all I have seen here, I was absolutely sure that if anyone in this world could help Lisa, it would be Cuban doctors.

Lisa's doctor - a nice young man with glasses - came to our room in the morning, accompanied by a large group of medical students. The students were intelligent, lovely persons. I involuntarily recalled the words of Duncan – how much he, a Western man, was struck by their knowledge of medicine, even by Cubans who are not working in the medical field: knowledge of medicine was part of the general education given in local schools. Oh, and if someone decided to choose it as their specialty ...

An interpreter on this occasion was not with them, but he had already been sent for, and so the doctor told me once that if I do not understand something, I should immediately tell him, and he will try to explain things to me again, this time with help. I nodded. He took the printout with Lisa's diagnosis, and, speaking slowly and clearly, told everything, that for such a long time no doctor could tell us - either in Holland or Ireland, or in capitalist Russia, nor in the "Great Britain. Finally I had a full and clear picture of what happened to Lisa's brain, what its status was now, and what to do to help her rehabilitation. I never specifically studied the Spanish language, but the doctor so beautifully explained the results of the examination, sometimes even drawing diagrams on paper, that it was like discovering that a math problem turns out to be much easier than you thought.

- Surgery is not required. The degree of progress is difficult to predict because it depends on how intensive therapy will be - for example, sessions with a speech therapist. But such therapy should be prolonged. Just now the most important thing is to control her epileptic seizures. When there are less chaotic electrical signals in her brain, she will be able to concentrate better and be able to learn a lot. Can you get this therapy for her at home? We just threw up our hands.

- Hmm ... if you lived in Cuba, then, of course, there would be no problem. Do not worry, we will consider what can be done. Perhaps, our experts will show you how to deal with it?. By the way, we do have here a speech therapist, who speaks Russian. She will deal with Lisa and be able to answer all your questions about speech problems. And as for antiepileptic drugs, I read what was ordered by your doctor. This is a very old remedy and in Cuba we don't use it anymore. It is strange that he did not order something better, such as Carbamazepine³³⁰. Let's try that and see if it helps Lisa.

"This is strange," - I thought - "Western doctors have to save money like the cat Matroskin³³¹ when the patient receives drugs free of charge. If I paid for them myself ... Maybe it is time for the doctor *Banionis* to take courses for higher qualifications ... If it were up to me, I would certainly have sent him! "

While the Cuban doctor was telling us all this, two of his students were joyfully playing ball with Lisa.

³³⁰ Medication for epilepsy

³³¹ Cat from a Soviet cartoon who was very money-motivated

We stayed in the hospital for another 3 weeks. Lisa had ozone therapy, a massage, was put on Carbamazepine, and worked daily with her speech therapist - a pleasant, large-eyed woman who at first was a little nervous, because she did not speak in Russian since her graduation. But with us she quickly remembered everything. She worked with Lisa for a long time - and with angelic patience, because Lisa could not sit still in one place for more than 5 minutes.

- Liza, a horse! - She said, pointing to a picture. And Lisa happily clicked with her tongue, imitating the sound of a running horse. Given her condition, this was great progress!

Daily walking to every corner of the hospital for different treatments, we saw how tirelessly the Cuban doctors ministered to their patients - with such infinite patience and sympathy and human warmth. Among the patients there were many who learned to walk anew. Many children had cerebral palsy. We saw many scenes that brought a lump to my throat - not so much tragedy, but the triumph of human spirit and of what can people do when they are sincere and truly love their neighbours- not like the hypocritical Christians with their church books.

Eventually Lisa's fits occurred less often and were weaker, thanks to the Cubans! Dr. *Banionis* attributed this success to himself - he must have forgotten already that I had insisted upon our return from Cuba that he prescribe the drug that was recommended in Cuba. A speech therapist - hard to find in the UK - we found ... at home in our city. Just steps away even from our house! She was a former classmate of our Cuban doctor. And she worked at a local children's sanatorium for free, and refused even to accept gifts: remnants of "that damned Soviet past!" ...

That's it.

The rest of our time in Cuba, we wanted very much like to see the island a little. Several times we went by taxi into town. I wanted to return by foot, but quickly realized that I overestimated my strength and underestimated the distances of Havana.

- Tell me, where you can find a taxi? - In broken Spanish, I asked the driver, who was washing his old *Lada* by the side of the road.

- And where are you going? - He suddenly asked in Russian, - Come in, I'll drive you! And he did. And did not take money from me. And he talked all the way about his Soviet friends ...

There were some funny incidents. For example, once when we got into a taxi and I was taking pictures out of the window of the city, my mother said to me:

- That looks like a military installation, do not take pictures just in case ...

Then the taxi driver turned to us and suddenly in the perfect Russian said:

- Yes, do not, please!

We met also a grandmotherly store cashier, who graduated from a military school in Kiev (wow!), and one of the doctors of the clinic who was married to one of our compatriots, and many, many people who remembered and loved our country ...

Once I was alone on the Malecon - Mum and Lisa stayed in the clinic that day - when a young man wanted to get to know me. I've already told you what is my usual reaction, but what I absolutely did not expect was- an invitation to a museum ...! The young man saw on my neck beads made of African seashells.

- Are you interested in Afro-Cuban culture? They just opened an exhibition of Afro-Cuban art, let's go see it together, huh?

I thought of a young Irishman, Fitzpatrick, inviting me to the pub on the street in Dublin ... One more thing in favor of socialism!

I remember we were sitting on the bench, and I told my new friend named Angel about a concert of the National Ballet of Benin, which I visited during my school years. Such a miracle, I never saw before or since. And our citizens who were not particularly interested in Africa were even more amazed. Audience members who were attending a nearby concert even left their seats to get a better look at the ballet we were watching, as one of the Beninese dancers was dragging a girl sitting in a chair across the stage with his mouth. He was the youngest dancer from Benin that came to us then. Back then, these dance groups came to us in the USSR quite often, and they always showed them on television on their country's independence day, and their ambassador that evening usually gave a speech on the TV program called "Time". Because of this, I still remember all the dates of independence of African countries.

To see, and even better to know Cuba I was helped by my new friend – an Irish journalist named Orla, who was introduced to me by Duncan. Orla was married to a Cuban and lived and worked in Cuba for several years. She greeted me almost as her countrywoman. Thanks to Orla, I met many other foreign journalists who left the usual conditions in their home countries, and decided to dedicate their lives to Cuba: British, Americans and even with one Antillean!

Orla was one of the few Irish people in the Cuban capital. By Duncan's calculations there were no more than 8-10 Irish people. Orla for many years traveled to Cuba with the solidarity brigades, and later met her current husband and stayed for good. In Ireland, she had lectured on the women's movement and the history of feminism. Here she worked as an editor of English language broadcasting. She was quite satisfied with life in Cuba as well as with a very modest (compared to Ireland's) salary.

- But I was given a free apartment - she says. Like many Cubans.

In contrast, Orla, as a foreign citizen, was not supplied with ration cards. Sometimes, this made things difficult, for example, there are no eggs in the dollar supermarket, because they will not send them to that market, before providing them to all citizens in the food distribution system. However, there is always a way out when one person - friend, comrade or brother, and not a wolf, or one of the Cuban neighbors would trade her eggs for a past service.

Such things as eggs worried Orla the least. She enjoyed getting to attend, almost free of charge, theaters, concerts, and films. At this time in Havana there was a regular festival of Latin American films, and it was so refreshing to finally to see on the screen some normal human films, rather than the endless American action ones!

Orla's best friend is an Englishwoman named Jenny. She has been working for one of the Cuban newspapers for several years after coming to Cuba seven years ago, in the most difficult time for the Liberty Island. She translates into English various publications.

Looking at her and talking to her, I could not help mentally comparing her with Tatiana, who escaped from Cuba at the same time, when Jenny left "rich" England for "poor" Cuba, and I remembered talking about rats deserting a sinking ship ... This ship isn't actually sinking, but is sailing on further, with patched sails torn by history's storms. The rats were wrong.

We quickly became friends with Orla and Jenny, and Orla's husband even tried to make a documentary about me and Lisa. I do not know how he managed, but he did film us for a few days with a big camera in the clinic.

Jenny had a small old car, and a couple of times in her spare time, she drove us with Lisa to the beach near Havana. The beach was gorgeous.

- Have you noticed how quiet it is here? – She proudly asked.

I looked around. Indeed, there were very few people. In the water, two handsome fit guys were frolicking, and two more Apollo-like ones were walking slowly along the shore. Except for them and we four, the beach was deserted.

- It is a beach for gays - said Jenny - I love coming here: those men do not pay me too much attention ...

One evening Orla invited me to a restaurant.

- I know a place where you can dine very well, and for Cuban pesos!

It sounded intriguing, so I went.

... I sometimes try to convince myself that maybe I have been unfair to the people that we nicknamed "amerikos"³³². After all, there were Americans like Dean Reed, Angela Davis³³³, Assata Shakur³³⁴ and, and Stokely Carmichael³³⁵. But every time I meet Americans myself - even leftists and progressives! - I, to my great regret, am convinced that I was not wrong and that I have little good to say about them. Maybe I am just still having bad luck. I would like to believe that. But so far, my impressions haven't changed. We humans have such different ways of thinking that we simply do not understand each other. It seems to me that Americans see everything only from their point of view, without considering that there is any other way, and think that everyone and everything can be sold and bought. I do not even want to argue with them - their spiritual poverty is just pathetic. Here is an example of their mentality- and this is not of a far right person, but rather a typical American. This American worked in Dublin, and seriously argued that NATO is losing the war in Yugoslavia, because "we have used bombs, which cost ten million dollars to bomb buildings that are worth only 30 thousand.. " It just did not occur to him to think about the people - the victims of NATO and his own government, at all. For him, they are just "collateral damage". To him, the real damage was the cost to American taxpayers. Obviously, it was necessary to either buy cheaper bombs or to bomb the more expensive items. Such an option would be a perfect arrangement, and he could eat, drink, sleep and watch TV with a clear conscience.

The main problem of the "Yankees" is arrogance. In Russian – “*vysokomerie*”. Orla told me how she had once observed the elections in Bosnia, and how there came "amerikos"

³³² Russian mocking name for Americans

³³³ Angela Davis (b.1944) is an American [political activist](#), scholar, and author. Davis emerged as a nationally prominent activist and radical in the 1960s, as a leader of the [Communist Party USA](#) and was in close relations to the [Black Panther Party](#)

³³⁴ Assata Olugbala Shakur (b.1947), born as JoAnne Deborah Byron is an [African-American](#) activist and escaped convict who was a member of the [Black Panther Party](#) (BPP) and [Black Liberation Army](#) (BLA). Between 1971 and 1973, Shakur was accused of several crimes and made the subject of a multi-state [manhunt](#). Shakur was then incarcerated in several prisons, where her treatment drew criticism from some [human rights](#) groups. She escaped from prison in 1979 and has been living in [Cuba](#) in [political asylum](#) since 1984.

³³⁵ Stokely Carmichael (aka Kwame Ture; 1941 – 1998) was a [Trinidadian-American](#) black activist active in the 1960s [American Civil Rights Movement](#). He popularized the term “Black Power”

who quite seriously, as if dealing with children, taught the locals to vote, which offended them greatly. "Well, if we have learned anything over the years of socialism, it's how to vote!" - one of them said to the "amerikos". "But this will be the first time you do not know who will win!" – They parried. Ha! Whether you vote or not, you will still get some keen advocate of "free market"! ...

It is hard to find a more vivid expression of cynicism, than this phrase - because we all have fresh in our memories the panic that swept across America, when at the elections in Belarus the one that Americans wanted to win, lost, so the results of free elections were just not what the Yankees had expected. Fresh in our memory also is what happened to the "unpredictable" democratically elected Chilean President Salvador Allende - and how American commentators on television are still trying to justify overthrowing of his government and his murder by saying "But he was a communist! " Meeting these people, it is very difficult to not be rude to them, even though it is unpleasant - especially if you are in mixed company, and they – are not your guests. But sometimes it is very difficult not to stand up for local residents, for our country - and in general for the whole globe, which Americans really believe should live by their laws. I met Marylou in the company of foreigners that Orla had invited over to see what a typical privately-owned Cuban restaurant looked like . She was from San Francisco and was very proud that she spoke Spanish: after a romance with a Mexican. The first thing she said at the table was her lesson to the only Cuban at our table ... how to speak Spanish, as she used to do in Mexico!

Then she remarked that many of the Havana streets are called by numbers, not names, "apparently under American influence."

- It's boring when the streets do not even have names! - I could not help it.

At the table, Marylou continued to pry at us, "which one of the dishes on the menu is a hamburger?" (Of course, hamburgers and popcorn would not be caught dead on a traditional Cuban restaurant menu!). Then she turned the menu over and loudly, with an almost animal joy, told us:

- I guessed, I guessed it - this menu is printed in PowerPoint Microsoft! - With such air as if Bill Gates was personally her cousin's uncle ...

How can we take these people seriously- and their "leftist" sympathies, if at the same table, my Irish friend had to explain to her what internationalism is , and how it was an indispensable part of Marxism - as our "leftist" hamburger lover did not have the slightest idea about such basics of Marxism-Leninism?

However, while Orla was explaining the policy of internationalism by the example of Che Guevara, Marylou arrogantly said that Che, of course, also made mistakes. The only Cuban at the table and I silently looked at each other and chuckled sarcastically. In order to have the moral right to judge Che, his life and views, we must first do something ourselves, even if it is tiny compared to what he did for the world revolutionary movement ...

We discussed the internationalism of the Cuban government with the example of the free medical care, which was guided by a sense of solidarity with leftist movements throughout the world.

- Our American government would never be so generous! - acknowledged a resident of San Francisco, with a sigh.

- And do you know what ours is doing? - the silent Englishman sitting at our table broke

in, (who was probably feeling intimidated by my t-shirt that says " Road to Freedom" with the image of a female IRA sniper). - Right now it is bombing Afghanistan. So our government will probably take one sick Afghan child (not terminally ill of course: they want a guaranteed result!), to England and give him free treatment there. Then they will brag about their "humanitarianism" in all the newspapers ...

And he sighed, deeply ashamed.

The restaurant where we sat was actually a private business. There is a kind of NEP (New Economic Politics) in Cuba now. It is true that private businesses must be conducted within very strict limits, and it is not allowed to supersede state sectors, and must be accessible to all. The number of tables at this restaurant was limited. Prices are kept very low for foreigners (it was one of the few places in Havana, where foreigners could pay not by dollars, but just as Cuban customers, by pesos) and quite affordable for Cubans themselves - to dine on special occasions.

Outside, there were not even any signs, and if you didn't already know where it is, you probably wouldn't find it. We went to the first floor of an old, Spanish colonial style, house, knocked on a door, we were let in, we walked some long corridors, passing doors on a wall to little rooms, where someone lived. Then we went straight through the kitchen – and found ourselves on a thatched roof - covered balcony-gallery, where the ceiling was hung with empty beer cans. Hanging from the walls were cages with parrots and pigeons, and typical of the "privateers" kitschy -lurid posters with popular beauties, one of which I had been familiar with from the time spent in Curaçao, Venezuela's pop star Alessandra Guzman.

The parrots insisted that we feed them scraps from our dinner. The silent pigeons only enviously looked at them, and I felt sorry for them.

The restaurant did not have any soft drinks: there was only alcohol or water. Directly in front of us one of the cooks was cutting up a great fresh fish.

Marylou resigned herself finally to not being able to get a burger, and ordered a steak. Cuban food is mostly rice and beans, salad and a piece of meat, usually pork or chicken. It was delicious!

The hostess, a large dark-skinned woman, was born in Guantanamo Bay. That is, speaking in Spanish, "*Guantanamera*." I silently prayed that Marylou would not bring up "their" military base at Guantanamo Bay. Because if she did, I would not have enough stock of politeness ... Fortunately, she did not- was too busy happily devouring her non-hamburger meal.

We went back by the already dark street, although it was only about 7 o'clock in the evening: night in the tropics comes not only early, but instantly. Just now the sun was shining, and after 20 minutes it would be already dead of night ...

Orla led us to a little park, in which was sitting (yes, sitting - on the bench, looking at those who turned to join him, with expressive ironic eyes!) a monument to John Lennon. "Who would sit it- it is a monument" - I remembered a phrase by the legendary character of Savely Kramarov³³⁶ from "Gentlemen of Fortune" ... It turned out that there was a monument possible to sit next to, if you wish!

For Westerners, The Beatles are something special that unites them all, regardless of nationality and even age. And it separates them from most of us Eastern Europeans

³³⁶ Savely Viktorovich Kramarov (1934 – 1995) was a well known [Soviet actor](#), known for his [comedic](#) roles in Soviet films of the 1970s

(although we also have many fans of The Beatles), who grew up with different music. This is well demonstrated in the story "Swimming with Dry Hair" , by Dutch writer Kees van Kooten. His hero, trying to find common ground with his Romanian guest of the same age, tells her: "*The Beatles*"! "To which she replies: "*Adriano Celentano*"³³⁷

I had roughly the same feeling about this monument. In Cuba these days they widely observe the 20th anniversary of the murder of Lennon. Not as a celebration, of course, but with concerts and exhibitions in his memory. This monument was placed about a year ago, and after some wag managed to steal his stone Lennon glasses, they brought in a special guard for Lennon. 24 hours a day, by shifts some old Cubans guard the symbol of Western pop music, ...

Our "Westerners" ran off to be photographed with Lennon, making a big ruckus on the street. They suggested that I join them, but I politely refused. And when we went down the street, surrounded by Cubans, I felt more sharply than ever that they were closer to me, despite the language barrier and thousands of miles separating us, than those Westerners with whom I was spending the evening.

Our attention was attracted by the light in one of the local yards, symbolically fenced by a few rows of wire. Under a tall tree there was a makeshift gym: a few old fitness machines where young Cubans pumped their muscles.

- My God, how exotic! – Exclaimed Marylou, and I knew from her voice that actually she thought "My God, what misery!"

I was reminded of my home on the Proletarian waterfront - a small wooden house with two windows, a stove and "facilities" outside, the only home I really think as Home with a capital letter, the years spent in it, and how happy and interestingly we lived there for years. If these people saw that, they too would have thought that we were poor - while in fact we had everything necessary for life, and in fact, we were a thousand times richer than them, I remembered my uncle's bookcase brimming with books, and going to the theater, and traveling across our vast country, our sunny garden with sweet apples and sour juicy cherries, good people who needn't be feared ...

"Our life was cheerful and happy," - says my mother. But the ghosts of CNN will never understand this.

- My God, how great! What a work of people's imagination and creativity - and how wonderfully they are spending the evenings doing sports, not pushing drugs, not running after one another with pistols or sitting all whole evening with beer bellies on the couch, watching stupid shows on TV! - I said.

My companions, probably felt then that I was on the Cuban side of the barricades

³³⁷ Adriano Celentano (b.1938) is an [Italian singer](#), [songwriter](#), [comedian](#), [actor](#), [film director](#) and [TV host](#). He is the best-selling Italian singer, and the best-selling male artist of Italy. He was and still is very popular in Eastern Europe.

On weekends, when there were no treatments, the three of us traveled by bus to Varadero³³⁸.

*“Azure of the sky stretching over us
Like sombrero, like sombrero,
Shiny gold of beach, lively green of land,
Varadero, Varadero.
You're so far away and you are so close,
Lovely Cuba, lovely Cuba,
This is what we say, greeting you again
Now!³³⁹”* – We were singing on the beach.

Lisa ran along the shore, trying to find stones in the golden sand to throw into the sea water, through which here and there flashed the heads of swimmers. And I ran after her, to keep her from doing that. Thank God that it was impossible to find a rock!
Of course, we had neither the time nor the opportunity to visit the whole country because Cuba is a huge island with an area of 104,945 km. square. ... And yet I could not afford to miss this chance and limit myself to only Havana: being from a provincial city, I understood very well, that one can not get an impression of the country just from seeing the capital city. So I went for a couple of days to the province - although it was in a tourist trip, but that was better than nothing at all.

My mother refused to go with me - Lisa had to go for her treatments. I felt terribly selfish - but when might I find myself here again?

Early in the morning, when it was still dark, I left the hospital, and ran right into that elderly security guard, who had sighed for my Mum. He even now still could not get her out of his head.

- *Ps-s-st!* - He whistled to me. He asked whether the "señora" was married or not. When I told him that my mother was divorced, he cheered up visibly, and gave me a thumbs up. "Great news!"

... The Cuban province pleasantly surprised me with its hospitality, simplicity, modesty and good nature. Maybe from a material point of view the life of the inhabitants of these places is more modest than that in Havana, but it is modest, not worse. Overall I felt in the people there something that was not in people of even in the most prosperous European cities - self-esteem, "*dignidad*", which only socialism can give to people. Where I live now, for most residents it is simply not clear what dignity even means.

I am not claiming that all Cubans are ideal, and that no one here is shaming himself by begging from tourists. But the number of such people, despite what Cuban economy has suffered from both the collapse of the socialist world system and the brutal U.S. blockade, is so small compared to the number of proud, hardworking, honest and courageous Cubans, going through life with the same dignity, that it is very remarkable to someone who is familiar with life under both systems. And it is especially noticeable in the provinces - for the Cuban capital, as well as all of the capitals of the world, has a greater than expected concentration of the *lumpen* element (by the way, they do not like

³³⁸ Most famous Cuban seaside resort

³³⁹ Soviet song about Cuba (1978)

to mention in the hostile western media the *lumpen* quarter of the Old Havana - a legacy of the past regime, the legacy of centuries.).

Western media loves to attack President Fidel or President Chavez of Venezuela, and loves to poisonously claim that they had made little change, but says nothing about how difficult, but glorious it was to make changes in just a few short years, while the system of plunder, slavery, oppression and exploitation had been there for many centuries! If socialism could blossom, unhindered on our planet for the same number of years - then that would be a fair comparison!

On this journey, I was accompanied by Western tourists from Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Germany and Canada. We were accompanied by two guides. One woman spoke English. The other spoke several languages- Italian, German and French. One of them took her daughter with her, and that immediately reminded me nostalgically of the same thing our guides used to do during the Soviet era.

I must say that I was unlucky with my language study choice. I wish I spoke Italian or German instead of English, because my knowledge of English meant that I had to spend two days with this classic caricature of the Western "colonial" tourist, always having his views about everything in advance. These views were limited, like of a hen on a perch, and, in his opinion, are the only correct views on the planet. I struggled to be polite, but when I saw that our Cuban guide, due to the fact that she was on duty, could not sometimes stand up for her country without having to put him in his place, I took on this task for her. Really, I had no choice - for even the arrogant and brazen ignorance has to have a limit!

His name was Kyle - this arrogant, ignorant Canadian. Listening to him brought me to utter despair. If in his part of the world he is considered an intellectual (he worked at a university), then what must the rest of the population be like?

The tour began in Havana. Many tourists are new to this, but I had already by that time gotten used to these noisy streets with their Parisian style architecture, vendors of cakes and slices of pizza, pineapple juice on ice and strong black coffee- that people buy and drink out of empty coffee cans- and the market with its fresh fruits and vegetables, where one could find Russian-speaking elderly people, always happy for an opportunity to exchange a couple of words with you in your native language, and laundered duvet covers hung on the balconies in the middle of the city, even on the main roads. And Old Havana, which if in Jamaica or Haiti, would be a frightening ghetto, in which one risks one's life, but here is an innocuous place, despite its external "exoticisms". There is Havana's Chinatown, where Cubans in Chinese costumes are working in numerous restaurants, and there are a few real Chinese. There are the yellow egg-shaped-bodies of local "Coco" motorbike taxis ("let's ride, with the wind!") everywhere, and you can hear snake-like hisses and whistles from the Cuban men, expressing approval of your appearance - yes, in Cuba one does not stay single for long! There are the almost white-hot stones of Malecon promenade, the familiar booths of local "cops", and the queues in an ice cream parlor, which reminded me of a great ice-cream parlor in my hometown, where we once ate ice cream on Sundays with a sauce of black chokeberry, and which closed after the attack by "freedom and democracy" and replaced by cheap, tasteless Sino-Turkish stuff. Also familiar to me was the silhouette of our Russian embassy - by all accounts, the most ugly building in all Havana ...

We went near orange and mango gardens, the deepest canyon in Cuba, small farms with proud "gauchos" – barefooted with white teeth, on horses of mettle. Then through a province of Matanzas which is called “the Cuban Athens” – because of the many intellectuals who came from there. I saw for the first time, how sugar cane looks– like the fluffy grass "cockerels" which we as children so liked to break: “*the Cockerel or a Hen?*” Work was done with eagerness everywhere, orchards, fields and kitchen gardens were well-groomed, well weeded, recently watered.

In Matanzas I was amazed with the number of Masonic lodges! I had never seen them except in Northern Ireland. There they are a sad symbol of religious sectarianism and numerous “secret societies”, which practically control all life. Windows in the North Irish Masonic lodges always are tightly hammered; buildings are locked (When do they gather? Most likely at night!) The only way to recognise them is by the Masonic sign on their gates. Thus I spotted them in Cuba, – before Northern Ireland I never knew how they look!

In my opinion Cuba is much “softer” than the USSR. Many things which at all wouldn't even come to mind to do in the USSR, in Cuba aren't forbidden. Probably Cubans are right, but in their place I would be more careful. For this reason it is bizarre to hear the West accusing Cuba of notorious “infringements of human rights”. Certainly only the USA and its friends and lackeys are allowed to infringe upon human rights!

The Cuban highways were of very high quality, but almost empty. In cities and their entrances, many people stand along the road, hitchhiking to reach work. Of course it is related to the economic and energy crisis. The shortage of fuel prevents bringing more cars on roads. The Cubans make miracles with their ingenuity, as here there are perfectly operating cars which in any other country would be impossible to start.

In one of these cars we were taken through Havana by a handsome man Rafael (or Alejandro, we hadn't time to find out precisely) – a relative of one of Orla's friends, who privately earns money driving people around. It would be difficult to call Rafael a convinced communist, but he was very attentive and friendly and has taken us to places where I would never go by myself. He spoke only Spanish, but was understandable. Rafael wanted “to live, as a human being”. He had complained that he was forbidden to stay in the posh hotel in the center of the native city, that he can't in openly make “taxi” business with foreigners.

– If we are stopped, I will say that you are my wife, – he joked, and I looked in his velvet-brown eyes, and my breath hitched from this thought!

I listened to him and remembered our "Berezka" shops and our ""Cosmos" and "Intourist³⁴⁰" hotels. In the Soviet period we were sometimes irritated in these situations, but it wasn't so bad. Why should you stay in hotel in your own city? What do you need Matryoshka dolls and expensive furs for? And now I look at Cuba, the country with incomparably smaller resource than the USSR had. I understand that all of it here is

³⁴⁰ Places in the USSR that were exclusively for foreigners

necessary. That Rafael's children could have a free education; that his old parents received free medical aid; that all his family will never experience hunger and never become homeless. I know very well what life is actually like for the exhausted majority of people living under "freedom and democracy". If only my knowledge of Spanish was better, I would try to explain this to him!

We saw local oil extraction. They told us that the oil is of poor quality, but still suitable to use. "It is good for them that it is of poor quality!" - I thought, - "I know what happened in those places that have higher quality oil, because of the greedy capitalists."

Our guide, Maria, amazed me with her encyclopedic knowledge and huge quantity of facts and figures. She knows all – from history to botany (she told us in detail about all the different kinds of Cuban palm trees) and zoology, from history of architecture to agricultural organization. I mentally compared her with the guides I met on my trips across Europe (more often the driver combines two functions, – and their knowledge doesn't go further than local jokes, and in Northern Ireland sometimes they know the militias' flags, but only from the guide's own community) – and there was no comparison.

Listening to Maria, I enjoyed the long stream of information about architectural styles of small towns through which we went, about the well-known factory making the Cuban rum (when I brought some to my workplace, our "free democrats" were afraid to test this magnificent rum – despite my assurances that nobody ever became a communist after a shot of "Havana Club"!); about the numbers of students in the universities we passed. I learned that Cuban schoolboys surpass many graduates of the western universities at the general educational level! I was quite assured of this fact while listening to Kyle from Canada who sat near me through our entire trip.

I must admit that at least he did ask questions. It might have been worse. So, it wasn't completely hopeless. But despite Maria's most detailed and interesting answers (I even began to write them down on the sly!), he still was sure that he knew everything better.

Maria told us that in Cuba, gambling at horse races was forbidden and had shown us ration cards without complaining and without shame. What is there to be ashamed about, when it has been external forces which caused the hard economic situation of Cuba? How is it possible to be ashamed of social justice?

Milk and meat here are first allocated to children and the elderly. A Cuban receives 3 kg of rice and sugar in a month. If they have more than they need, and not enough of something else, they can exchange with others, but cannot sell it in the market. She told us also that the situation of less fortunate citizens living in the quarters of Old Havana arose not because of unemployment – there were enough jobs, but not easy ones in the countryside. To correct this situation and put an end to their marginalization, the government had begun a new project: training people in this area to become social workers who then would take up the problems of local youth and to help bring them back into a course of normal life.

–Foreigners think they help these people when those beg, but actually they only promote dependency among the population of Old Havana, – she had explained. Why work, when tourists will always give you a few dollars?

Before the revolution in Cuba there were only 3 universities and not one of them was in province, and today there are already 52! The average life expectancy from the year of revolution had increased from 55 to 76 years (compare these figures with those in any Latin American or Caribbean country today!). The children's death rate has decreased from 26 to 7.6 on 1000 births. Before the revolution about 75 % of the population was illiterate, but today illiteracy is nearly non-existent. About 250,000 teachers were sent to work in the countryside. New quarters in the Cuban capital (such as Alamar) and in other cities have been constructed by a method of voluntary "micro brigades" (where people collectively build houses for themselves). Sports also had reached high level of development during the years of revolution.

Cuban farmers are organized in cooperative societies, but they keep their land as private property. A typical daily routine of the Cuban peasant: work in the field early in the morning, rest at the hottest hour (from 12 to 3) and again work, after 3 and till the evening, even in the dark at the time of harvesting. Farmers hand over to the state 75 % of what they produce, and they sell the rest in the market, except for honey, milk and tobacco which belong to the state. The Cuban cooperative societies have everything – from their own kindergartens to their own drugstores.

Looking at Kyle's reactions to Maria's stories, I again involuntarily remembered "*model of a person unsatisfied gastronomically*" made by professor Vybegallo in the Strugatsky brothers' fantasy novel³⁴¹. When we stopped for a dinner at a restaurant, he wanted to order in advance a double portion – he was afraid that there would not be enough to him, because Cuba is such "a hungry place".

– *I will pay extra!* - he had stressed, this pink, balding creature with naked knees sticking out from under colonial shorts and with a typical beer belly. He had been greatly surprised when a single portion of food portion had turned to be so large that he couldn't eat it alone.

I was surprised at Maria's patience with him. Even I begin to boil slowly inside from disgust. Especially when he "threw up" something terribly thoughtful, like: "*Venus is a planet!*"

Kyle's girlfriend back home in Canada was a poor student from Ecuador who was awfully afraid that since the Canadian government had toughened material requirements to foreign students for reception of entry visa she could not get into this blessed country

³⁴¹ Monday Begins on Saturday (1964) - [science fiction / science fantasy novel](#) by [Boris and Arkady Strugatsky](#). Set in a fictional town in northern [Russia](#), where highly classified research in [magic](#) occurs, the novel is a [satire](#) of [Soviet](#) scientific research institutes.

any more, – and consequently had decided to never leave, even for a vacation. She had been secured with presence of a Canadian "partner". He was not going to marry her; – he hadn't even found time to learn a word in Spanish. He was so self-confident that he did not suspect that this was "love" only for his thick purse and passport.

And although he thought that he was a true intellectual and a liberal, it didn't stop him from declaring confidentially to me about Germans (probably, he considered that we should hate them after last war!):

– These Germans always point fingers at us, Canadians and Americans, how we treated our Indians, but that is only to take away attention from the Holocaust!

The Holocaust of the European colonizers and settlers in America and a transatlantic slave-trade had destroyed entire nations and has cost the lives at least 40-50 million Africans and more than 100 million inhabitants of "the New world" ... Nevertheless, still it "is impossible" to call it by the real name, and descendants of these victims have no right to damage compensation to this day.

Kyle was surprised that Cubans were in such friendly relations with Spain: in his opinion, Spaniards were such cruel colonizers that Cubans shouldn't forget about it even now. He thinks that Englishmen were much more "humane" colonialists. He really ought to discuss this topic with my Irish friends!

But I still restrained myself, until Kyle began to give Maria his "civilized" advice about the necessity of "free" elections and a multi-party system in Cuba. She again remained stoically polite, as it was necessary for her job. For her – and for our socialist countries! – I went ahead and answered a bit boldly, because by my experience people like Kyle see politeness as weakness.

– It is better to have one party which cares about the people, than 20 which care only about their wallets. Tell me, what use are 20 parties when they are all the same? - I asked him.

He looked surprised, and was frightened.

– I am just talking... - he mumbled.

– I am also just talking... - I looked steadily at him.

Then I felt pity : was it necessary to be so strict with this man? Well, he doesn't understand another kind of life. At dinner I had decided to give him a chance and had listened to his stream of confused "thoughts" about Solzhenitsyn and Chomsky (which he didn't like at all but to smooth down the incident with me, he showed off that he had bought his book about Latin America in English). I didn't argue with him about Solzhenitsyn and only when he had turned the conversation to colonization of NATO in the Balkans and stated that during operation in Bosnia and in Kosovo “ NATO operated

for the first time without any vested interests for itself”, I still said nothing, but looked at him in such way, that he had retired to the background, reddened and mumbled:

– Well, there is such point of view ...

The situation was awful ... If they in the West could not see and understand such elementary things, even the pseudo-leftists (if Kyle were a rightist, he wouldn't come to Cuba as a tourist!), then what could we expect from the others?

That day after dinner we found ourselves in Santa Clara, in a place which for me, as well as for millions of communists and fighters for national liberation of their countries, was very special. Che Guevara's mausoleum.

The mausoleum of Che towers over the city. The huge statue of the revolutionary hero is visible for many miles. In the mausoleum, using a video recorder is forbidden, but one could live with just the memory of having been there.

I saw tears on the faces of many, even some western visitors, – that is how heartrending it is to touch the stones under which lies the body of the eternally young, immortal soldier and revolutionary with the short name that sounds like a bullet's whistle through the air – Che. Behind that stone under which he is buried, are his companions who had fallen together with him in that unequal fight, including the legendary guerrilla Tanja .

They left only their names you think during the first moment when you enter this small, dimly lit and cold room. But then you correct yourself, – not only their names! They left their immortal work of struggle for justice in this world, and their beautiful example which will call to all new generations of fighters all over the world.

Before my arrival I had got acquainted with many works and letters of Che. Many of them I read for the first time. Under the impression of his letters I felt that he might not have been an easy person to deal with because of his astonishing frankness, asceticism and refusal to compromise. But if all of us would emulate Che and never compromise with consciences, what a beautiful place our planet would be today! Part of the mausoleum is reserved for the museum. Here, among other things, you can see the famous beret and jacket of Che, in which he is depicted in his most famous photograph. Judging from the jacket, he was not a tall man - and it was so strange to realize that, because people like Che - these giants of thought and action - always seem to be giants and titans.

The city of Santa Clara was a city of cyclists. This type of transport became quite developed here after the energy crisis in the country in the "special period" of the early and mid 90s. You can also see a special kind of provincial Cuban taxi, which can not be found in Havana - a cart pulled by a horse, in which the townspeople sit as passengers. The city is clean, well maintained, there is no begging, but instead, a strong sense of industry.

Provincial homes have high narrow doors and wide open windows on both sides of the house after sundown, so that the houses have the fresh breeze. These windows are closed

with wooden shutters during the day against the scorching sun. But in the evening, virtually all life is going on around you as from the street you can see everything that is happening inside these homes while families are also drinking coffee in the evenings on the verandas. The decorations in the houses are modest, but very pleasant, with the inevitable rug on the wall depicting a bunch of little animals, and some photos. Many people walk along the streets, carrying in their lifted up hands white cakes of dazzling beauty covered with transparent lids .. Of course, Kyle immediately wants to eat a cake! But there is no time to look for a confectioner's, we were being taken to another museum, the famous armored train, which was at one time captured by Che and his comrades! The cars are still fitted with machine guns and beds. I jump from one car to another, forgetting the cakes and other materialistic "charms": who cares about cakes when you can literally feel the spirit of the revolution!

... In the evening we were brought to the small provincial town of Sancti Spiritus, which to this day is for me the personification of Cuba and its provincial fascinating simple beauty. I would give much for chance to live in a place like this!

It was already beginning to get dark when we were in the square. A veteran shyly approached, with an outstretched hand. He said nothing, but I felt so sorry for an elderly person that I could not help it and gave him a Cuban banknote. He still said nothing, and disappeared.

- What insolence! - Kyle exclaims, whose opinions I do not ask. -Did you notice they don't even say thank you even if you give them something!

He does not understand that people do not say thank you because they are ashamed to beg. If Kyle himself lived in poverty, you can be sure he would have crawled on all fours to the edge of the world, kissing someone's shoes, and as Patsaks and Chatlanians from the movie of Danelia³⁴² - for matches-"ke-tse".

We were taken to the small motel outside of town. It consisted of groups of small white houses scattered in the middle of a green tropical garden with a pool in the center of this garden. We had some free time before dinner - although Kyle expressed his dissatisfaction with that, because he was, like Karabas Barabas³⁴³ "dying of hunger". Do not worry, Kyle, lie down, it'll pass!

The Cubans apologized to us for the quality of the hotel, but I absolutely could not see why. The hotel was very comfortable: in each cabin there was air conditioning, television and an internal telephone, a shower with warm water (heated during the day in the tank on the roof!) Everything is sparkling clean and on the bed were laid towels, folded together with a blanket with proudly swimming swans (so beautiful I have never seen!), and a hand painted watercolor postcard on the cover and hand-written in Spanish a lyric poem inside, with the wish of a pleasant stay here ...

I feel tears on my eyes. I feel more than ever that tourism in Cuba - is "throwing pearls before swine." Porcine Kyle could not appreciate such beauty and such a fine culture. Tomorrow, he will instead complain about the quality of the hotel due to the fact that he was chewed by the mosquitoes! The poem he will throw in the trash, especially since it is in a foreign language ...

I took the card as a souvenir. What will happen in the world in the future if people with

³⁴² Soviet cult film "Kindza- dza!" (1988); director Georgiy Daneliya (b.1930) is a [Soviet/Georgian/Russian](#) film director, who became known throughout the [Soviet Union](#) for his "sad comedies"

³⁴³ Karabas Barabas - a villain in Buratino , Russian fairy tale (version of Pinocchio)

Kyle's mentality win? It is terrible to imagine their spiritual poverty covering the whole planet and destroying such peaceful oases of true human culture, like Cuba. Such was our way in the USSR. Yes, it really is necessary to devote the rest of our lives to fighting what Kyle represents, for the sake of offering our children and future generations the chance to enjoy what we enjoyed since childhood-the beautiful way of life never even imagined by those who have not lived under socialism.

I had to call my workplace in Ireland, and they did not have an international phone, so Porter - a skinny, handsome boy of 20, offered to take me to a nearby hotel (about 2 kilometers!) on his bike. I was sincerely touched, but worried whether he will cope ... He was so skinny, while I was a fairly plump woman, and for some 10 years had not ridden a bike! But I really had to call ...

After 5 minutes we were whistling down a very dark road, and he was telling me all about his hometown. We whizzed by a glow in the dark banner with the words of Fidel "We work for life". I was desperately balancing on the back end of the bike, so as not to fall down and whine from time to time, to the delight of my zealous driver. When the road went uphill, I felt sorry for him, and I offered to get off and go on foot, but he just shook his head and pushed even harder on the pedals.

Have you ever called your workplace in such an unusual way?

We had returned in time for dinner. They fed us another enormous and very generous meal, and all was extremely tasty, although Kyle complained that it was too salty or too sweet. Again there was a debate - this time with unfortunate consequences for him. He wanted to talk about Ireland.

- A delegation of Sinn Fein is now on a visit here - I mentioned, neutrally.

- Ah, they probably came to give their IRA weapons back to Fidel, that they borrowed from the Cubans! - He said slyly, hoping that I appreciated his incredibly keen sense of humor.

- Well, it is the right decision! To Cubans they can still be useful! - I answered dryly.

But Kyle had not realized that his humor was not appreciated, and was continuing. :

- Look at these unemployed Irish militants who have nothing better to do at home than to become mercenaries for drug traffickers in Latin America ...

He was talking about my friend Fionntan, who was now languishing in jail there, where he could be killed any day now. A wave of anger and bitterness rose in my chest, because I knew that people like Fionntan would not be bought or sold at any price! But instead, of standing up and saying, like the hero of the "Headless Horseman"³⁴⁴ Maurice the Mustang, when some began to insult the Irish people: "I'm Irish", I just gave half a smile. We still had all day tomorrow on a bus.

Kyle left without paying for his glass of lemonade, and drinks were not included in the price of dinner ... The Cuban staff looked for him for some time but to no avail. Since there is no casino in Cuba, he apparently went to the cabaret.

Tomorrow you'll be sorry that you offended my friends!

³⁴⁴ *The Headless Horseman* is a novel by Thomas [Mayne Reid](#) written in 1865 or 1866 and is based on the author's adventures in the United States. *The Headless Horseman or a Strange Tale of Texas* was set in [Texas](#) and based on a South Texas [folk tale](#). One of the most popular books in the USSR.

Morning is here, dew is on the grass, but it is not cold, even at this hour. The people are slowly coming for breakfast, and as I expected, complaining of mosquitoes. You don't like mosquitoes? My God, stay in your cold countries!

I notice that this hotel is not only for foreigners but also for Cubans, and if it costs about \$ 40 per night for foreigners, for the Cubans it is only 35 pesos (the average monthly salary in Cuba - 200 -300 pesos!). So, what are you complaining about Rafael (or Alexander)? I note to myself.

Kyle finally comes to the table, too - with a sleepy face. I wait until everyone is assembled, and then gently, but loud enough for the whole table, declare to him - And where did you go yesterday? We were looking for you everywhere. You never paid for your drinks.

Kyle turns purple, then begins to mumble something about the fact that in Canada, drinks are always included in the price of dinner, to which I (in the spirit of Nonna Mordyukova³⁴⁵ "*I do not know how it is in London, I was not there...*"), just smiled at him, saying:

- I do not know how it is in Canada, but in Europe it is like in Cuba ...

"That one is for Fionntan!" - I say to myself.

We were sitting in the bus and going to a city called Trinidad. This region was once a leading producer of sugarcane in the world. It is also known for cattle breeding, and production of tobacco. Maria began describing the area with statistics, and Kyle - for the first time in the whole trip - at last was silent and didn't interrupt her.

Once Fernando Cortez³⁴⁶ enlisted the entire population of Trinidad in his crew, and only 14 families were left. We were introduced to the famous local cocktail: a mixture of rum, honey, lemon juice and water. We were shown the tower where a local slave owner once kept watch over his slaves to make sure they couldn't escape. We were shown the house of a slave owner. What posh lives the bloodsuckers and exploiters in this world always manage to live!

We are coming to the city of Trinidad, proclaimed an architectural monument in the open of global importance by UNESCO. The bus skipped along over a narrow stone bridge, and above us - a dazzling blue sky, and around us were small, white Spanish colonial style houses. No buildings were higher than two floors - with the exception of the UNESCO building, familiar to me from childhood on postcards and magazines, and "Cuba" the local church building.

- Why there are no tall buildings? The government doesn't permit it? - Kyle asked quite seriously of Maria, his words sounded so ridiculous and absurd against the background of this beauty that once again I could not stop myself:

- Do you miss your skyscrapers?

We saw another home of former slave owners, whose descendants left long ago for Spain - and, perhaps, are known there today as "successful" businessmen who owe their

³⁴⁵ Noyabrina "Nonna" Viktorovna Mordyukova (1925 – 2008) was a [Soviet](#) actress and [People's Artist of the USSR](#)

³⁴⁶ Famous pirate

very own capital and labor only to their "great qualities".

The house was surprisingly cool, because the heat is terrible in Trinidad, even in December. But the slave owner lived on the hill, and a fresh breeze always flows through the house. Here everything was designed for the owner's comfort, but the slaves were kept on the ground floor along with the livestock. The museum tour guide - an intelligent middle-aged woman told us about the different places from which the furniture was imported. She communicated with us through Maria - because of the language. Kyle continued to ask the most ridiculous questions, but there was no way to escape from him, because we were the only two English-speaking tourists in our group.

All I could do to comfort myself during his idiotic questions was to exchange knowing glances with our non-English-speaking guide as if to say "Here, some stupidity is walking in our world!" Such an understanding developed between us, that at the end of the tour she carefully looks around and then beckoned to me. I went to where she stood, and she deftly plunged her hand under a pillow on the bed of the slave owner and pulled out from under it a bunch of white lace handkerchiefs, the kind for which Trinidad needlewomen are famous. Quietly gesticulating with her hands, she explained to me that she was knitting these during the short tropical nights, and they can be bought for \$ 2-3 apiece. At the corner of my eye I saw that the same "secret tour" under pillows and in cabinets was being given by the other guides pulling aside tourists. And each of them acted as if she were the only needlewoman in this team.

Kyle, meanwhile was excited about the slaveholder's marble bathtub, made from a single piece of marble. In contrast to modern bathrooms, there was no hole to plug. The slaves had to use buckets to carry water to the second floor to fill the tub, and then empty it the same way.

- Such treatment of people over the centuries - this is worse than any holocaust! - I said loud and saw how Kyle silently turned purple.

We had about an hour to freely walk around the city. It was stunningly beautiful, but I feel a bit ashamed to say that my impression was that the city was a tourist trap!

Everywhere, we were offered a wide variety of locally made goods, and within 10 minutes I found myself loaded with basket made of palm leaves (I felt sorry for a "grandfather", who sold them!) and photographed on a little donkey ... I'd never before climbed on the donkeys and was terribly afraid to break the patient, cute animal's neck! Everywhere in Trinidad there were markets with local lace products. And suddenly I was stabbed by a keen feeling: people are selling here, as in ours and many other countries, things made by their own talented hands extremely cheaply - and all these people in the world are feeding a huge army of the self-proclaimed "elite" loafers and parasites, all sorts of supermodels and security guards, from which society benefits less than that from he-goat's milk! This is how sick our world has become, that so many of us don't even notice this whole ugly absurdity!

I sat on the porch of a little restaurant waiting for the group. We were entertained by local musicians singing and then a chef in a white cap came out of the kitchen and also started to sing, and how! But I felt sad. More and more, I felt that being a tourist from a "rich" country is disgusting. I felt that we were exploiting all these people. I didn't want to be surrounded by people hopping on their hind legs. I didn't want to be like those Western tourists, one and all looking like ridiculous cartoon characters! I didn't want to be a

tourist - I wanted to be one of them, the local people!

I shared my thoughts with Maria, and she tried to comfort me:

- Don't feel badly ... people behave this way because we Cubans are very hospitable to guests and share our best with them...

-

I looked at my companion tourists- and they all looked disgusting to me. Around us - talented people, people who can do so much with their hands, and what are you able to do except exploit and plunder other nations?

Past the restaurant jogged a truck full of local workers - joyful, easy. I looked longingly at them as I wanted to jump on board and fly away with them!

.. We returned to Havana via Cienfuegos. Nearby we were shown the only nuclear power plant in Cuba, which Fidel had ordered closed immediately after the Chernobyl accident. In Cienfuegos before us there were a lot of beautiful buildings - one of them previously housed a casino owned by the son of the dictator Batista. Today in Cuba, casinos - rightly, in my opinion! - are forbidden. In departing, we strolled along the longest boulevard in Cuba.

The road back to Havana seemed truly endless. We were slowly beginning to languish in the bus. From gloomy thoughts I was saved only by the sight of the peasants, in the twilight harvesting sugar cane - and how they were dear to me. It was so nice to see them, and how I wished to stay among them!

The bus bounced over some bumps in the dark when I was surprised to discover that another passenger, seated not far from Kyle on the bus was one of our people! A German from the GDR! He was also delighted and happily went on in Russian.

- Well, Zhenya, - with a nice accent he said in Russian about 15 minutes later - let's have a drink! - And pulled out of the dark from his pocket a bottle of Cuban rum.

- To *Bruderschaft*³⁴⁷! - I said while my new friend, Ronald ("My name is Ronald like Reagan, and my brother is Michael, like Gorbachev!" - he joked), held out a plastic cup towards me, above a completely terrified Kyle, who was caught sandwiched in the middle of the "socialist camp"! He was scared by many things: by the fact that we drank alcohol in the dark, and the fact that we spoke in an unknown language which he couldn't understand, and that we, obviously, were both Communists, something unthinkable to him - "how a Russian can be friends with the Germans after the War?"

After one small glass it became fun, and we asked Kyle to join us. But he was so intimidated, that he appeared to be about to jump off the bus!

- I am so pleased to speak Russian - Ronald said to me.- We have some who said we were bad off before, but I do not think so. It was great - and a lot of Cubans I have met here agree.

On the horizon, we could see the lights of Havana. We started singing the "*Internationale*" in chorus, each in our own language. Surely our Canadian friend would not forget this trip for a long time!

³⁴⁷ Brotherhood (German)

.... I noticed in Cuba, that children enjoy school and do not hurry home after school. And I've never seen on the streets of Havana, a crying baby - just happy, smiling children's faces. The streets of Havana are very tidy compared to other major cities in the world. People here are always busy with something: cutting lawns, paving the new boardwalk around the pipe. The city literally glows from the loving care it receives - even with financial difficulties and lack of paint for homes.

How can a man of sound mind and memory voluntarily choose to flee from such a life? The trouble is that some Cubans think - as some Russians had thought, years ago - that the media's lies about the reality capitalism are true. Especially when the island receives broadcasting 24 hours a day of the sweet tales of "*Ci-Ene-Ene en Espanol*³⁴⁸". We Russians, like other residents of the Eastern European countries, now know well the terrible price of believing these lies.

Well, there are in the world Communists of another type, different than those who betrayed their comrades, such as Gorby, who became the slave at the door of the overseas Dragon. Well, there is an island - the Cuban Island of Liberty, whose Communists are not for sale!

... Leaving the hospital, we almost cried. For a long time we were saying goodbye to everyone and to each separately. There was an especially warm farewell to a janitor, who every day polished the floors in our room. She hugged Lisa by the side of the road, wishing me "even more children." She herself had two daughters.

- Yes, but I am too old for this! - I laughed it off. In response, she hugged my neck:
- Do not be sad, *Soviética*! For *Soviéticas* it is not allowed by the labour contract.

So, that's who I am.

I am Soviética!

And I proudly raise to the sun my still tear-stained face.

Chapter 14. Ooh-ah, up the RA!

"The situation is quite normal. The shooting... Well, there is such a thing as planned shooting here."

(S. Ilyasov, Head of Government in Chechnya)

... We came back on a cold December night, cloudy and starless; we landed after quite a while of jiggling in the skies above Ireland: it then seemed to be right in the heart of a wind rose.

After the sunny, bright and cheerful Cuba, it all looked like the return of *Kin-Dza-Dza*³⁴⁹ characters, from Alfa back to Plyuk, and besides, it was by our own choice. We, as well as they, had every reason to lose heart.

³⁴⁸ CNN in Spanish (Spanish)

³⁴⁹ Kin-Dza-Dza – Soviet science fiction comedy made in 1986. The film is a parody on capitalist society with its lack of social responsibility, lack of mutual cooperation and with its propaganda of pop culture. The planet Plyuk where the film is set is an epitome of such a society. The film became popular in the USSR due to its experimental, unusual (at the time) cinematographic approach.

At the airport entrance our faithful farmer Frank had been waiting for us; he was the one to bring us back home. The way from Shannon to the North was long, the night was dark; though the blizzard had stopped, there was still some snow in the wind howling over the bare ground.

Frank was driving so fast that we were literally jumping at the bumps. Lisa enjoyed it greatly, giving a squeal now and then; Mum and I didn't like that at all. Yet, Frank didn't seem to notice; he was driving away wildly, like Eugeny Leonov's character from *Racers*, driving along Georgian mountains.

Driving, he was telling us the Irish news and what he had managed to read so far from the history of the Time of Troubles in Russia. Retelling Marina Mniszech's³⁵⁰ biography in detail, he would doze off, and then we had to make him stop to take a breath so that he wouldn't fall asleep for real. So, in such a manner, we finally arrived back home by morning. We asked Frank to stay and sleep at our place, but, sleepy as he was, he refused, because, he said, back home in Cavan his cows were waiting to be milked.

In the plane, people might have thought that Mum, just like that Tatiana, an English gentlemen fan, decided to ask for refuge in Ireland, and that was why she didn't return on board in Shannon, even though she had a ticket to Moscow. There was nothing farther from the truth than that!

It cost me great effort to make Mum stay in Ireland, at least for a while, to celebrate the New Year together, because I hoped that Lisa would now stay with me for good; yet, the Cubans, without realizing it, gave Mum another reason to take her back to Russia, as surely, there were no Russian-speaking speech therapists in Ireland. Even an Irish-speaking one was not so easy to find, as my Irish-speaking friends with children complained.

As far as English-speaking therapists are concerned... I noticed that they readily worked with those who didn't really need any medical help; but if you try to ask them for some serious medical intervention, they would tell you off in such a manner that you would remember it for a long time. A really ill person needs *real* treatment, and to provide it, one has to bear *some knowledge*, and not just decorate the wall with numerous BAs., MAs., and other self-assigned abbreviations. It was a lot easier to be a quack prescribing some not very harmful, but expensive medicine to the one who just made himself *believe* (alone, or with the help of others) that he was ill. After Cuba, it just screamed at me.

“Why not to live *somehow?*” this phrase by Gogol's characters has since then stopped to comfort me. There *is* another life! On the one hand, I cheered up; on the other, got even more intolerant to what one couldn't tolerate. Soon my friend Wendy got offended because I started calling a spade a spade; she regarded my words not as a mere “offence”, but as a real crime! You see, I turned out impudent enough to say that Cuban medical service is great, quite accessible and free for all Cubans!

³⁵⁰ Frank refers to the period of 1598-1613 in Russia. It was the time of social unrest, famine and Polish-Lithuanian occupation. Marina Mniszech – one of the Polish organisers of the plot against Russian monarchy.

When one of the local newspapers asked me for an interview about Cuban medicine, I readily agreed; for me it was a way to tell the truth to the people who knew so little about the country, and most of what they knew was Uncle Sam's poisonous lies.

I was lucky: George, the journalist, visited Cuba several times, and was absolutely charmed by the country. A socialist, he was forced to earn a living making heart-rending reports for one of the most-read Ulster tabloids; so, he had to keep his style in accord with the general tone of the newspaper, which is why he warned me from the start that the title would be "dramatic", as well as some of the content of the article. Listening to my account of Cuba, he just sighed.

- I wish I could get away from it all and just go there! – George told me confidentially. – But someone has to support the family, pay the bills, and so on...

At least, I was sure his interview would not be hostile to Cuba. It was exactly what I needed, the newspaper which is widely read; all right, not a very sophisticated report, but at least the people would learn some truth, and in the language they *understood!* However, I once again saw that the truth was not something desirable for all, and that not everybody wanted to know it.

The trouble came from where I never expected it, namely, my Unionist friend Wendy. I didn't even know she read such papers as she seemed to me too "respectable" for that. I have already told you that for me that woman was a real sun-ray in that racist Orange kingdom of darkness. So, I was very surprised when once, on a cold rainy Sunday morning she called me and demanded apologies in a voice trembling with anger. According to her, I had to apologize – and not to her personally, but officially, in the newspaper which had published my interview about Cuba, for having insulted the infallible and great British healthcare system in general, and all Belfast doctors in particular.

I hadn't read the article yet, and so, I did my best to assure Wendy that it was not my intention at all either to "insult" local doctors, or libel them. That, however, did not seem enough for her. I then promised her to go to a shop, buy a copy of that ill-fated paper, and read it to find out what made her so angry.

- You should have read that article *before* it was published! – usually reserved Wendy almost screamed at me. – And ask for corrections if there was something wrong! Has she just been born (or, as they say in the North of Ireland, "came up the Lagan in a bubble"), and doesn't know that local papers don't work like that? I met Wendy for the first time during an interview about Chernobyl children who came here on vacation every year, and we then both noticed how many mistakes there were in the published text. But nobody even thought of apologizing to us, or letting us proof-read the text before publishing...

I went out into the heavy rain and cold wind to get to the only shop open that evening in

our town, the one next to a petrol-station. Having returned home, I hastily opened the ill-fated paper. “The NHS made a sick child go to Cuba!” screamed the typically tabloid title, whose sole, and quite understandable aim was to attract the readers. I read the whole text through, and found nothing insulting either for Belfast doctors or the British system. Not a single rude word or exaggeration.

Besides, I had warned George not to write anything bad about local doctors, because they did all they could to help the patients; it was not their fault, after all, that they worked within a system indifferent to human suffering, and that they had such fragmentary education.

So, George kept his word. He did say a few words “on my behalf”, though, something I never said; that, for example, in Cuba, unlike the USSR, there was no social difference between a doctor, a medical nurse and a cleaner, and that they all had dinner in the same diner (which is, by the way, true, but it was also true for the Soviet Union). I think we in the USSR didn’t see that much difference either, at least, nothing even close to the “class” status of the privileged group of doctors compared to the “half-human” cleaners in the “fantastic” UK. But I could forgive him this. My main task was to say good things about Cuba, let the people here know what it *really* was like, and how deeply humane Cuban lifestyle was.

So, why did Wendy get so offended? Talking to me just a couple of days ago, she was denouncing local hospitals for unimaginably long waiting lists for simple surgeries (many people with cancer, or heart diseases who have to wait for their free surgeries as paid ones are unaffordable for them, die, because it then gets too late!); Wendy gave me her own example of waiting for a free crutch after a hip surgery: when she finally got it, she already didn’t need it!

What hurts Wendy so much then, if even British newspapers every day write about scandalous condition of local state, or public, free hospitals, where 90- year-old patients are placed in the corridors of resuscitation department, waiting for their turn to see the specialist? Where the hospital administration is going to hire the police to force the ill elderly people who have nowhere to go from hospital beds? Where the patients are more and more often sent for surgery abroad, because in local hospitals there are no places? Where annually hundreds of people die because of medical “errors”, many of which occur because doctors work with no break for 48 to 72 hours, and most of them have a 70 hours working week? Where, for example, such things happen as raping of a 70-year-old woman, terminally ill with cancer, on her way from the hospital bed to a hospital toilet?

Mind that I mentioned *none* of these glaring facts in the interview. I only spoke about the indifference of the system to the people, from my own experience. That you’ve got to fight for the medical care even you are officially entitled to – a medical examination (after 9 to 12 months of waiting!) to get computer scanning; that your complaints were to be taken seriously; that the useless medicine were to be changed; even to get a transcript from your medical record and copies of the x-rays.

And it is about money: you don't need it, it is too expensive. The "society of equal opportunities", where very senior Queen's relatives, breathing their last, are revived again and again (and it is considered our duty to loudly celebrate it!), and some "black" child, having her whole life ahead, cannot get an extra x-ray, on the simple ground that it costs the taxpayers 'too much'.

Of course, I couldn't mention that in the interview either – because of this "sedition" it would have been immediately banned from publishing; I focused on Cuba instead – I think the difference in treating people which I showed, spoke for itself. The country with very limited resource sends more medical doctors to the Third World than the World Health Organisation, and never refuses aid to anybody, no matter how hard a situation it might be experiencing!

I did my best to understand Wendy. Yes, it is unpleasant to see a foreigner criticising your country. But I am a foreigner who actually *lives* here, not some tourist; and it means I am a taxpayer in the same sense as she is. So, I am fully entitled to know where my tax money goes, and ask for better medical service *not* at my expense, but, say, forcing Blair to give up his new private luxurious Concord, or reducing military spending.

So why are you turning pale of fear, Wendy, in your "free" country, when I say that 'they have the money to bomb Yugoslavia and Iraq instead' – I'm telling the truth? You will gain from this truth, won't you, because next time you will get your free crutch on time?

I waited for her to cool down a little ('We Unionists are such hot-bloods!'). In a few weeks I mailed her, as it is customary among Calvinists-formalists, a beautiful post-card with a detailed account of the current situation, stressing, that I had nothing against doctor X whom she had recommended, or doctor Y, to get to see whom we had been waiting half a year.

The postcard was sent back to me together with the present I had attached to it. Wendy has written that if I wanted her forgiveness, I had to immediately write a refutation of my interview in the newspaper, having expressed my deepest gratitude to the wonderful British healthcare system. To do this would have meant thanking Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev for our "happy and free" today. Beside friendship there is also such a thing as principles and a refusal to lie.

So, this is how our friendship with Wendy stopped. In my farewell letter I also flared up, and promised her to make public all the facts I hadn't even hinted at to George. "*You obviously think that as a native British only you bear the right to criticise the local healthcare system*", I wrote. "*While we, foreigners, are to swallow up whatever is given, and be grateful for it. We have no right to speak out against anything 'great' British. It is called 'racism'. I was supposed to admire the fact that this system is free, while where I come from it was a norm. Before coming here I had no idea of what this many-month waiting list to see a specialist was. Back in the USSR, I had had to spend no more than several hours waiting for my turn to see a surgeon, an ophthalmologist, or another specialist. You will never understand what I'm talking about when I refer to Cuba; my*

criticism is not against certain doctors, it is against the inhumane, indifferent attitude of the local system towards the people. So, I feel really sorry for you, because you know of no other system, and cannot even imagine that it could exist. Well, if you don't believe me, a non-British, I will then enclose a copy of what a real British person, John Waller, writes in his brochure "Cuba: Health for All."

And so I sent her that brochure.

I think that after she has read it, Wendy would only start hating me and Cuban Revolution. It is so really annoying to have lived your whole life firmly believing that your state as great indeed, even sending your old dresses to "poor Belorussian children" to feel "kind", and then to suddenly read that '*in Britain the number of the elderly is very often presented as a problem; in Cuba, it is considered a triumph.*' This would sound like a sickle cut to that self-proclaimed "civilization"...

Having put the envelope into the mail-box and returned home, I saw a message on my answering machine. In total despair, parents and grandparents of a small local girl Caoimhe were asking for help. The girl had a rare form of epilepsy, which broke out quite unexpectedly. Periodically she fainted and fell, so her face was all black and blue. Local doctors were quite indifferent to her condition, having prescribed her the standard "cocktail" of medications which didn't work; they even refused to make an x-ray or a scan...

The parents went over the Internet and found an American clinic which could have helped Caoimhe. 'We admit only Americans!' was the doctors' reply. Treatment in Munich which wouldn't go without a heart disease as a side effect would cost that not very rich family 15.000 pounds...

"What can we do?" they ask, unable to stand their little girl suffering any-more. So I grab the phone – I've got to immediately call Havana...

Let Wendy dream on about the "great British healthcare".

We've got to act, not dream!

The man who was happier than anybody else to see me back in Ireland was the one without whose help I would have probably never brought Lisa to Cuba for treatment: Dermot Kinsella. We returned just before Christmas, right after his wife had gone to the "Evil Empire" to visit her relatives, so he was home alone.

Mum and I do not celebrate Catholic Christmas, so Dermot invited me to spend the day at his place; he didn't even worry that his neighbours or our shared acquaintances could see me at his town – that was how much he missed me.

I then told Mum about our relations, as I needed to explain my absence. To my surprise, she approved – possibly, for the first time:

- At least, he is a very interesting person!

We were sure that the house was still bugged, and so I told her about Dermot outside, on a walk.

- We need to call him by a secret name, - Mum decided. – So that if we start talking about him, *they* would have to go out of their way guessing. What is he like?

I described my LFC, who looked somewhat like my favourite author Kir Bulychev; not quite as tall, though, quite on the contrary, and with a noticeable limp.

- Let him be a *Lame-Crutch!* – Mum stated. The way it sounded made me giggle. So, Mum granted me a leave for one evening, and that was settled.

Dermot's town, beautiful but gloomy, blown through by all the winds of Atlantic with the seemingly uneasing rain, and a tagged wall mysteriously stating, 'Yeltsin is a Prod!' was still the same. The only difference was that this time it was *snowing*; enormous downy flakes slowly turning in the air looked like in a Soviet New Year postcard. I even felt sorry for "our" wife who couldn't see this wonder; no Florida crocodiles were a match for that!

Dermot opened the door, smiling widely, and a wave of warmth from his house went over me. He was wearing a terry gown, which made him, this uncompromising, harsh and redoubtable revolutionary look so homely; in fact, he now looked like a big teddy bear. From behind Dermot's back his dog, an Irish setter with a very beautiful honey-shaded coat, was angrily barking at me. Dermot said that the dog would soon get used to me, and it was true; the only problem was, he was very curious, literally poking his nose everywhere. There were also three or four cats wandering around the house; their sleeping baskets were hanging on the central heating radiators.

On the table, there was a half-ready quilt, "our wife's" favourite hobby, probably as engrossing as the revolutionary struggle. In the hall, next to a lit fireplace, there was a Christmas tree, and something very atypical for an "average Irishman" - a bookcase, stuffed with books.

But Dermot wasn't an "average Irishman"...

He sprawled on the sofa after we had exchanged kisses, gesturing me to join him: surely, it was *Star Trek* on TV!..

- I'm so happy to see you, LFC! I missed you so much! So, how's Cuba? Is Lisa better? And so I started my long story, having mentioned Wendy's reaction to my newspaper interview...

- The Irish have felt racial discrimination on their skin, so to speak, both abroad - in England and America, and at home, where the English colonial rule, as early as in the 17th century, practically 'cancelled' the very existence of the Irish people as a nation. The Irish, because of their own historical background, should have understood better than other Europeans, what it means to be discriminated against, and how much it can affect your self-confidence, your whole life... Yet, now we are witnessing an increase of racism in Ireland – that's happening before our very eyes. They say it is connected with a growing number of immigrants coming to the country, like people here are not used to it yet... What do you think, how could one explain such strong negative feeling towards the "newcomers" on the part of the Irish?

- Somewhere deep in our core there is a prejudice, a deep-rooted assumption that other nations are, in this or that way, not so 'important', that they are people of a 'lower level'. The Irish are quite often not even aware of the *extent* to which they have been exposed to propaganda coming largely – well, not largely, but rather *solely!* – from English-speaking sources. Children here in Ireland are raised in firm belief that American Indians, Australian aborigines and so on are creatures of a 'lower degree', and that Europeans 'had every right' to travel to those continents to conquer and destroy their cultures and civilizations.

Besides, they are overwhelmed by enormous surge of that propaganda coming from books, films, press, TV and other mass media stating that mainland Europeans are, in their turn, 'creatures of a *lower* degree' than the 'great British', - Dermot replied.

– And of course, many of us had swallowed the bait of this propaganda, which then somehow imprinted itself somewhere deep in the consciousness even of those who didn't want it... People themselves are not always aware of this. Irish missionaries, for instance, honestly believed that they were 'enlightening' and 'civilizing' Africans and Indians, and that our lifestyle and our Christianity were a lot better than any other, which entitled us to destroy other nations' cultures...

Now when you look at all that from today, those views and their practical outcomes cause nothing but terror, yet those ideas are still deeply installed somewhere in human brains... So, I'm not surprised, when, for example, someone from Nigeria or Kenya comes to us, and we consider him a person 'not as important as ourselves'... Plus, there is a purely racist attitude like, 'they are taking away our job and our houses', 'they are treated better than us.'

On the other hand, we look up at Americans in awe! We consider the British a more advanced nation; and surely, there is a long story concerning the so-called 'Cold War', when we were supposed to look down at the Russian, or any other system, Nicaraguan, Cuban, etc., which were not 'approved' by the British and American government. Those systems were considered 'second-best', thus it was only 'right' to destroy them... So, the propaganda formed this attitude in people... And it doesn't matter how much 'good will' you have, those prejudices do show up, and I'm absolutely convinced that if we are, to seriously fight against racism in Ireland, then we have to start with the anti-Irish racism, which determines how we treat the outside world and ourselves! – he went on, pouring tasty Irish coffee into my cup.

- The amount of anti-Irish racism in *Irish* media is unbelievable! Several years ago Canadian scientists found out that racism was 'built into' even school textbooks, and they had to be replaced... The most effective way to fight racism is to make sure that all its manifestations are outlawed, including the racism against your own people! ... Which brings me to the next issue: here in the North the Irish still suffer sectarian discrimination. And how does that influence our everyday life? You, for example, how were you influenced by it?

- My parents wanted to save me from this, and sent me to study in Scotland at a very early age. Still, as you can see, it didn't work; there I graduated from the university, got married, even learned to speak Scottish Gaelic, but I couldn't give up fighting for my

people's freedom. My first wife was a local communist. She was there both times I was arrested. We are still friends. She simply didn't want to come with me to my native land. Here we see, on the one hand, rather obvious manifestations of discrimination: people are denied job, housing, and are not allowed to settle in certain districts because of their religious background. On the other hand, there are now people who are constantly eager to please you, tell you how much they admire your culture or religion... And this has reached such a scale that sometimes you simply tell yourself, 'I don't want to talk to those people anymore!', because yet again they will be telling you how many Catholic priests they know, or how wonderful the Irish dance, or whiskey is... If you follow their logic, you could end up saying something like, 'How great it would be to meet an Irish Catholic priest, because he would always treat you to some great Irish whiskey!' Stupid, isn't it? But this is how they are: they simply *must* pay you such 'compliments'!

Another remarkable feature of our life is that we can't go about without figuring out the religion of each of our new acquaintance... Each and every one of us has to suppress it within, saying, 'No, we are not going to even ask about it!...' Yet, the most terrible thing is, of course, the job and housing distribution discrimination. Now it is happening to a lesser extent, because the anti-discrimination law in the sphere of employment works, not well enough, though, but it does.

- You know, Dermot, I must confess that even I have been fighting this in myself - even though I came here quite recently! When I'm introduced to someone, the question about religion just springs up, against my own will, even if I'm not going to voice it. And there's also another difference between the North and the South in the attitude to immigrants: northerners seem to be a lot more interested in socializing with us than the arrogant southerners... Probably it's because till recently there have been so few foreigners in the North that both communities were trying to show each of them only the best sides of their country. I think, it's also because people here have come a long way to understand the value of life, and because they have experienced so many things by now that it makes them take other people's condition closer to heart - unlike in the South, where people get more and more 'spoilt' with the Celtic Tiger... and become more selfish and materialistic.

- Well, it is really very difficult to say why. Which is why I'd like someone to start a research about racism - what is it? What exactly are its manifestations? If we again are facing the situation where the church and political parties bear and spread the prejudice that some people are better, and other are worse by nature, it will all end up in the streets. Here in the North, we'd rather discriminate people following their sexual orientation than skin colour. I can tell you that in Belfast there are districts where a black man has nothing to worry about, while a gay - if people know for sure that he is a gay, that is, - has every reason to watch his back...

In Dublin, it's just the opposite: the issue of homosexuality has been widely discussed, the people got used to it, so now it doesn't trouble them. Yet, the skin colour is something Dubliners still have problems with. So the difference is only in the way people express their rejection of what is 'different', 'differs from', or 'other'...

I think we in the North used to have very good initiatives, such as the tradition of Irish-African friendship, linked to African scientists working at our university... But if we look back at 1969-1970, when the social unrest finally broke out, we will see that there were

two kinds of racism.

First, the clergy complained that there were black British soldiers in the streets (-‘It’s *we* who should bring order to *them*, not vice versa!’). It was, in a way, self-disclosure, because for the first time such a racist remark came from those seemingly respectable people... Yet, that black soldier was probably some Liverpool Englishman, or a Glasgow Scotsman! They were ‘English’ in the very sense that people living here, are ‘Irish’!

Second, it was the way people here treated Mother Teresa’s nuns. They came to us and asked: ‘How can we help?’ The reason why we rejected their help was, in many aspects, racist: ‘What can *they* teach *us*?’ They had a signboard on their door, ‘Missionary Nuns’, so our church authorities went raving mad, saying, ‘It’s *we* who send missionaries to *them*, and not *they* to *us*!’ Yet, ordinary people did not have such prejudices. So, the difference between the common people and big authorities has always been great; the higher the status, the more they felt their ‘superiority’... In Dublin, on the contrary, racism comes from the needy, and not from the ‘authorities’... Actually, it is a ridiculous situation!

- Listening to you, I’ve just remembered coming to the Netherlands with my Soviet University diploma – and there I was told that my diploma would be ‘worth nothing in this country’, even though those people there had no idea of what our educational system was like... The education I got in my native country was excellent, and I can say that studying in Moscow was a lot harder than in Holland, even though here I had to start it all over again, and in a foreign language! But such were the prejudices of the Western society about ours, and their firm belief in their own ‘superiority’...

- That’s very interesting, because we have here the same prejudice: once you get beyond America or Britain, you immediately find yourself in the countries where people are ‘underdeveloped’, with an ‘underdeveloped system of education’. It’s very difficult to sustain that, if you know that most of European music and literature comes from Germany, France and Italy, and *not* Britain... But nevertheless, there *is* an idea that a foreign university or a foreign institute of any sort is somehow ‘less competent’... I remember this tremendous surprise I got as a youngster when I first learnt that Italians had a great reputation for architecture! Or how much surprised I was when I first saw the pictures of the African cities with high-rise buildings. ‘That is not what we have been taught!’

- In Russia, we have enough of that too: when people seriously speak of African students who come to Moscow that they have ‘just got off the palm tree’... I was always fighting with it back home...

- That’s very sad. The people who themselves have suffered from discrimination or racism or other sorts of oppression, quite often turn to be racist, and besides, very aggressive! I noticed this quite a lot of times when I went over to America in the 80s – and I was amazed! There I met people of Irish origin who had the most striking prejudices against black or Hispanic people... So, it’s not surprising for me what we see now in parts of Ireland, but I do believe that there has to be a tremendous all-encompassing campaign to eliminate this - and whether you can eliminate this or not, I do not know...

- But we have to keep on trying...

- That's exactly the point! And to my mind, you have to be very severe to people who do it. You see, I've given up the idea of reforming governmental and other institutions... You might as well talk about 'reforming banks' - when people talk about 'reforming churches'. You can't do that. It doesn't work. They've tried many times - and failed. Instead, you've got to concentrate all your effort on making the laws which will immediately punish anyone letting himself a slightest manifestation of racism - and until we make those laws, we are not going to get very far... Now, look at our laws both North and South: there is one stating that you must not make any derogatory reference to another person. But if you try to put this law into practice, you'll find out that unless you can prove that the remark actually resulted in undeniable physical damage to you, you have no case!

- And unless you can prove that it was said deliberately...

- Yes, and there are all these exceptions which they have very deliberately put into this law to make it lose its actual power. Once, for instance, a very disgusting remark was made here to a Catholic bishop; well, he was well able to defend himself, but the clergy decided to test our justice system. So, they were told: 'If you could actually prove that it was this remark that has resulted in a person's going to the bishop's house and smashing all the windows, you would have a case... But as this actually didn't happen...' So, in reality it means that you could have any numbers of insults - and because the law doesn't work, you can be as insulting as you like. The anti-racist laws and the laws to protect your good name are simply that ineffective.

- That was one of my strongest impressions of Western society - when I just came here from the USSR - that criminals had more rights than their victims!

- That's perfectly true - and people would have to think about why it is so! For example, if somebody breaks into your house at night and breaks a leg - no, not your leg, their own leg! - they can actually sue you, and you will probably lose the case... It's amazing, and people find it very hard to believe, but it is true! You are responsible all the more if a burglar comes into your house, and you beat and injure him (or her!) to defend yourself and your property. So, you can be brought up to court for an assault; the police have actually told the people: 'We are sorry, but if you do anything on anybody who will break into your house, then you will be accused of assault, lose your case and might even go to prison!'

Such laws have been made very deliberately because the state wants to make sure that nobody will be legally able to defend property or a person, except the police.

The police are given *the monopoly of force* - just like the army. That, to me, is very sinister. It's not a question of protecting the people, it's just to make sure that only the police and the army have this monopoly - even if they don't use it. *They* must have it, and nobody else! And so, you are forbidden to defend yourselves.

- That also was a very striking thing for me in the West. I was brought up with the idea that *you've got to fight the evil*. When you see something bad happening, don't just stand and stare – you go and help people, do something. Because evil is there to fight against! In 9 cases out of 10 criminals are such cowards that, once you stand up against them, they'll run away. It's a question of human dignity, after all – not to watch the evil, not to escape from it, but to challenge it! And this is what the West is teaching its citizens from their childhood: don't fight the evil, it is unavoidable, it is always there, it is a part of human nature, think about yourself first, give your wallet to the robber, run away, hide, call the police after, etc. The main idea of this society, I think, is '*don't fight the evil*, it was always there, it will always be there'... Even if it is always there, we are not going very far; and how could one consider himself a human, if he doesn't stand up against it?

- And, of course, if you do stand up, you learn how to defend yourself and then you have taken away some of the power of the state. And you must not be allowed to do that. The law is quite determined that the citizen should be powerless. It happens in a number of spheres. The propaganda has always been telling us that only communist countries treat their citizens in such a way, and that is why people here fail to understand that their power, their own abilities to be their own masters are being taken away from them day by day. So, they are left with the solid fact that they can't defend themselves that they are not allowed to educate their children the way they want to, or even choose the TV programme they would like to watch, because the programmes are all same. The people have no right to decide practically anything. And with the rise of the European Union it is going to be only worse...

- You know Dermot, I noticed that to understand your own life, it really helps to know of *another*, another country and another society. Maybe this is why you understand me so much better than your many comrades – unlike them, you know what life is like in other countries. I now also have that kind of experience. Maybe this is one of the reasons why the 'system' here is so afraid of immigrants: we will bring with us the knowledge of a *different* kind of life – and we will be able to crush at least some of the myths spread here about us. And so, the local people would start to understand that their own life is absolutely not what they've always been told.

- And then, of course, you will also have to cater for them, because they have their own special needs: cultural, religious, etc.! In a country like ours – with overwhelmingly Christian ethos – it comes as quite a surprise to the people to find out that there is a need for a mosque. A synagogue – all right, they got used to that idea of having it, only occasionally, but a mosque... People say: we didn't realise others have their own needs. And that's a big test: to see if we are going to be able to receive newcomers or not. I think, as the time goes by, they probably will realise that a lot of racism here is of the same kind as insults that people would use to their fellow citizens. It's the same as shouting at them loud because they are lame, blind or supporters of a different football team.

- Just because they are *different*?

- Exactly! And, once again: in order to understand why people do it, why they have this instinct to insult others, you have to get down to the very root of this basic human desire to hurt other people. So this is one of the reasons why I want to see the people turn around and have a good look at the issue of anti-Irish racism by the Irish themselves. That's the root of why people do those things.

- Because they feel bad about themselves...

- Sure. This is their way of making themselves feel confident, at another's expense. The dreadful thing is that *you feel better because you hurt somebody else*. That's an educational problem. There is that other thing too: the difference scares people, and therefore they want to attack those who are 'different' from everybody else. Schools will tell you that they are fighting against racism, but how can they do that, if they require all their students to be absolutely the same? At school children must have the same religion, be of the same age in the group, read the same books, get the same lessons, say the same prayers... They also have uniforms too, so, they even *look* the same! How can a school claim that it teaches people a respect for difference if it doesn't tolerate it? If you are to seriously fight against racism, you've got to create a 'cult' of difference at school. And so, this is just not happening – in church surely, all people say and believe in the same things... Just imagine: hundreds of thousands of people who believe the same way! This is just not possible, and if they claim they do believe the same way, it means, they lie...

Somehow, deep inside people resist all things different from what they are. If it is done in order to preserve one's cultural identity, it's good. But it is easy to go over the top in such a way... The biggest problem is that people do not respect the difference. *Racism is only a manifestation of a lot deeper problem: a very real human necessity to hurt others in order to feel better!*

...That was a wonderful evening. Dermot was showing me his books, and even gave me some, brought from Libya and the DPRK.

- We have a lot to learn from the Koreans, - he said. – Look, why did they survive even after the socialist camp got dissolved? Because they have always been spiritually independent, not blindly following the USSR – no offence! - like other socialist countries. They, unlike those European countries, were building their own version of socialism, considering their own condition and reality.

- I'm not offended – I said. – I'm also not that happy with "Brezhnev doctrine"³⁵¹. I would have definitely intervened when Americans invaded Grenada...

And so we went on and on, till it was very late, having moved to the bedroom. The feeling that Dermot was my "F" and "C", only grew stronger; for him, though, the letter "L" still was more important than these two other letters...

³⁵¹ The author refers to the Brezhnev's foreign policy of "peaceful coexistence" or Detente (French for "relaxation" or easing of strained situations in politics) between capitalist and socialist systems in the 1970s.

On New Year's eve, in the morning, Mum was very nervous: she was going to cook her famous meat in pots, but stewing it took much time, and first, it had to be unfrozen. In fact, we didn't eat meat here every day, but that was a special occasion...

Just as Mum was thinking out loud, if we had enough time to could cook everything we wanted, there came a knock on the door. Our tireless farmer Frank was "just passing by", and decided to bring us some guests.

Mum, having seen that he was standing on the doorstep with two unknown women, ran upstairs and refused to come down again, even though I begged her to.

- You, with your Irish again! Let us celebrate the New Year normally, at least...

- No, not with the Irish, Mum... Those are *ours*, from Lithuania! And they are looking forward to meeting you.

On hearing the word "Lithuania", Mum went down immediately. Lithuania was her favourite among all other republics. Budraitis, Adomaitis, Banionis, Masiulis, Čiurlionis, "Zalgiris", Kindzyulis...³⁵²

- Why didn't you say at once you were from Lithuania?

Years of living abroad – and the degree of my own exposure to Western propaganda "radiation" – were probably taking their toll; when Frank told me that our guests were Lithuanians, I started to worry: what would they think of us, Russians? Local mass media never fail to stress how much "Lithuanians were discriminated by the Soviet power", or mention the "Russian occupation of Lithuania" and "religious persecution in Lithuania in Soviet times", etc.

Last time I visited Lithuania when I was 9 years old; yet I still remembered a lot of wonderful, and almost fantastic things about the land, from legends to the song about a cuckoo and green wine, which we had learned right away in Lithuanian from our guide, Wilgelmina Vikentyevna. Thanks to her, we, Russians from small towns, literally fell in love with the land and learned by heart the Lithuanian phrase for 'Hello': 'Laba dena!' 'Oh, lilya-derilya, oh lilya-coo-coo!' we sang in a choir, all Russian-speaking, except Wilgelmina Vikentyevna, her son and the driver who drove the bus. After each coming chorus we had to add one more 'coo-coo'...

In two weeks we have seen all of Lithuania; we swam and looked for amber in Palanga, wandered around a castle in Telsiai, visited a former German concentration camp *The Ninth Fort* in Kaunas, came to a real working mill and an apiary, whose owner gave us each a glass of honey. (He, by the way, also owned a bathhouse, with a rather bawdy to a Soviet eye, wall-size picture.)

We also came to a peasant woman, who treated us to fresh milk, and in whose garden there was a small pond with swans, dug by her family... She had blister-covered hands of a labourer, some fingers even with nails missing. 'You know, I noticed, it's customary for your grannies to sit on benches and discuss neighbours. But it's not like that here...' she said as if apologizing, having noticed that we were looking at her hands.

³⁵² Juozas Budraitis, Regimantas Adomaitis, Donatas Banionis – popular Soviet Lithuanian actors. Algimantas Masiulis (1931- 2008) was a [Lithuanian film](#) and [theater actor](#). M.K. Čiurlionis – end of 19th cent. Lithuanian artist. Zalgiris – popular in the USSR 1970s Lithuanian basketball team. Kindziulis – popular in the USSR hero of Lithuanian anecdotes.

I also swam in a forest lake with icy-cold water, and the forest around the place was so deep that it seemed to me some ‘merry men’ would show up, like in Zhalakyavichus’s³⁵³ film. In Kaunas, we visited the Čiurlionis museum, and even one of... demons! I laughed my head off at the way Lithuanian magazines called my then favourite actor – *Alenas Delonas*; at night, I dreamed of *Egle*, *Birute* and *Vytautas*...³⁵⁴

The shops in Siauliai, where we stayed at some university hostel, were full of awfully tasty locally produced dairy. There was virtually everything! I haven’t noticed any ‘oppression of national culture’ either: Lithuanian language was everywhere, in schools, universities, theatres, magazines, books and on TV, dominating over Russian; but of course, if necessary, everybody spoke Russian.

We admired the hard-working Lithuanians, and even somewhat looked up to them – maybe like the Irish looked up to the Americans. We were sure that after the Baltics got independence, they would really flourish, because of such hard-working people. It didn’t even occur to us that the region would eventually turn into a *pan-European supplier of nearly free labourers and sex-slaves*. They, I think, didn’t dream of it either, fully assured that the European ‘brothers’ would readily embrace them, like a prodigal son, having returned to the European family. Even now their pride does not let them admit they were terribly ‘let down’...

Neither could we, people of Russia, imagine that those polite and civilized people, especially Latvians and Estonians, would so disgracefully treat Russian-speaking minorities in their countries, taking off some mysterious inferiority complexes. It looked like Nosov’s characters’ behaviour, when children made a laughing-stock of No-Nothing after *Know-It-All*, *appearing from nobody knows where*, signals them to; yet, just before he came, the very same children had been quite willingly praising No-Nothing. By the way, have you ever given it a thought why Know-It-All, so positive a character, is not exactly likeable?

... Yet, when I saw the smiling faces of our new acquaintances, Vida and Regina, I understood at once that all my worries were groundless. They treated me like good old friends – we hugged each other right on the doorstep, and both women started saying how homesick they were, that in Lithuania they had been deprived of Russian TV for ten years, how much they missed the *Blue Light* New Year show, the *Song of the Year* TV programme and our old Soviet films...

- Please, take a seat, feel at home, I’ll make tea right now! Treat yourself to potatoes, have some more! – Mum was fussing around.

The guests sat at the table.

Farmer Frank didn’t understand a thing, but seeing us all so happy, he beamed.

- What brought you here?

- We are Vida and Regina from Lithuania. We came here... Well, we won’t conceal it, for money. One needs to eat, to pay the rent, to educate the children... So, an intermediary

³⁵³ Vitautas Žalakevičius (1930-1996) – well known Soviet Lithuanian film director and head of the Lithuanian Film Studio. He studied in Moscow and was especially famous for his film “Nobody Wanted to Die” set in 1947 Lithuania.

³⁵⁴ Egle the Queen of Serpents – Lithuanian folklore heroine. Birute – wife of Grand Duke of Lithuania in 14th cent. Vitautas – one of the most popular rulers in medieval Lithuania.

firm brought us here, to pack mushrooms into boxes, - started an older one, with a pale, tired face. – The work is not easy, of course... You've got to move plenty of boxes during the day. They are 20 kilos each... But that's all right - we are used to it already. You can get used to anything, so, everything will be fine. My son is coming here too, he has graduated from a university, will work in a hotel here. No, no, not in the same city, at the other end of Ireland. Still, not that far... I worry about him, look forward to his letters... How is he there? So, that's our life...

- We have been here for two months - Vida joined the conversation, the younger one, a beautiful dark-haired woman. – What is the most difficult thing here? Everything! You can say - everything... The language... we thought we knew it well, but the Irish have their own language. We don't understand a thing!

Now I started to understand a little.

- This is good... The cuisine here is very strange. My God, it is all so hard! We don't know what to eat... We haven't eaten almost anything for two weeks. Our fellows from Lithuania – they also came here for work – say, 'You can't go on like that! You'd starve! Maybe you don't have the money to eat?' They offered us money, tried to help... But we simply cannot eat local food.

Nature is very beautiful here, though. We walk a lot. Everybody thinks we're stupid because we like to walk; here everybody is so lazy, just driving... There's a beautiful lake nearby, we sit on a bank, watch it and get a little rest.

- We've got a year-long contract here. They pay well. We are happy, - Regina said. – I worked as a sales-assistant at home, twenty years at the same place, didn't want to leave it. And Vida made coats at a factory. But now... Now it's all over, there is no work in Lithuania; but if you find a job, you can't survive with that money. So we came here to support our families. Vida left her sick mother and children at home for that... Now, at school you've got to pay for everything... What else can we do?

It's all so hard, we don't sleep well at night, thinking about our families: how are they there? And then, we get so home-sick, missing our Motherland! You turn so happy if you get newspapers and magazines from home, you just die to know how things are back there... You cannot betray your Motherland, no matter what! Motherland is only one... Not for any money. You could go to other countries, but just to travel... At this point, Regina got overwhelmed by emotions, and went silent.

- There are 3... no, 6... no, more, 8 Lithuanians in our village! We are all friends. They got me such a wonderful birthday present when we were celebrating! It was very pleasant. We hold on to each other, but not only Lithuanians – there are also Russians and Latvians. We socialize, make friends with them, - Vida continued instead.

– When we were coming here, they misinformed us about the work... You could say, deceived us a little. They promised that we would work seated; the work would be to seat and sort through the mushrooms, good from bad... *Sort through!* But not to stand at a transporter, pack them into those enormous boxes and toss them around, from side to side. We are lucky to still have some health, but what if the women who come do not have the health? What if they have bad varicose veins, like my friend? This is what you

can't do, lie to people like that!

We work standing for 12-15 hours. Sometimes there are 18-hour shifts, it depends on the orders. The break is only half an hour... You are working – and the boss is standing behind your back, watching your work! How can you work like that? People here are barbaric, uncivilized... Once, Regina dyed her hair, came to work in a hat, so they pulled off her hat, started touching her hair with their hands... Can you imagine that? But the main thing is, you've got to tell the truth about what work there is, really. We've got men who can't stand this work, they faint because of bad heart. But you can't show it, because they'll fire you, send you back home – and what's back there?

Regina, meanwhile, regained control over herself.

- We have a guy here, Yura, a qualified electrician. They told him he would work here as an electrician, gave him all the documents stating it... But instead, they put him to the transporter, like everybody. So, he got worried, wants to see the boss about it, but the boss wouldn't even listen. Yura says, 'You lied to me! I came here to work as an electrician, I've got all the documents!' And the boss says, 'What of that? Go to the transporter and stand there!' You can't do such things to people...

To come here, you had to go through the selection, and it was such a narrow squeeze. So many people from Lithuania want to come to earn some money, legally! So we had been waiting for 4 months to come, my son has been waiting for 6 months... It all costs a lot... Not everybody can afford that. But what can you do? No work at home at all, and you've got to live and educate your children... So, it means, to earn something, you've got to pay first.

Vida borrowed \$1500 to come here. Now she is paying back; she is working to first pay the money, and only then she would start saving for herself. We all have the same stories, we all have borrowed the money, because people cannot afford the ticket, the visa, cannot pay to the office...

On the way here, they detained us in Copenhagen. We were so shocked – with all the documents, and everything was legal... Yet, we were detained like some criminals – they just wouldn't let us go, and that's it. But we weren't going to Denmark, we were here only by transit. Then they apologized to us, placed us in a hotel, even made a tour around the city for us... At least, we saw Copenhagen by night... But still, it was a shock. We are not criminals, we were going to work, all documents in order, all legal...

- We thought differently of Ireland, - Vida complained. – Mildly speaking. But here we understood that our country was more civilized than this. What was the greatest disappointment? Just everything! Everything! People's lack of intelligence, yes, intelligence, and all. Here they are happy only with the material things. They are happy with every house they build, they think, we don't have such houses.

The boss asked our girls if they had ever seen a TV! Just imagine! They think we are so poor, such dummies! They have a very bad idea about us, some very bad information. Maybe they just aren't interested... They aren't interested in anything. When I said, I'm a Lithuanian, a woman said, 'Ah, Lithuania is over there, in Spain!' There was also that fellow in hospital, sort of tanned, so a nurse, a young girl, tells him, 'So, is Latvia in Africa?' He even coughed up, then said, 'In Africa? Why, it's in Europe!' 'But why are you so dark-skinned?' So, this is what they think, if you're tanned, you're from Africa! Andris says, 'It's like some joke!'

When our fellows get hurt at work, the boss doesn't treat them at all. We don't know, is it that medicine here is so poor, or they just don't want to spend any money on us? One of our fellows still has an open wound in his side, soon it would start suppurate, just we manage to save him so far.

- Yes, but people in general here are good, harmless, - Regina said, glancing at Frank. – Not aggressive; you could be going back from work at 4 a.m. through a forest, and nothing happens to you! It's different in Lithuania now. Here we are just a little afraid of the drivers, there are so many drunk ones here on the roads.

We walk a lot, I've told you already. Just one thing is bad: there's no place to take a seat in town, no parks, no yards, no benches. But the people help, if you ask them for something. Good people, narrow-minded, but kind. You've got to accept the people as they are, and respect them as they are. We have very little spare time here, but when we do, we'd sleep well and then go for a walk, in any weather. And so, we walk, and walk and walk... What else could you do here? No theatre, no cinema... And TV – what is there to watch?

- Still, you've got to learn the language, it's not good, - Vida changed the subject. – We came here, and it means, *we've* got to respect, learn the language... If *they* came to us... You've got to understand the people, and we will try. We will live... Maybe we'll stay for a second year... What is there to do at home? The pension will be small, you've got to save up. How can you survive? My God, what a terrible situation! A man wants to work for his own country, but the country doesn't need him! Here everybody is surprised with us, how well we work, but it feels like crying! Our country doesn't need such working people! It is very sad...

Then, Regina burst out:

- They live here with no problems, get the money and you can live normally till the end of the month... You go shopping, and see them buy anything they want by bags. But we have people, retired ones, grannies who have been working all their lives, but now they can't even buy a piece of meat!

Here old women go to bars, but will you see one in a bar in Lithuania? They can't afford even a glass of juice! Is that what you call life? It's just surviving! It was so good in the Soviet Union! I went to all places in the South, all the resorts, visited Kiev and Tolyatti, could go anywhere... We lived well in the Soviet Union! They say sometimes, 'There was such discrimination!' But *I* lived well, *I* didn't feel discriminated against– I... just *lived!* I wasn't afraid of tomorrow, and I wasn't afraid for my son – really, I wasn't!

We didn't appreciate many things. We had free housing, free medicine, and job... If you mean it, and you want to work, you could do anything you wanted, all the ways were open to you! You could get anything, the education, and all... But now in Lithuania all education will be paid... I'm happy that my son has managed to get a diploma! Yet, you have to pay your last money for hostel, way, food...

... We were seating and eating for a long time, in Russian and Lithuanian way, to satiety, and talking about life.

- Tell me, do you need such freedom, if you can't go anywhere? Why can't I help my country? And why are our university-graduates forced to wash dishes here? Because, to

get a job, you've got to live in a big city, but you can't rent a flat, you need your own place... First, you earn some money washing dishes abroad, and only then you start looking for some job at home! It is terrifying... A person with such education wants to live in his own country, wants to be of use to his country, give it all his energy... But a hungry person cannot be free!..

- People here are not mean, they don't know such dearth, such problems... But our idea is, though they've got money, they aren't interested in anything! They have no theatre, nothing... They just meet their friends in pubs, drink, talk – and that's it. And they are content with that! But we need a good cinema, and theatre... We've got Lyosha from St. Petersburg – so, he can't live without theatre. We do need it, we need concerts... But it's so different here, people here don't understand it. They have the money, can go anywhere they want, but it's not interesting for them. Pub and beer, that's their life. Two in the morning, there's smoke everywhere, noise, dirt, and they take their children there! What does such a kid see since his childhood except that?...

- We want to tour the country, see it. We also want to go to England. But we have no money so far. After Vida has paid her debt, maybe then we'll go. She's got to pay back quite soon, all her neighbours collected that money. They were all very sorry for Vida, she hadn't worked for 3 years, stayed at home with children. They all love her, and she loves them. They are very good people. They are not very well-off, so she's got to pay them back as soon as possible! The house costs 30 pounds a week, plus also food... There is no money left. But we hope to see the country. We've got to know it all, to see the people, interesting places... We've got to live and believe! How else can we survive?...

And when our guests were about to go back to Cavan, Mum exclaimed:

- Girls, where are you going, it is already late! Stay with us, we'll celebrate the New Year together! We'll sing our old songs...

And so we celebrated the New Year, like in good old Soviet times...

In a week's time, Mum left, taking Lisa with her, and tearing a piece from my heart – I don't want to describe my feelings in detail... It's just this time I protested and told her very firmly:

- Mum, please, take her, but let's make a deal – I'm coming to pick you up in autumn. You will be taking her home twice a year, if you wish, but Lisa will stay with me. It's enough moving the child here and there. Mum agreed – maybe just in order to leave sooner; because her attitude to Ireland hasn't changed.

My sadness though, to some extent, was smoothed over by an unexpected visit by a fellow countrywoman, a girl from Moscow called Alyona, my pen pal.

It was the first Russian who could play the Celtic harp; what's more, she taught it herself, as well as Irish dancing! Besides, she was completing her doctorate, and not in some Irish fairytales, but in organic chemistry, so I had every ground to respect her.

It was the first time Alyona was coming to Ireland; she wanted to see the country, and impress the Irish with her outstanding musical abilities, so she came to stay with me for a week.

I really wanted to show her as much as I could; I knew quite well that Alyona was not interested in politics – why, after all, should EVERYBODY be interested in it? – but in the North everything is literally saturated with politics, so there is simply no escaping from it. Still, I bit my political tongue and brought Alyona to St. Patrick’s grave and other such-like places, even though I got very tired after work. Alyona, in her turn, being a truly art-immersed creative person, didn’t notice my tiredness.

At St. Patrick’s grave – the patron-saint of Ireland, who, the legend has it, drove out all snakes from the island (according to some evil tongues, to America!) – Alyona had a fit of sentimentality. She settled herself a few millimetres away from the tombstone, took out her harp, and played some heartfelt tune. People started to glance sideways at us, but said nothing out of their Irish courtesy.

‘You feel it? The stone responds!’ she said to me, ignoring the glances. Obviously, the stone was a lot more important for her. Then Alyona went hugging trees in the park for quite a while, trying to talk to them. ‘*Such an odd wench!*’ I thought in Gogol’s character’s, lad Vacula’s, words.

Then I brought Alyona to Belfast, so that she could see all the ‘niceties’ of local life with her own eyes, and give the full picture to those at home who didn’t believe it.

I had never – till that moment – pretended to be a tourist; yet, that was a lot more interesting to listen to what the guide had to say, if we introduce ourselves as two absolutely naive girls, who had very little idea of local life – mostly, from 20-second news clips about yet another blast.

So, Alyona and I made a kind of bet if we could guess from which community our guide came. In theory, for sure, a guide should be neutral and objective, relating the dry facts, seasoned with a couple of local jokes, so that the tourists at the back seat would have no trouble staying awake. But in the North, the ‘land of contrasts’, just like in Russia, the ‘neutral’ people are almost impossible to find...

Once, having practically settled in the country, I was touring Belfast with a guide; that time I didn’t pretend to be a ‘tourist’, and so, the guide ended up virtually interrogating me along the way, if there were any flags at our place. ‘Do you have any flags where you live? Just *any* flags?’ - and refused to believe there weren’t...

That guide was a clever, educated guy, who knew a lot – and he went out of his way to appear neutral. Yet, I figured him out. How?

When he brought us to Carson’s grave, the first prime-minister of *Ulster*, I got the first insight about his background, but then I wasn’t 100 per cent sure. For Catholics, Carson is a locally incarnated Adolf Hitler; for Protestants, he is a hero and the Father of the Nation... Yet, for a guide, he should be just a figure from history, about which one ought to speak dispassionately. But how can you be dispassionate about something which concerns you so immediately? So, Brian – that’s what the guide was called – couldn’t help it, no matter how hard he tried; all his emotions shone through, even though he did his best to conceal it all...

He avoided saying ‘we are right, they are wrong’, ‘we are red, they are white’, but when we were passing by a Sinn Fein office at Falls Road, he commented on the mural depicting probably the most famous person in Northern Ireland, saying, ‘And now, here’s a portrait of a *convicted terrorist* Bobby Sands’. I just slapped my knee, and said to myself: ‘Oh yes, bull’s-eye, I know who he is, no doubts now!’

It was interesting to listen to Brian, as it is always interesting to listen to someone relating a different viewpoint, with which you are less familiar, in a good, well-grounded way, without insulting anyone; so Brian had not been insulting anyone till the point when we came to Bobby Sands mural; but on seeing the hero of the opposite community, he just couldn't help it...

I continued to listen to him attentively, which he considered a sign of approval of his position, so he got even more inspired. Driving through Antrim, he was sadly observing the seaside, telling me in a trusting voice no less than half-a dozen times: 'You know, in good weather, you could see Scotland from here!' Saying this, he looked as if someone was keeping him from leaving for the land of his ancestors...

This time, as we were waiting for the guide, I told Alyona that it was impossible to figure him out by the name: Michael, because people called 'Michael', as well as 'Brian', were both among the 'Green' and the 'Orange'. Both have black taxis as well, but if you call one, they sometimes ask you quite seriously: 'Which one would you prefer: *green*, or *orange*?'

Alyona and I decided that we would try to figure him out judging by the places where he would take us, and by the comments he would make. But when our guide showed up, I, for a split second, lost every desire to go with him just *anywhere*...

'Michael' turned out to be 'Charlie' (the name you can come across in both communities as well); yet, the main thing was not his name, but his appearance – it was a real paramilitary thug, shaved, with a thick neck and prominent muscles, quite visible under a thin T-shirt... He looked as if he had just returned from a village after a day of hard work in a vegetable garden: his face and shoulders were deeply sun-burnt.

Charlie was neither an expert, nor an intellectual; he, unlike Brian, didn't try to unobtrusively make people sympathize with his community, being absolutely sure that 'Cuchulain was... an ancient warrior who defended *Ulster* from the attacks of the Irish', as we were surprised to find out in East Belfast.

Charlie was just eager to earn his twenty quid, and, finding himself among his own, was obviously experiencing a fit of intelligence and inspiration.

Probably, it was a pity that Alyona didn't learn many facts from Belfast history and architecture, which she could have learned from Brian, but at least she had a rare opportunity to see the real *face* of a rather isolated Loyalist community. I can only say, that even to me, working in a Loyalist district, Charlie was *exotic*.

He started with Carson, of course, but his resource of dates and facts was quite limited. He didn't bring us to Stormont, where the parliament met (next to that building, by the way, there is a great Carson's statue, as if pointing his finger at the exiting attendees, so that they got out of the 'Protestant state for the Protestant people' the sooner the better); he didn't even bring us to Waterfront Hall and Odyssey Arena, which are now the pride of new Belfast...

Charlie was a rather *narrow specialist* in murals, besides, mostly those by his people. So this is what eventually brought us to Shankill Road, which even Wendy, blushing with shame, called 'ruffian land'.

Shankill Road is the only Protestant district in West Belfast, which is why the local lumpen has developed a deep siege mentality. Newcomers are treated here with mistrust, suspected of 'coming from Dublin', and the smiles are left without response...

Pot-bellied head-to-toe tattoo-covered Shankill thugs went on raiding Catholic districts, mostly in less protected North Belfast. I said once that after attacking assisted living facilities and a children summer camp, Loyalist 'heroes' had no other choice but to raid hospitals. Ironically, what followed made me think they had somehow overheard me: soon in local newspapers there appeared notices that Belfast Royal Hospital could be closing because the '*Ulster* freedom fighters' were preventing the medical staff from going to work, threatening them with death.

So, this is *where* he brought us. Even though Charlie was convincing us, with a charming smile, that it was a safe place, and the 'truce' was lasting, and the 'peace process' was in progress, it was difficult to believe him, looking around. The streets of Shankill, abandoned and dirty, its houses, some boarded-up and some completely ruined, radiated hostility, enmity and alienation...

At that time, several dozens of families, about 300 people, more or less, were 'ethnically cleansed' from Shankill, and, what was hurting them the most, not by some 'enemies', but by their own. Two largest local paramilitary groups waged a mini-war against each other - for the territory and areas of influence (both were earning to finance themselves and buy weapons from drug dealing). The casualties of that war were, in the end, not only the several 'kingpins', but also their wives, children and parents, whose houses were burnt and blown, forcing them to move...

Judging by what we saw, the 'squabble' had turned the place upside down, and the scanty residents, already isolated and marginalized, turned into total outcasts (which, of course, embittered them even more, and made them angry with the whole world!).

It was a sad sight, sadder than anything - people degrading, developing backward, and it seemed it wouldn't take them too long to crawl on all fours. Yet, even this place's got its talent, judging at least by the steadily increasing murals, for what else would unemployed, but quite capable men do in between shooting children and the elderly, but painting walls? When Brian brought me to Shankill, he even tried to introduce me to one of the 'painters', and showed me his then unfinished masterpiece. Now, a year after, the painting was finished: a local paramilitary, who had ingloriously died in the local squabble, was observing us from the height.

There are many *painters* among Loyalists. One of them is Michael Stone. He started to paint in prison: a long-haired 'hero' looking like a Zaporozhye Cossack, dark fire shining in the eyes, he was serving his time for shooting at the crowd of civilian Catholics at the cemetery, at the burial of 3 IRA volunteers... He is now said to be making good money with his paintings, and he even is said to have conducted his personal exhibition.

...Though the quality and taste of those murals are contestable (Alyona was exactly right, having remarked that Princess Diana, whose portrait was among those of serial killers of women and children, like Billy Wright, and drug dealers, like Johnny Adair, looked more like Margaret Thatcher!), even they possess some fantasy and their own black humour.

We were really impressed by a new mural, depicting a hare with the face of the Leader, escaping from a 'positive' character - a bulldog wearing British colours - on the road to Dublin! You could disagree with the idea, but you couldn't help laughing, looking at the face of the Leader, portrayed so exactly.

We pretended to be quite ignorant of what was happening in Shankill, and behaved as if we didn't know who was in the mural... Yet, I think, we overacted a little. Charlie was sincerely happy with our laughter about the mural of the Leader, and that we made a lot

of photos from different angles.

- There are plenty of things *more* for you to photograph here! – he said to us proudly. Still, the strongest impression was not the murals of Shankill, but its glaring desolation. On the ground in the middle of an almost closed circle of houses, half of which had their roofs half-torn and windows boarded up with iron sheets, there was a burnt-out spot – big, occupying almost the whole space.

- It was quite *a fire* here! – Alyona concluded.

Loyalists and even very small children of theirs start to collect the ‘wood’ – old boxes, containers, furniture parts, anything that burns! – a couple of months before their own ‘Walpurgis night’, the one from the 11th to the 12th of July, the main Orange holiday of the year: the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne of 1690. There are, though, some other days in a year, on which such bonfires are made here.

On that night the effigies of all those who they are particularly unhappy with, are burnt in Loyalist bonfires; the first on the list is the Pope of Rome, accused by some in all earnesty of dreaming about usurping the power in England (but for *them*, he would have done it already!) then come the long-suffering Leader, Margaret Thatcher (guilty of signing the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1980s) and the police, who had to interfere, at least from time to time, and stand up against their roistering – yet even those minor attempts to appear ‘even-handed’ were taken as ‘treason’.

Loyalists claim that all this is just a part of their ‘culture’, which is to be ‘preserved’. But how much does it resemble the American Ku-Klux-Klan! Especially when the ‘great guys’ come to the bonfires and start to shoot the air from someone’s illegally (or may be even legally!) acquired guns, which the ‘disarmament’ – surprisingly! – did not concern. Having visited Shankill, and seeing its bleak daily life, one could feel sorry for the Loyalist people. No-one deserves what is now happening in the ‘ruffian land’. Yet, the fact remains: instead of looking for the real reasons of the present-day lamentable condition, and attempting to improve it, to start creating something positive, like Catholics, who literally managed to raise their community and culture from the ashes in the last 30 years, the Loyalists still prefer not to ask ‘What to do?’, but, rather, ‘Who is to blame?’. What’s more, the answer to that question is always ready: the Irish Catholics, the Leader, and of course, the Pope! *They* are held responsible for everything.

And thus, the answer to the second question, ‘What to do’, is also quite clear: shoot and bully ‘em all, until they recognize that ‘Great’ Britain, having turned into a dwarf compared to the giant of Empire she used to be, is still the ‘best country in the world’...

Really, it’s so good that Wendy has no gun!

For now, it’s all clear, and while they lay awash in self-pity, Shankill is obviously losing its battle against the nettles (I saw the houses, whose windows were furnished with 5 different paramilitary flags, but the backyard had disappeared under 2-meter high weeds!). Yet, seeing this, they feel even more pity for themselves...

‘No surrender!’ the fences scream. Ten years more, and nobody will ask you, whether you *surrender* or not; there soon would be no-one to surrender as well: Protestant youth is leaving for England and Scotland in great numbers, and some are even going to the South. The reason is not some threats coming from the Catholics, but the fact, that good honest people simply cannot stand it anymore. You feel ashamed when associated with Johnny Adair – just because you were unlucky to have grown up here. Yet, many are evacuated from Shankill by the British establishment, for they know too much about the

role the British security forces have played in local events.

From Shankill, accompanied by Charlie's detailed stories of the brave Loyalist soldiers and how they died, the subject he was the best at, we finally move on to the Catholic Falls Road. We enter through one of the 4 gates in the 'peace wall' – the local 4-mile long 'Berlin Wall', which still separates this city. The gates are closed at 7 pm. sharp, to prevent aggressive youth mobs from attacking the neighbours. The windows of all the houses along the peace line have grates, but even that doesn't always help...

The 'peace wall' is streaked with wishes of the passing tourists addressed to the locals. Last year my Mum left an inscription there in Russian. '*Men, enough of this folly!*', she wrote.

...Charlie's black taxi dives into the gates, and we find ourselves among the Irish tricolours. A familiar face smiles at us from the election-time posters, which are still there. These posters of the Leader in the US Irish community cost \$400 per piece. - And now we are entering Falls Road! There isn't a single Protestant there, - Charlie explains.

'Not a single one? What about you?' – the question freezes on my lips...

Alyona, who then had no doubts regarding our guide's background, noticed how nervously he was driving the car here. Brian, unlike Charlie, didn't worry, as the people at the *both sides of the barricades* knew him as a guide, and none of the communities ever hurt him. I don't know who, and where, hurt Charlie, but he drove along Ballymurphy at such speed that even the famous Northern Irish racing motorcyclist, Eddie Irvine, would have envied him (Eddie Irvine is also a Protestant, but, unlike the residents of Shankill, is a real Irish patriot). Charlie even made no decent stops there, on the way showing us a mural of a British soldier (without even explaining that the inscription '*Slan Abhaile!*' roughly translated, means, 'get home safely!'). This is what the people of Falls Road wish him, those whose dreams aren't about 'killing all Brits and prods'.

Ballymurphy, Falls – an outsider might think them comfort-less and poor, not the '*districts where one wants to live*'. But there's at least one thing one cannot blame on those districts – hostility. There was no hostility towards those who were coming, unlike at 'the other side of the barricade'. Here nobody depicted, for example, Ian Paisley, in a humiliating way, and there were no insulting inscriptions on the walls addressed to the other community. All the murals and comments at Falls Road concerned only the British; Loyalists as such were ignored, for here the people clearly saw *who* the real reason of the status quo was – but what would one ask from those who are dangerous, but brainless weapon in their hands?..

Falls, in West Belfast, possesses its own wonderful and ferocious beauty, visible and palpable, even though the district itself is desolate, bleak and poverty-stricken. It produces the impression of one of the last corners of Europe, where even in our 'counter-revolutionary' times the hearth of future revolutions is still kept burning... West Belfast residents, it seems, keep up this fire just like the people in distant pre-historic past used to keep the fire burning to guard the life of their tribes.

Because Charlie wasn't telling us anything anymore, I tried to show Alyona what I knew here instead of him, and in Russian. Charlie became alerted:

- For how long have you been here?

- It is my second day, - Alyona told him the truth. Yet, Charlie was not 'dangerous' for us here, and I could almost see his face change if at that moment I had a call – my mobile phone played the Irish national anthem!

Finally, we managed to make him stop at least at one mural. He didn't want even to explain its meaning to us. With an obvious effort, he told us about plastic bullets, and that the North was the only statelet in Europe where such barbaric weapon was still legal to use, and, what's more, against civilians...

Charlie didn't sound exactly indignant. 'So, some *Fenian* children are shot dead, what of that? There are too many of them around!' his face was saying. While we were photographing the walls with that happily-naive air of ours, a friend greeted Charlie – another taxi driver, coming towards us. They exchanged very expressive glances concerning us: 'Stupid tourists, they don't even know what a *sash* is, and how to read *Sinn Fein!*'

Yet, as it turned out a couple of days later, Charlie wasn't the only 'bigot' guide in the North; the first prize in bigotry would definitely go to Ronnie, who, at the weekend, brought us to the shore of Antrim.

We arranged it with his firm, that after the excursion we were not going back to Belfast, but visiting Derry instead – and asked to drop us at some place where we could get on some public transportation to get to the city. We were advised to do it at Ballymoney; they also assured us that they would bring us there without any problems. In my messages to that firm, I used the neutral 'L/Derry', because I knew that the firm was Protestant. Protestantism, however, didn't prevent Brian, as well as the majority of the people in the North, from calling this ancient city just 'Derry' – which used to be its name since the foundation, till the city was placed into the hands of several London companies.

The name of this city is a kind of litmus paper test showing the degree of 'bigotry': not all Protestants, but only the *die-hard bigots* call it 'Londonderry'. It is equal to calling Tbilisi 'Moscowtbilisi', or Dakar changed to 'Parisdakar'!

On the walls of our public toilets one writes who loves whom; here in Derry it is a place for political debate. 'I was in Derry' – writes one. 'Not in Derry, in *Londonderry!*' another corrects her, indignantly. 'I heard London was in England!' the third adds spitefully. '*Londonderry! London* my a**!' the fourth exclaims.

So, this is a preface to what happened to us; the story that follows is very simple.

... Ronnie didn't look like Charlie the Paramilitary. He looked more like a member of the 'Committee', a secret sectarian society of bankers, businessmen and other 'respected' people, whose sole aim was terrorising the peaceful Catholic community, say, by killing the Irish who, in most cases, had no connections with the IRA whatsoever, in order to intimidate each and every one of them. (A detailed documentary account of this society's activities is given in Sean McPhilemy's book, *The Committee*, which is, by the way, banned in Great Britain!) It is those 'respected people', rich Orangemen and masons, who direct the 'brotherhood of block-headed teletubbies' from Shankill, Larne, Portadown and other such-like places.

Ronnie didn't know a thing about the history of the places which we were passing: the land occupied by your ancestors is not your native, so its history suited the Loyalists only in their own version. His only strong point was paramilitary flags, and the history of

paramilitary Loyalist organisations. When one of the American tourists was careless enough to ask him about the ‘zoo’ happening around Bushmill, Antrim, Ronnie displayed such deep knowledge on the subject, that it could probably be enough for a doctorate thesis.

And when we asked him to drop us at Ballymoney, saying, we were going to *Derry*, it worked on him like a red rag on a bull. Though, because he wasn’t a thug, but a quiet, mean, baldish little man, treating the people of ‘non-Saxon origin’ as some backward creatures, he didn’t say anything, but dropped us outside Ballymoney, so that we had to walk 2 miles to the station (we would have made this distance by car in 5 minutes), and even gave us a wrong train schedule.

He must have been very happy, knowing, that he had *avenged* these two foreigners for daring to call the second big city of ‘Ulster’ by its ‘Fenian’ name. He was probably humming the *Sash* tune all the way back to Belfast with pleasure, feeling like an impossible-to-catch people’s avenger for the honour of the ‘good King Billy’.

Ballymoney is not the best place for a 2-mile walk. Unfortunately, this town is known not only as the birthplace of the famous motorcyclist Joey Dunlop, who died tragically during a race in Estonia (he was a Protestant, but, in the first place, a good person, loved by all; even the Irish ‘Catholic’ bikers from all over the island attended his funeral without any fear). The people will never forget one of the greatest tragedies, fuelled by the Loyalist psychosis around Drumcree, which took place here at our times – three little Catholic boys, the Quinn brothers, were burnt alive in their own house by the Ulster Volunteer Force.

Ronnie would have been very upset to know that we successfully reached our destination – the weather was really great! – and even managed to get on an earlier train.

...When the train started, I thought that with such typically ‘*Ulster* hospitality’ the ‘province’ was very unlikely to get the ‘*international solidarity with the Orange cause*’ – something that those sectarian bigots had suddenly started seeking, somehow abandoning their worn-out ‘isolation’ trump-card; tourism was also very unlikely to flourish here: what tourist would be excited to get into the hands of such ignorant and consciously negligent guides for just one, quite innocent, word?

... Alyona and I spent the next day in Dermot’s town, staying at one very hospitable elderly Republican activist, who met us like our own granny. I still was doing my best not to discuss politics with Alyona, but here every nail in the wall was ‘political’, even in the pub, which we visited in the evening to listen to the music.

According to some rumours, the pub belonged to the *Army*, but I don’t know exactly, for I never asked. It was in the Catholic part of the town, and the first thing we noticed, was the flags hanging from the ceiling; among them was the Soviet one as well. Alyona and I practically didn’t drink, even though the owners offered us to. I managed to text Dermot that we were in his town, and he came to the pub – as if by chance – and got *as if* very surprised seeing me. I introduced him to Alyona, surely, giving no hints of the nature of our relationship. Dermot had numerous international contacts, that’s why his socializing with us didn’t surprise anyone, and gave no grounds for gossip.

Alyona was gazing with admiration at an Irish ‘grandpa’ who earned 2 pints of beer in each pub, performing, rather professionally Tyrol tunes – where did he learn that? Like I said, Irish people are very talented, shining like a real raw diamond – and are, in the same way so excitingly unpredictable!

While Alyona was absent-mindedly listening to Dermot's story about his native town, adoring local talents, *black clouds* started gathering outside. Police armoured cars quietly surrounded the pub from three sides, and the excited youth were, no less quietly, preparing Molotov's cocktails round the corner.

Such things happened in Dermot's town almost every weekend, and nobody was taken by surprise. The police were obviously provoking the youth, because before they came, it hadn't even occurred to anyone to 'take to guns'.

Having assessed the situation, Dermot promptly rose from his seat:

- Now, ladies, we are leaving this place!

And he took us out into the light falling from the police cars. It was probably the first time that Alyona felt what it was like, to live there. She wouldn't think, I arranged it all specially for her, would she?

As we were going up the dark street, Dermot was pointing at a mural, where, among other, was his name too. He was a little tipsy, and shamelessly pinched my bottom. Alyona didn't seem to have noticed anything, but I felt offended. Revolutionaries don't act like that! You wait a little Dermot, one day someone would inform your wife about that and it will serve you right !

When we finally came to our hostess's house up the hill, there had been a real 'Battle on the Ice' unfolding down there, only there was no ice. The police, just like real 'Teutons', were advancing in a 'wedge', and the local residents were closely surrounding them.

...In the few remaining days I managed to find Alyona a real Irish dancer for a couple of classes through my contacts, she made a small solo-performance in Belfast, and seemed quite content with her trip. I also was happy – it was a pleasure to look at a happy person, and an enjoyment to please someone.

After Alyona went back home, I still wanted to do something pleasant for her. Frankly speaking, I want other people to learn about Ireland and to love it just as much as I do. I e-mailed Alyona, asking, if she wanted to have her music used in a local documentary; it was just a simple question, for by then I hadn't even talked with its authors. I thought it would please her.

Alyona's reply was like a cold shower: she was blaming me for my intention to... *profit* from her music, and was about to mention observing the *copyright*! What's wrong with you, fellows? What do you think of others? Or, maybe you think everybody is like *you*? What *profit* might there be – Ireland has enough of *her own amateur performances*!

Alyona's e-mail just slain me. The week that she spent here, neither I, nor anybody else mentioned money to her. Money was the last thing on my mind; yet, the capitalist plague, which hits people's brains and makes any Santa turn into a paedophile, and every desire to help you - a way to earn, has already struck that talented and smart girl to the core.

I tried to bring her to senses, but in response I got another bout of accusations, like, I was force-feeding her with 'politics' the whole week, her, the little fairy who was looking forward to talking to trees and strum on the harp at someone's grave – so, *that* was what she came to Ireland for! I was thinking, in surprise, my feelings clouded by offence – what '*politics*' was she talking about? It was *life* itself! You can't run and hide from it!

Alyona's e-mail reminded me a phrase from a movie, uttered by Zinochka, a flamboyant, shallow and light-headed starlet: 'Alexander, please, understand: I'm *so* deep in cinema,

in art!’ But this is *what* they are like. While normal people lived by their real cares and joys, trying to survive in the world, which was turning more and more indifferent to people’s needs and grieves, this ‘mighty handful’ of spoilt overgrown 20- and even 30-year old kids, living at the expense of ‘elite’ fathers and mothers (many of them worked just for higher self-esteem), were all deep in this make-believe game, acting out the *Irish, Druids* and *Elves*. ‘Play on, guys...’ - and ladies, too.

Alyona tried to apologize – having realized that there was nobody to invite her to Ireland, except me – but after what she had done, I didn’t want to have anything in common with her.

‘Alyona, you know, after what you said I feel as if a camel spat at me in the zoo,’ – I wrote her in my farewell letter. – ‘Let us stop our exchange. I wish you much success in your creative activities.’...

Local party women, at least, those butch-looking feminists took quite a dislike to me. What’s more, those were not some plain activists, but middle-rank officers, who had some influence. I really don’t know why it was so, but it is a fact. They spoke to me with their teeth clenched, and didn’t pass over the due messages... Yet, I don’t blame them. Looking at them, I tell myself with understanding and sympathy, ‘But what could they do?’ Belfast beauties, for example, walk around the streets in daytime wearing pyjama pants –not bothering to change. Is that my fault?

I tried not to notice that, pretending, everything was just fine; I behaved with those creatures as if nothing was happening. Yet another feminist female *pan* doesn’t exactly like you – what’s the big deal?.. *Lekker belangrijk*.

But when I came back from Cuba, one good-hearted elderly male soul revealed to me that there was a woman in the party who said out loud that I ‘took advantage of my situation’ to go to Cuba (in fact, she had been dreaming about going there herself, but still couldn’t). That was way too much.

- Does this bighead of yours have her own children? – I broke out.

- No, she doesn’t, - replied the male soul, having told me in advance that he wouldn’t disclose her name.

- No need to, I know it’s Jill, isn’t it?

- Yes, it is her... but *I* didn’t tell you this, - the male soul replied, obviously shy.

What a bitch, really! Excuse my language, but for her I had no other words. For a while, I was considering sending her a record of Tupac’s song *You Wonder Why They Call You B****?*, and a note saying, ‘*If you had your own disabled children, you would have seen it all differently. Though, if you continue to fume around with your cigarettes like that, don’t worry, you will never have children, even **such!***’ Still, I stopped at the very last moment. To do this would mean going down her level.

I was thinking, what this whole thing was all about. Maybe it was all because, unlike female party members, men – *their* men - treated me very well? I never abused that, though. I didn’t ‘steal’ anybody’s husbands, and never flirted with any of them. I treated them all, men and women, in a very friendly way. (Dermot is a different story, though, he already wasn’t popular with women, and nobody knew about our relations.) Besides, I was popular not among *all men*, but only with a certain weight – sorry, age – category. ‘For those who are over 60’... Or, just a little less.

Why, I never found out, but some of my personal characteristics made me absolutely irresistible for that category of Republicans. This is simply where my destiny is being ironic, playing its evil tricks. I didn't make any special effort – what for? I simply didn't wear a mask socializing with people. I respected them a lot, but I never considered them as *partners*, and thought they ought to pay due respect to our age difference and treat me accordingly. I might also take a fancy to some 20-year old, but I don't grab his knees, inviting him 'to the mountains to abandon ourselves to passion' as one elderly local MLA did. You've got to keep the *natural* distance, *mo chairde*³⁵⁵!

I would have thought he was joking, but for this grabbing my knees – passionate move indeed! – and another invitation, to the South, that time to a faraway county, where nobody knew him, to continue doing exactly this. God, when did he look at himself in a mirror last?!

This MLA looked somewhat like Georgiy Millyar – taller, though - playing Koschey the Immortal.³⁵⁶ His wife – I knew her well - was a beautiful woman a lot younger than himself; I also knew his daughters. So, tell me, how was I to react? I never gave him, or anybody else, any reason to think of me like that.

He visited me once, when I was still seeking medical help for Lisa in Ireland – to see what he, as our local political representative, could do. I told him all about our situation, made him some tea and seasoned it with a couple of jokes – some were old Soviet anecdotes, and some were real stories from my own life. Needless to say, they were all quite innocent. Was *that little* enough to start this 'conflagration'? After that I could hardly get rid of him; he went on repeating, 'Please, tell me more!' before I actually told him I was getting up early the next day.

Then he invited me to the local parliament, where I interviewed him. I still did not have the slightest idea what plans he had made for us. So, then, on our way back (he offered to drive me home, as he was going in the same direction) he started telling me all those 'obscenities a decent woman would not be bearing for even 5 minutes'³⁵⁷...

For some time, I fostered the hope that he was joking. I started to avoid him when he rang, to make him understand I didn't like such jokes. But once, as I sat on the stairs talking on the phone with Frank (praised he be, as, unlike his other peers, he was a real friend and gentleman), someone knocked at the door. I couldn't see who it was, so I asked Frank to wait, and opened the door.

Our passionate deputy was on the doorstep, smiling widely.

- May I come in? – he said.

I got so much confused that, on seeing this unwelcome and unexpected guest, I muttered something like:

- You'd better not...

And shut the door before his very face.

He then called me and demanded an explanation.

- Can't you guess? – I asked.

- No.

³⁵⁵ My friends (Irish)

³⁵⁶ Georgiy Millyar – popular Soviet comedy actor. Millyar was very thin so was his personage Koschey – hero of the Russian ancient folklore who represented death or a King of the Underworld.

³⁵⁷ From the Soviet film "Hello, I'm Your Aunt" (1975) loosely based on B. Thomas's play "Charley's Aunt"

- So, listen up, then, - I spoke out, telling the slow in comprehension deputy all I thought – of him, and his offer of ‘passionate love’. There was deep silence in the receiver first; then, he said:

- There has been some misunderstanding, it was only a joke.

Not a very good one, indeed; but I let him ‘save the face’.

- I really *hope* it was! – I exclaimed, stressing the word ‘hope’. – I’m ready to apologize if I misunderstood you.

No, he didn’t need my apologies. He was offended that the ‘fish got off the hook’.

- I will never again approach you without eye-witnesses! – he said coldly, making it sound as if I needed him to approach me without them.

Yes, that’s me, the ‘tricky’ me. You can’t just fish me out. If I was like that, I could have probably been a ‘rising star’ by now. But I don’t need it at such a price. I need respect for my work and personal qualities, not the ‘physical’ ones. I didn’t need any honours and positions, just the feeling I was doing a useful job.

Of course, I wanted to do more than distributing leaflets, but I wasn’t given anything else to do. The jealous women (let them read this story and get embarrassed) even ‘forgot’ all the time to inform me when the next meeting was, to specially make me miss it. One could, it turned out, let someone into the party, but that didn’t mean that that person would be treated in an appropriate way, like a comrade. In case you didn’t know: it was the Irish who invented the ‘boycott’ tactics, and instead of openly discussing things with you, they’d rather hurt you on the sly.

You think I didn’t try to do anything about that? I did. I asked different people to give me some *real* work, doesn’t matter which exactly, but doing which I could be useful. One remarked that in our district ‘the Republicans are strange: there are three different groupings, and all are feuding’; yet, what I was supposed to in such a situation, he didn’t say.

Another promised me an e-mail of someone who could get me some real work to do – and ‘forgot’. When I reminded him about that, also in my e-mails, he ignored me. Then I, to stir at least some kind of response, asked the young man where the magazine which he was publishing was. (I had paid for a yearly subscription, but after a couple of issues, it stopped.) I also hinted that good editors, in such cases, usually refund the subscription.

You can’t guess what followed. *Screams, and a pool of blood.*

First, I got the reply in 5 minutes, even though before he had left my e-mails unanswered for weeks. Second, refunding was totally out of the question. (To tell you the truth, for me it wasn’t the money that mattered, but the principle: if you promised you would do something, you’ve got to stick to your word no matter what! After all, it wasn’t me who started talking of the e-mail address, was it?)

The letter was full of cursing, and contained a rather colourful description of how totally ‘impossible’, according to ‘everybody’, it was to deal with me.

Well, yes, it’s true. I don’t buy everybody beer in a pub, and I expect promises to be respected. Who would deal with *such* a person, really?

... By the way, now I’m very grateful to that young man for not giving me that ill-fated e-mail address, because the person, ‘who could give me a real job’ turned out to be a British spy. Surely, he would have found something very *suitable* for me to do!

I shared all my worries – without naming the offenders – with someone who could have become my best friend - if only he hadn’t tried to become somebody else.

Grandpa Tom is a linguist, and a truly wonderful person. He does not only *read books* - he's got a real library - but also speaks several languages. He is also the kindest man in the world, and I have always sincerely liked him. We had much common interest too, which meant, we could easily find things to talk about at all times, and I thought of my relationship with him just like of friendship with Frank, and was proud of it. I expected no trick on Tom's part; besides, I myself had openly told him what exactly I thought of flirting by the men of *a different age category*.

Grandpa Tom was married - happily! He treated his Grandma so well, that my heart leapt with joy as he was telling me about her. Then, a terrible thing happened. When Tom was abroad on business, some joy - rider in West Belfast knocked down his Grandma. She died, but the offender, by the way, was not even sent to prison for that - viva British liberty and democracy! So, Grandpa Tom, just like me at a certain time, started to succumb to the grief. He was very lonely. He had grown-up children from previous marriage, but they lived too far from him. His first wife left him for the same reason that Alyona broke up with me - because he was 'talking politics all the time'.

'And I didn't even notice I was,' he was saying, a sincere surprise in his voice.

When his second wife was buried, I couldn't make myself phone him, because I didn't know what to say on such occasions. Words are no real comfort. But things like, 'it's all in God's hands', or 'now she is in Heaven', which some Catholics say, sound even worse, like a real mockery. That is why I simply sent him a card with condolences.

- I actually was looking forward to your call... - he said, as we met occasionally a year after. - People's calls were a great consolation...

I explained, in all sincerity, why I didn't call him - just because I tried to stand in his shoes, and, if so, other people's calls would have made *me* feel only worse. He seemed to have understood.

'This is where the two lonely ones met,' a popular song has it. To a certain extent, it was true for us, but as for the fire which the 'lonely ones' make next to the road, I can say that each of us simply put different kind of 'wood' into it. For me it was an innocent Pioneer-style fire, but for Tom...

It was a great pity that I understood it too late.

Finally, his psychological brakes broke down completely, and he, after we visited a Chinese restaurant a couple of times discussing linguistics and politics, started to swear, he would love me forever. My first reaction was to escape from him somewhere as far as I could; yet, he was so harmless, unhappy and lonely, that I just couldn't. I felt pity for him. I tried to reason with him, to explain him that it had nothing to do with love, or, surely, with me - simply his loneliness made him believe in all that, and that we could be great friends, being as alike as we were: we even had the same Zodiac sign! And isn't *real friendship* great?

Yet, he couldn't leave his hopes... His fantasy was boundless, like that of the real *Pisces*. - Just imagine what *he* will say, when he sees us together! - Tom was saying, referring to the Leader. I tried to, and I almost fainted...

He saw some symbolism, some deep sense in everything, even in my not-so-perfect English; when he asked me, how Mum would have reacted to his declaration of love to me, I said 'She *will* kill me' instead of 'She *would* kill me'. This 'will' fuelled his hope that some future relationship between us was still possible! Listening to him was like

observing an exaggerated version of myself, which made me feel very uncomfortable. I was giving more and more thought to my own behaviour and attitude to life. He talked with me like a tipsy Bunsha talked with the Tsarina: no matter what I said, it all was '*just charming, Marfa Vasilievna!*'.³⁵⁸ By the way, he was quite often tipsy – and then he called me late at night with truly amusing stories of *what, where, and how*.

- And then we went to a pub...

- And drank a bottle of wine each! – I prompted.

- Right, but how do you know this, mo chuisle? – Tom asked, moved.

- But you do this every week!..

At that point he would change speaking into Irish, and passionately swear at length that I was the love of his whole life. It was great that I didn't understand *everything!*

From him, I learned things which I never asked about, and even didn't want to know, like, who in the Republican movement was gay, and how one of very well-known Republicans (I won't mention his name here) stole a rare book about South Africa from his book case... Listening to him, I thought, I could have made a rather decent *Mata Hari*. Yet, I didn't want to be one.

- What is there so special about me? – I wondered. – Why do you need me, what for? You just feel lonely, that's it. So, let us be friends.

- Zhenya, you even don't know what *kind* of person you are...

- Quite recently someone has said, I'm 'impossible to deal with'.

- What idiot said that? Oliver? He is a latent gay, and hates women, I know this for sure. That Basque girlfriend of his is just his cover, and she, in her turn, needs a reason to stay here...

- Please, don't tell me all that...

- All right, all right, I won't. So, I started speaking of you... You understand, you are so fresh, so ingenuous... there is something almost childish in you, very open, very vulnerable... at the same time, you are very smart, and possess totally merciless powers of self-criticism. You see all your weaknesses, locate them and laugh at them – while most people are afraid even to admit their own weaknesses to themselves! I have never met anyone like you...

'Thank God you haven't', - I thought. He was already apprehending his neighbours' reaction to 'us' – so, I understood, it was time to do something. *Tom, what 'us' are you talking about? Hello?! Wake up and smell the coffee!* Beside all that, he was terribly jealous – without even any *right* to be jealous. (Well, this '*even*' should definitely go out, otherwise he will get some hope again!)

When Tom came to the point of figuratively describing his physical attractions for me, I got really mad. What is wrong with them all, really? What books, or films, does this dirt come from? Does he really think that would make *any* difference for me? Even if I loved him? Does he still remember I'm a human being as well?

So, I gave him an ultimatum: either we remain friends, or...

He chose the 'or' option. Now he doesn't talk to me. Well, that's his choice.

He is now married for the third time, to a woman of his own age. I was right, then, saying, it was a fit of loneliness. I hope the 'newlyweds' are very happy together.

I don't mean to ridicule the elderly; just on the contrary, I know now what it is to appear old, or fat, and remain a slender youth in the heart... Yet, no matter how young I might be

³⁵⁸ Reference to the cult Soviet comedy "Ivan Vasilyevich Changes his Profession"

feeling at heart, I never forget how old I am in reality, and will not disgrace myself anymore. Or try not to, at least. This is the main result of my getting to know Grandpa Tom.

...My resentment grew slowly; my heart was *growing dark*, too, as once my Granny described this condition. Finally, I told myself, ‘Awor esei ta basta!’³⁵⁹

The day when the Leader was to tour Cavan as part of the election campaign, I planned an operation called *Farewell of the Slavonic Woman*³⁶⁰; why it was called so, I’ll explain a little later.

I made no mention of it to either farmer Frank, or to anybody else.

I came to Cavan in advance, in the evening, and Frank, who had the keys from the local party office, because he had just finished furnishing it, let me stay there for the night. The thing is, he was ashamed of his own house; he proudly demonstrated me his cowshed, but didn’t let me see his place – probably because it was in such ‘creative disorder’. So, because it didn’t seem possible for me to spend the night at the cowshed, I stayed in the Sinn Fein office...

I slept on the floor upstairs. The place was yet unfinished, still no real floor, just planks, and it was cold. Frank brought in an electric heater, which made me seriously worry that we could accidentally burn down the whole place, right before the Leader’s visit: the unshielded red-hot spiral of the heater and the dry planks around weren’t the safest match imaginable.

There was an alarm system in the building, and Frank showed me how to turn it off when I am coming downstairs in the morning. (And after all *that* he would still contend, he was in the *Army*? I would never believe it!)

I woke up in the morning, safe, thinking it over once again if what I had planned was really worth doing. My final decision was, yes, it was – if I wanted to tear myself away from those people, those, who meant the world to me, but from whom I got nothing but mockery.

...When Frank came out to greet the Leader, he, for no known reason, started to introduce me once again, even though he was well aware that we already knew each other.

- And this is Yevgenia from the town where Kalashnikovs are made. She is also *Kalashnikoff*...

The word ‘Kalashnikov’ made the Leader wrinkle his nose, as if suddenly struck by toothache; this word was now out of fashion. ‘*No, no, Basilio, not that...*’ I understood; but Frank didn’t understand anything, and went on and on, and on.

- I know this woman... - the Leader interrupted him with a sigh. And then I handed him – no, not a bomb, and not a glass of poisoned wine, but something that for me was even worse! – a video tape with folk songs and dances of different countries.

³⁵⁹ Enough is enough! (Papiamento)

³⁶⁰ Popular Russian military march

At that point, our Irish comrade obviously needed to get out of his own shell, and face the fact, that the world around him was changing. I wanted to share with him that tremendous cultural variety that had long been an inseparable part of my own life, and was still viewed by many Irish as something quite alien, Martian, maybe.

There was yet one more reason, though, something close to self-flagellation, resulting from the invisible obstruction I faced among his comrades, which caused me that insufferable pain.

So, you think I'm just a stupid foreigner who came here in search of some exotic adventure, and would leave you as soon as the slightest difficulty appears? Just like your own 'cookies' who run complaining to the FBI? Only, you tolerate them because they are of the 'proud Irish race' and with dollars in their wallets... Well then, go on dreaming! Here's some material which will make you totally believe that. There you go!

Honestly, though, I was just burning bridges. Because after that video, where among others, I was filmed passionately dancing the *Latino-American merengue*, nothing in the world would make me face the Leader again... and all the *others*, too.

He didn't know it, but that was my way of saying 'farewell', and not only to him – to *them all*. If I hadn't given him that tape, it would have been a lot more difficult to make myself do it later. This is just how I am, you see?

...I know all of them, some of their names, or the places where they work, but, even though we see each other every day, we remain strangers.

Every morning I enter the first bus to Belfast, shivering with morning cold, and still sleepy.

Every morning we say hello to each other, me and a middle-aged man, not quite tall, with a typically Scottish appearance, already on the bus, even though nobody introduced us.

His name is Jim; I know this because in Ballynahinch another man would enter, a small round cheerful elderly, who, judging by the uniform, works for the very same bus-company, and, having said hello to me, would shout across the bus to the 'Scotsman': 'Hey, Jim!' That man's name I still don't know; yet, he always says hello to me.

We never talk, but always greet each other; when Jim, or the Driver, is not on the bus, I start wondering, if they have fallen ill. Or, maybe they're just on holiday?

Next to our most 'bigoted' village, which practically lies in ruin, but whose residents still do nothing except planting bombs in neighbouring villages, and hanging out flags, a young man gets on the bus. He has pit-black hair and a long nose, works for the same bus-company, and, judging by the appearance and the place where he lives, is one of those who desperately try to pass themselves off as descendants of the English and Scottish. I privately call him 'Dodik'. He smiles shyly, and visibly blushes, and I turn down the volume in my walkman so as not to insult his tender feelings by the music I'm listening to.

Flags are flying in the wind, 365 days a year. When they get faded and torn, the residents buy another batch from Thailand... The ruins of the main street look as if a scud missile has hit it, no less! They don't seem to bother. They got used to it. You could live without

shops and libraries, but *never* without flags... *'The society which has no colour differentiation of pants, makes no sense!'*³⁶¹

Having passed the village, we enter a deep forest. In summer, it's indescribably beautiful; yet, many are afraid to walk here, and not because of wild animals, but because of red, white and blue curb-edgings of along the road.

There are no Catholics here. Not *one*. The bus starts, speeds up, and I can see a cat running along the road. Leo Cassil's 'Conduit and Shwambrania' comes to mind, and I paraphrase a quote: 'Mum, is our cat also a Protestant?'

The main street of Ballynahinch is a living memorial to apartheid: practically all the shop owners' surnames there are English and Scottish – Watson, Douglas, and there's even one J. Bond.

After Ballynahinch, where we say hello to the Driver, and ignore the Blond – a lady with a bored and falsely pious face, who also always rides on our bus – our way is sometimes blocked up by a herd of cows, who had run away from a farm. The farmers are still fast asleep, even though it is already 7 a.m., so there's no-one we could ask where those cows have come from. They go trotting before the bus, as fast as horses, and there's no way you could overtake them. Finally, the driver forces them out to the side with a cunning trick, and we continue our way.

By the way, speaking of animals: there's even a real 'rabbit clearing', with plenty of local rabbits in summer, soaking in the rising sun. Sometimes foxes cross the road, small as mongrels, and awfully likeable. You could also see big dairy farms on sale, built on the land taken away from the natives a few centuries ago. Till very recently I couldn't understand why the Protestant 'colonists' were so militant, but some knowledge of history helped me to figure them out: farmer Frank told me that most of their ancestors came from the border between Southern Scotland and Northern England, the 'strip' where there was so much robbery going on at the roads that the authorities didn't know what to do about it. So, they made up a plan: those bandits who agreed to go to Ireland, were amnestied, and besides, were promised some Irish land as a reward.

The descendants of the 'border bandits' are now quite respectable people. They are landowners, bankers, businessmen – as it is now customary to say in Russia, the 'elite' of the Northern Irish society. Yet, from time to time, such – possibly inherited – qualities as aggression and impudence do show up... They can't help it, though: the 'call of the ancestors' is hard to resist...

The bus stops again. A road worker squeezes in; he looks like a walking old racist caricature of the Irish: a prominent jaw, sun-burnt red face, deeply-set eyes... I don't see him every morning – probably, he works in shifts.

Then we enter the Belfast suburb. 'Carryduff says No!' announces a homemade rusty plate hanging on a road post. This 'No!' refers to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1988; so, it has been there since...

Near the garden nursery the first people start to get off the bus – two young girls from Ballynahinch, probably co-workers, jump off. Round the corner, after we passed the 'Ivanhoe' restaurant, 'John Smith' enters, yawning. That's what I call him – John Smith. It is a young, tall, and strikingly handsome blonde with typically English appearance. He,

³⁶¹ Reference to the film "Kin-Dza-Dza" (Footnote 201) where the inhabitants of the planet Plyuk treat each other according to the colour of pants they are wearing, the colour of pants being an indication of a social status.

like every morning, is absolutely sleepy, blinking with his long thick lashes. Why 'John Smith'? Because he reminded me of a hero of "Pocahontas". Since then I call him 'John Smith'. Sometimes he is late for the bus, and then he chases it along the empty street, swinging his long legs.

An elderly couple enters the bus after John Smith. Well, they are not a *married* couple, it just they go to work from the same place and at the same time. The woman is grey-haired, and she doesn't even try to conceal it; she wears simple clothes, but in such perfect taste, that every morning I'm wondering, what she would be wearing today. Everything is she wears is matching, classical and impeccable. The man, looking depleted and also grey-haired, with a square unwelcoming face and a prominent chin, like that of a Canadian professional boxer, gets off at the first stop after the Ormeau Bridge.

This I already know for sure.

Then, two more 'false Scotsmen' enter the bus. They both read morning papers on the way; the papers are English, saying almost nothing about local events. It is quiet on the bus. Those who can sleep 'on the ride', do so. Dodik and Road Worker are asleep, John Smith is trying hard to stay awake, all in such perfect harmony! Just before entering Belfast, the driver (no matter which, I know them all now) turns on the radio, where, as a rule, the news bulletin is being read out.

And so, the harmony breaks up: we again are informed of how many arsons and blasts there were the night before. Bitterness and hostility are fuelled up in the bus passengers again. Dodik turns away from the Road Worker, 'false-Scotsmen' hide behind their papers, pretending they are not here, but across the Channel. It is now only Jim who continues to smile at me. Well, but I'm not Irish, though...

Sometimes I want this radio to break down. Maybe then the 'acquainted strangers' will be able to finally start talking, and know each other for real...

According to Mum, Lisa was successfully working with a speech therapist in our town; the therapist, Mum said, was above all praise, and Lisa was obviously making some progress. Yet, I had been making no progress at all: the nightmares of the past were still hunting me...

Dermot couldn't make them go away, being somewhere else exactly at those moments I needed him most. Yet, it would have been stupid to reproach him: he clearly couldn't have done otherwise in his position, and so, I didn't blame him.

Still, his favourite catchphrase 'As soon as I can' literally made me wince; this, and the way he constantly asked me to confirm he was 'treating me fair': 'I'm treating you fair, am I not?' To me, it seemed as absurd as his other demand to be telling him, he was the greatest love of my life. Such things are not 'pulled out' from a person; if she herself doesn't say them, it is stupid even to ask about that.

What do you think?

Chapter 15.

"Somebody would like to talk to you"

*"Tatyana now need wait no longer.
Her eyes were opened, and she said "this is the one!"*

(Alexander Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin")

... January is always concluded to the people of Northern Ireland's by traditional commemoration on the last Sunday of the month for victims of the Bloody Sunday in Derry - the slaughter by the British "elite" troops of local civilians who came to demonstrate for their civil rights back in 1972. 14 of them were killed on city streets then

...

The circumstances of Bloody Sunday has not yet been investigated fully, the perpetrators so far have not been punished, although there is evidence that the decision to massacre unarmed men had been taken in Britain in 1972 at the highest level in order to intimidate the population. But the truth is seeping drop by drop - despite the best efforts of the British Ministry of Defence to conceal all traces and bury it. Despite the fact that the first investigation had been buried by a lie, and the second had to be open, which is continuing to this day. And it is despite the fact that to the soldiers-killers the new investigation had guaranteed anonymity. Despite the fact that Ministry of Defense "by mistake" destroyed the guns, with which in 1972 civilians were killed in Derry.

Despite the fact that the hysterical British tabloid press resorts in order to justify "our boys" even to such absurd fairy tales, as stating that the Bloody Sunday was the fault of one of the Republican leaders, who allegedly "made the first shot that day."

Exactly about it - that the secrets always become obvious, that the truth always eventually prevails - those gathered for the march spoke on a cold January Sunday. As always, it brought together thousands of people, not only from Ireland but also from abroad. I met there, not only, for example, Americans and Australians, but also representatives of the Flemish Parliament in Belgium - politicians and human rights lawyers in this country were specifically invited to Derry for that day. They marched under the Flemish traditional flag. And with some alarm responded to a meeting with a woman who spoke their language and claimed that she was Russian ...

... When you go down from shops in the Catholic ghetto situated on the high bank of the River Foyle - Kreggane, where many years ago the tragic manifestation began, fantastic views of the city is revealed from the hill: the river Foyle glistens in the sun, covered with a low winter fog, and high in the sky there is a rainbow .. Across the river ancient city walls gleam with the cold, disfigured, for many years now by the ugly military towers. It was from there "brave" British snipers opened fire on the unarmed crowd on that distant day

And involuntarily it brings to one's memory Catherine's words from the "Thunderstorm" play by Ostrovsky: "Why it is that people do not fly?" I guess the people that went that way in the distant 1972, too, one way or another thought about it, even though they were not familiar with the Russian classic play. They also believed in their ability to fly - at the

time believed that they are capable of anything, capable of achieving justice and equality for themselves and their children on earth, and that was worth going out on that cold day. They did not know, they could not know and would never have believed that many of them would never return home ...

No wonder in Derry Bloody Sunday is called "the day when the innocence died" - the day when the local Irish stopped believing in the attainability of justice for themselves in this "fragment of the British Empire."

There were a lot of people on the march in that year - by some estimates, about 10,000! I was surprised that the police this time were willing to stay away from the demonstration: they usually never miss an opportunity for provocation, even at such an occasion.

Late at night on the eve of this day, when many visitors were going home from the bars, where Irish patriotic music was played for the entire evening, the streets were silent, and there were no hooligans at all, we - myself and Dermot – were "escorted" by three "armored cars" until my hotel, going around us at least 4 times during those 20 minutes that way took us by foot.

- Do not go out tomorrow, I'll come to you in the morning, I'll need you - suddenly said Dermot.

I did not pay a lot of attention to his words. I knew well what Dermot usually needed me for...

- OK, - I said without much enthusiasm.

And I started to think how it was on a similar procession the last year.

Then the procession was led traditionally by the relatives of the dead carrying their portraits. The path down the hill was filled to capacity with journalists carrying photo and video cameras. However, to my surprise, in the evening neither local nor British television said a word about the march - and the next day in many parts of the North all the TV channels were off for more than half of the day due to "routine maintenance" - someone especially did not want viewers to see the march in all its scope ...

... Dermot walked me to the hotel, came up with me for ten minutes, and then went home. For him, such a meeting, apparently, was called «I am treating you fair".

Somewhere in the fathomless depths of my soul I still dream about great and shining love, but was well aware that in my life there was nothing to wait for except the roll in the hay. Well at least I have had the freedom to choose with whom! - I was joking joylessly.

I commanded myself that I did not deserve great and shining sentiments. I did so in order not to tease myself with unnecessary illusions. This way it is easier to live, I said to myself.

But that day I was nevertheless hurt by Dermot's behavior. To have words with someone who did owe you nothing, and whom you do not really love, made no sense. So I slowly began to drown in melancholy. Maybe, this is what my father felt, when, having brought my mother to a concert, suddenly and quite unexpectedly she would say: "One fool is singing, a hundred are listening... Let's go home!"

In the morning it was as if my father's genes awoke in me with such force that when Dermot came to fetch me, I had firmly decided that no matter what I was not going to march, I was going to go home. Now, immediately!

Dermot was surprised, but was well aware that an attempt to change my mind was useless - I was in such a terrible mood.

- Going away already? - Dermot asked, disappointed and a little worried. - And there is someone here who wants to talk to you...

I just waved my hand. Who wants, wants what, why does he want anything? Let him lie down - maybe it will also pass!

- Well, - said Dermot - never mind, I will tell him ... You'll talk next time.

I was not even in the mood to ask Dermot who wanted to talk with me.

If I had payed a bit more attention and had known Irish republican terminology a bit better, I would have immediately understood. Because the phrase "someone wants to talk to you" in the local brogue has one and only one meaning...

... The following month, my birthday was approaching, and Dermot promised to spend it with me, especially because it was a weekend.

- I am sorry that I have not found much time for you! I will mend my ways, - he said -

But we will spend next weekend together - here's my word!

By the time I had almost forgotten our January conversation.

Dermot did not disappoint me. We met in Dublin, went to a hotel in the suburbs and did not leave the room for nearly two days. However, it could not be described as "cut from the world," because Dermot was still watching "Star Trek" and the news on television.

He was incorrigible.

That year, fate gave me an unexpected birthday gift: in Angola one of the worst enemies of the leftist forces of Angola (and hence also of the Soviet Union) - the warlord head of UNITA, Jonas Savimbi was killed. On this occasion Dermot and I even drank some red wine. Good people get killed every day, but the villains - not so often.

When Dermot was a little tipsy, he suddenly said:

- Well, are you ready?

- For what? - I asked, puzzled.

- Can you come next weekend to Donegal?

- Wow, what a distance! What for?

- Remember I told you that someone wants to talk to you? Next Saturday he will be there waiting for us.

- "Do not talk in riddles, you hassle me ..." Who is he? And why so far?

- Mm.... One of our boys, you understand? I told them about you and they want to talk to you. And so far away, because there it is less dangerous. Come to my city at 11, and I'll be waiting for you at the bus stop. Next we'll go together. I'll introduce you, and then you two will arrange it between yourselves. Do not take a mobile phone with you, and if you do - take out the batteries. Remember?

I understood perfectly what he meant, but the reality of the situation had still not reached my consciousness, because it read like a cheap mystery novel.

Sometimes by chance I came across some news, which I thought might be useful to them and I diligently passed it to Dermot. But there was nothing secret or dangerous - the usual open information, not available to them only because they "did not master the

language" – just like director Yakin from a Soviet comedy film. For example, how in one or another country the laws were changed.

Was I needed them just to do this? Would it not be easier to just learn the languages? But of course I did not think so. In general, I tried not to think about what they needed. We would go and then I'll find out, and for what sake now whistle in the dark? But finally, they needed me!

... A week later, exactly at the appointed hour, I arrived at the bus stop in Dermot's town. As agreed, I had no phone. I felt quite calm.

He was standing there, just on the other end, and diligently pretended not to know me. He tried so hard that I felt ridiculous. After all, we could also be seen by one of those who knew that he knew me - and would then begin to wonder why Dermot behaved thus.

Dermot sat down near me only at the bus to Donegal.

- Hi, LFC! - He said softly, - Not far from here. Forty minutes, not more.

He did not say anything else, and I did not ask.

After a while we reached a relatively large town, and Dermot got up to get off the bus.

We had crossed the border, and he relaxed a bit. I followed him like a veritable tail.

We walked along the main street, where for some time Dermot was busy looking for a particular cafe. Then he finally found it, we entered, climbed the stairs, sat at a table, ordered coffee and waited.

We had to wait, I felt, for incredibly long. I was sitting with my back to the door and saw nothing, and Dermot was straining at every creak of the door, like a lynx before the leap, screening all incomers. Once or twice he even went outside, leaving me inside: to check whether it was the right place to come, and whether the stranger who had wanted to talk to me was somewhere else.

We drank three cups of coffee each. Dermot said:

- We'll stay put for 10 minutes more and then go. Sometimes something happens and they come late or not at all and then make a new appointment. Let's have another cup?

When the coffee had just started to spill out of my ears, like with Volodya Sharapov, Dermot suddenly started, and from behind me there was a voice, somehow a smiling one with a strong Belfast accent

-Here I am. Sorry for being late: missed the bus, had to wait for the next one.

With these words, the owner of the voice sank into a chair in front of me.

I looked up at him with some curiosity - and I felt like I was struck by lightning ...

... Remember, Pushkin's verse - "she waited long enough: her eyes went open,

And she said: that's him "?

It was exactly such a case.

To say that the stranger was handsome, tall and slender, that he was a mixture of Mickey Harte and George Clooney – is to say nothing. For example, I see the same George Clooney - and say to myself, without emotion: "A handsome man." As a statement of fact. But it does not interest me one little bit, I am quite calm when I say it.

The stranger was different. My heart ached at the sight of him - not because of his looks, and not even because of the adventurous atmosphere in which our meeting took place

(after all, until I saw him, I waited for the representative of the rebels without even batting an eyelid, but because I had imagined them being just like him. Always, from the beginning, not even being aware of his existence. He seemed to come from the mental picture printed somewhere in my brain. He was a carbon copy of my dreams about what they should be like.

I had seen enough of these guys during my life here - different ages, different looks, different characters, and all more often than not just handsome men. But no man ever yet during all my thirty plus years was ever an alive and walking personification of my dreams.

To be honest, I felt too embarrassed to even look at him. When Dermot introduced me to him (no one had told me his name), I literally forced myself to look up at him.

The stranger had thick black eyebrows, almost fused at the bridge of his nose, blue eyes, with a few wrinkles around them, like Dean Reed, black and gray short cut hair, a pale oval face and dazzlingly white teeth. From the first few seconds I had a feeling as if I'd known him all his life.

I shook my head, trying to get rid of an obsession. After all, I'm not here to admire him, about business. I got a grip on myself, rather successfully, but talking to him was very pleasing to me. It felt so nice that I would just like to sit and listen, and listen to him - for hours.

The stranger said that we would now have to schedule the next meeting, and then he would tell me what they needed. That today we are only acquainted with him, so we both knew what we look like.

- Let's meet in two months in Dublin, - he said - that time it will be clearer to us what we need. Do you know a place to meet in Dublin?

I frantically began to think - and I remembered one tiny cafe near the park. I could not remember the name, but described in detail where it is and how it looks.

It was agreed upon. The stranger told me what to do if we for whatever reason missed each other (there always has to be a plan "B"), shook my hand and said:

- See you in two months - stood up and walked quickly toward the door, not even finishing his coffee.

- We'll leave one by one - said Dermot - Now we wait about five minutes, then I will go, and then you.

I was glad to return home without being accompanied by Dermot - I had to put my thoughts in order.

"After all, there is nothing wrong that I liked him" - I tried to convince myself on the way home. - "It's much nicer to work with someone who you care for."

But it was the cry of a drowning man.

On that day, Dermot, like Dmitry the Pretender³⁶², could rightfully say: "The happiness devised with so much labor I have, perchance, destroyed forever. Idiot, what have I done?" Of course, he did not know this, but this day he lost me forever. And thus happened exactly what I had not wanted and had been afraid of, I fell in love. Not even head over heels, but above it. "And thus the Cossack was doomed ..."

Only I had not yet admitted it to myself and resisted the growing feeling like a drowning man, until the last minute desperately struggling in the waves. After all, I had never fallen

³⁶² Dmitry the Pretender or False Dimitry - was the Tsar of Russia in 1605-1606. He was one of the three impostors during the Time of Troubles which followed after the death of Ivan the Terrible.

in love at first sight, and had always believed that to be a folly.

... - And now, folks, we'll show you how terrible and how unbearably hard life was for our grandparents during the 1940's during the war and after! -A pretty TV presenter cheerfully began. - They had to dig the earth in the garden by hand and plant vegetables instead of flowers because the government ordered them to be self-sufficient. Almost no one had a washing machine, TV sets were black and white, during the second world war there was no TV broadcast and when it was re-transmitted after the war in 1945 TV did not have any children's programs

Indeed, what a nightmare! I tried to imagine British television without the weekly showering of children in paint from head to toe accompanied by pre-recorded laughter, and without a game called in my childhood, "shvyryalka" (this is when the two sides hurl all that comes to hand at each other) - and I even shut my eyes.

I'm vacuuming the room, while the British TV carried on with its usual nonsense. I was about to turn it off, but became intrigued - what else the Brits remember about the most terrible war in human history?

The presenter was meanwhile transported, with the power of TV-magic, into the distant forties.

She demonstrated which dresses were in vogue then, and then she put one on. "But it is quite comfortable," - she was surprised. Then they started doing her 40s hair style. "Hair had to be put under the band, because the fashion had come from women working in factories, where the hair had to be covered," - she explained to the war veterans. "But what did you do in the 40s in your spare time? I heard that dancing was in vogue then!" - exclaimed the presenter, after which she was immediately taught the foxtrot ...

Then she showed how to make sandwiches with nasturtium leaves from the garden and with margarine instead of butter. - "Well, it is good for your health!" The poor girl was terrified of military rations, "Can you imagine, folks, a child was supposed to only get a half chocolate bar a day (on the screen appeared a large half-bar)! Well, I eat more in one sitting!" Then it turned out that during the war, "it was difficult to buy bananas" ... And just how the poor English people survived at all, not to mention the fact that it was they who won the WW2.

"... In general, I quite liked the 40s!" - presenter summed up with a cheerful smile. -

"Apart from digging the garden - that was not cool ..."

It is a pity that this program was not seen by those who survived the siege of Stalingrad. Or those, for example, who during the war, had lived in the occupied territory of Belarus. Or that elderly woman who simply, without embellishment, without a shadow of self-pity and without hatred for all Germans in general (which is cultivated in British children on the sly), told me in suburban train how the Germans who were staying in their village kicked her family out of their home in - 30 degrees cold to the woods - her mother with all of them - then young children...

"... As the great Pestalozzi³⁶³ ..." - do you remember the Soviet ship's captain performed by Alexei Gribov in the movie "Striped voyage?" Yes, the Soviet captains read Pestalozzi, and the Soviet schoolchildren knew by heart the names of the capital cities of all the states. But the British TV star Natalie Cassidy, known throughout the country for

³⁶³ Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi – 19th cent. Swiss pedagogue and educational reformer.

her performance as Sonny in the soap opera "Eastenders," it turns out, does not know what Archimedes was doing when he shouted "Eureka!"

So what do you think he could do in the bath? Blow the bubbles?

But she apparently does not even know that he was in the bath. I believe that I knew it before starting school. From the newsreel named "I want to know everything."

Interesting, do they have physics lessons in British schools at all? Or is physics not included in the concept of «science»? On the history lessons, it seems, "a disproportionate amount of time is devoted to the stories about Hitler" (let me add, - and about the Holocaust. As if the Nazis did not exterminate anyone else!). May be the reason for it is so there was no need to talk about their own colonial past? Children in schools here, I have learned, are gathered daily for a school "daytime prayer" ... And yet many British citizens dream of the return of spanking to their schools, because they believe that without this it is not possible to maintain discipline in the classroom!

How about getting back to physics and geography lessons? Well, at least to begin with ...

... How, oh how many of our Russian countrymen still want to believe, that somewhere far away, beyond the seas, over the mountains, some people live in a higher and nobler way than us, "stinking dogs!" They believe that there is, so to speak, a higher court which rules us how to live in the so called right way, as it should be in the "civilized world". And where on the planet exist such a higher-order, noble creature? Of course it exists only in the technologically advanced West. Sure not somewhere in Africa!

I refer to this mental illness as a "Sakharov syndrome." Often people who suffer from it have the best motives. But I do not share their puppy admiration for the "great" ("prosperous and beautiful"), for Western "supermen" who, in contrast to the "Russian racists" "deeply and sincerely" sympathize with the victims of the Chechen war.

But in Iraq and Afghanistan – there are also victims and similar mothers and their children. Somehow the thought of them does not disturb your "Western supermen's" sleep. Do you seriously believe that they are disturbed so much and sympathize so much with the Chechen victims, that they simply "do not know how to live with it now" (as it was written by one of our liberal journalists!)? They probably stopped eating their burgers with chips, poor things, and have turned en masse to the ranks of the human rights defenders (who, incidentally, are very well paid for their angry zeal against *undesirable countries*).

This is simply their dutiful politeness, my darlings. You are not little children anymore; do you really not see this? I too, routinely come across people in the West who straight away start telling me how sorry they are for the submarine "Kursk" sailors³⁶⁴, or the freezing homeless people in Moscow. But somehow, for most of them it all comes down to "It's all your presidents' fault! If only he let the West to intervene on this matter, then we... "

I do not need their pity.

Academician Sakharov could be excused, he was never permitted to go abroad, so he was daydreaming about someone of the higher order, some deeply moral and spiritual beings lived in the West. But today the Russians, so to speak, have freedom of movement ("so to speak" - because some have it, but the majority cannot afford even to go and visit their relatives in the suddenly turned "foreign" neighboring republics). In any case, the

³⁶⁴ Russian cruise-missile submarine "Kursk" sank on the 12 August 2000. All 118 sailors died.

ones who have American and other "civilized" friends already took advantage of this freedom. And you, don't you see anything ahead of your own nose because you are so mesmerized by the bright shop windows?

In Northern Ireland, for now almost daily, migrant workers are beaten up, set on fire, blown up in their homes. Not the Tajiks, of course, but the Lithuanians, Latvians, Poles and Ukrainians. Most, so to speak, are pure "whites" (at least, by their own opinion). But the Africans and Filipino nurses also get their share. Have any Russian journalists written anything about it?

Here are the views about other people that are prevalent among the civilized Irish: "They all keep from 5 to 10 snakes at home, and drink their blood", "Eastern Europeans have a tradition to spit on the ground," "Blacks here want to live like parasites, insidiously using Irish good nature. Once they settle here, they can't be got rid of, as they all look the same and all use the same passport "(excerpts taken from the diary of the Dublin organization "Residents Against Racism ").

How do you like this? Way ahead of the Russian skinheads, isn't it? ... Our village in this respect, too, was not a paradise. Sometimes, god forgive me, I was almost glad that Lisa will never be able to go to the local school, facing local ladette girls, and that even if she was bullied, she would not be able to understand. But what do others have to endure...?

... I first saw this guy when he was sitting on the roof of my shed, and at first I did not believe my eyes. Twig like African teenager, graceful as a young doe with a mop of little braids, - where did he appear from, in a dull Northern Ireland village, frolicking in the rays of never warming sun?

The guy saw me looking at him through the window - and leaped to the roof of the neighbouring shed and then - to the next one, cheerfully smiling to me. I almost compared him with Mowgli - he jumped with such dexterity - but I restrained myself in time, as I know that such comparisons would have been taken by the Africans as racist. Such things pop up annoyingly in ones head: at home, we actually had not thought at all about such things, and it is difficult to imagine how another person feels, in whose shoes we would never find ourselves. But now, after many years spent among the black community, I jump up in anger, when watching, for example, the old Soviet cartoon serial "Just You wait!" - with black rabbit savages, breaking colour TV-sets with their spears, and intending to fry a Wolf on the bonfire, from what they are distracted by our own, "white" and "more intelligent " Rabbit, who starts dancing then fashionable lambada. As savages supposed to, the black rabbits, portrayed in a style of the English Victorian colonial caricature - with a thick lips and noses, and in loincloths - are easily distracted from their goal, because they love to have fun. Then our white Rabbit bravely saves the same "white" compatriot predator ... How can one be surprised then that some Russians who were brought up with these cartoons rudely say about African students that they "just claimed down from the palm tree"?

Where from did the authors of the Soviet children's cartoons derived such a racist subconscious? Did it come from the classic children's books that we all read - about the savage Friday, about Mowgli, the Uncle Tom, slaves in the "15 year old Captain?" But one must also take into account by whom they were written, and in what times!

It turns out that the racist colonial Western "culture" nests deep in us without us noticing. Could this be the source of the - deep, not based on any facts - belief that the West

means "civilization", that "the West will help us", that the West can be some kind of supreme moral judge of what is happening in our country, that one can plea to it about the violation of whatever rights of whatever people?

This is the belief, which has led us to disaster, and of which so many Russians have not rid themselves. They believe that the Western "civilization" and "savagery" of the rest of the world are a self-evident axiom - but when you start asking them, where these beliefs come from, they often cannot explain it. So, could it be that the reason is in these books? Could it be that we believed in Western self-promotion, accepting it at face value?

All these thoughts flashed quickly through my head while the boy was jumping across the rooftops. He looked defiant enough. And neighbors looked at him askance from behind the curtains and shook their heads disapprovingly ...

Later I met him. Thanks to the Nigerian Chinedu, who lives in Belfast, and who decided to create an organization for the Black youth in Northern Ireland for themselves and their parents. Chinedu, a serious and responsible man, took a kind of patronage over this little guy.

His name was Victor and I in my heart at once called him simply Vitya. His mother was unable to manage him. The son of a Kenyan woman and a local native Protestant, Victor was born and raised in Kenya and came here only when he was 11 years old. His father died soon after. His mother, who worked in the tourism sector in Kenya, found a job in the Belfast airport, a two hour drive from home, and worked very hard: in addition to Victor, she had four other children, two of whom were left in Kenya with her family because she could not support them all here. She felt terribly guilty - and worked more and more to save money and reunite the family. And who would condemn her for it? But Victor was left more or less to himself...

At first, he was put into a "good" Protestant school. But for this he was beaten up by the local Catholic lumpen³⁶⁵ boys, who were calling him "prod" - and in our village lumpens were a majority. His mother moved him to a Catholic school, and there he quickly became a hero, especially among girls, who fancied him - but his new friends were themselves bullies, and demanded the same behaviour from him. Vitya was forced to become a hooligan, in order "not to stand out." But all of the first blame for bullying, of course, immediately fell on him - for he could not "not to stand out" comparing to white bullies. Too peculiar was his appearance for our place. In the end, after one mischief, he was "asked" to leave the school. The white thugs, of course, stayed.

It became worse. Victor began to indulge in drugs. By the time I met him, Victor assured everyone that he has left his habits in the past. He even volunteered to write articles in a local magazine, explaining to his peers about the different drugs, and why they are harmful.

He was 16 years old. His was not the appearance of an ordinary bully: his eyes shone with a deep and lively mind, he was all artistic, musical, painted beautifully and dreamed of becoming an architect.

- To become an architect, you have to study. And in order to study, you have to pull

³⁶⁵ Lumpen - from German *Lump* vagabond. Dispossessed, often displaced people who have been cut off from the socioeconomic class with which they would ordinarily be identified. The author means here Lumpenproletariat - or the layer of working class who is lost to socially useful production, the term first introduced by Carl Marx.

yourself together - quietly, persistently Chinedu, who took over his patronage talked to Victor like a father.

- Otherwise, you will achieve nothing. Understand, man, to our likes, it is much harder to prove what we can do. To do this we need to be head and shoulders above all, we have to do the most work. And if they are already "agreed" to take us in certain areas: for example, resigned to the fact that we are accepted as good football players or musicians, but to the place of architects we have not yet reached. Maybe you'll be one of those who pave the way for others in this area ...

Compared with their local peers Victor struck me with his erudition. Going home with me, he immediately recognized Karl Marx on the wall. Yes, there are adults who do not know who Marx was, and much less what he looked like ... But Vitya was aware even of Lenin. Not to mention that, in which details he knew the biography of Bob Marley! He was a thoughtful, reasonable guy. And that's how his young life went awry because of the conditions in which he found himself, and because of the fact that for most people here Victor was no more than the aforesaid black "rabbit" with a spear in his hand, with the manners of a cannibal. Because of the way these very white savages - this time without the quotation marks! - were raised ...

The last time I saw him was at the bus station. Victor could not resist. He returned to the bad cronies. He left his home and found himself in a hostel for the homeless in Lisburn. Then the police stopped him while he had a knife in his pocket. "What do you need it for?" - They asked, and Victor, having watched too many American movies about Harlem, showing off, said: «Revenge!" He was convicted to six months in a youth prison. For comparison, two adult male Protestants were sentenced to two years probation after they broke in to someone's house at night, beat him within an inch of his life, left, and then returned to continue. The motivation of the judge at sentencing: "We will give them a suspended sentence, because they are both respected members of society (I'm not kidding, these were judge's own words!), they are working men, and if they are jailed, it will then be difficult for them to return to normal life"!

And for their victim, was it easy to return to normal life?

In general, show me a single person here who has a normal life! Yes, you did not even imagine what it is, my dearest!

It is hard to live in this cruel world that expects nothing good of you and believes that you're born to be a criminal ...When then he saw me once on the street, Victor looked down and ran away.

- There is nothing to be surprised about! - One of our local Trotskyites said to me. - The whole family is the same and their mother was not looking after her children.

He did not even bother to ask why, and how this family lives. For him, "it was all clear." Like for our fans of "Just You Wait!" cartoon. Once they called me dirty words for that I was going to the movies with Sayed: to them, too, "everything was clear," a decent girl would have not gone to the movies with "a monkey"...

After a while I had a call from Chinedu.

- I found him. He has returned home. I will not let the guy go off of the right road anymore.

That's just not in of life of everybody there is their Makarenko³⁶⁶... But society continues

³⁶⁶ Anton Makarenko – was a famous Soviet teacher and writer who introduced the theory of self-governing child collectives. With the help of Soviet government Makarenko opened orphanages for

to expect "wild" behavior from "savages" - and push them in every way to this direction...

Time was running fast, like sand in an hourglass. Have you ever noticed that the older you get, the faster life flies?

Sometimes this makes me feel ill at ease. But I was not afraid of death since my grandmother and Little Tamara had died. If in this world there are less people dear to you, then why fear it? Maybe we will meet at least beyond the grave? I do not hold such a strong belief, as Catholics, about the fact that underworld exists, but sometimes I so much wanted to believe ... It cannot be like that person disappears, without a trace! And I had not said my good-bye to them, we did not finish, not sung all, all lot is not completed yet. Before she died, Tamara, they say, said with a sigh: "I so do not want to leave you ..." She was 93.

And maybe in that world Lisa also will be normal and be able to talk? How great it would be! She would have told me everything she had accumulated over the years to tell. And about what she, perhaps, was not satisfied and we had not known, and what she wanted, but did not experience in her life ...

To think about what would happen to her when I am gone, was very scary. I really ought to give birth to another child, so she would not be left alone. There's nothing scarier than shelters, hospitals and nursing homes. No matter how comfortable they look.

But I did not want any more children. At least, not like before I met that Donegal stranger. Now I started to think about it more often. Maybe it was all because of my age. But it would be nice if I had a son who would remind me of him! Like him. After we broke up with Sonny, I swore to myself that if I ever a child, I would not tell their father about my pregnancy and would disappear from his life before he could figure out something himself. That is the extent to which my life had deformed my views on marital bliss ...

... How could they have remained not deformed?

Once I got back the year from Ireland, the court held its first hearing. I cannot say that I was very nervous because I knew like Soviet soldiers during the war years - "our cause is just." And if so, then we will win. After all, it was not something about me. Not about my "rights". The fact was that Lisa was still a very little girl, and she needed a mum. The mother, who had always cared for her, been by her side. And is the case not primarily about what the child needs, and not about the rights of a man who would continue not to take care of her and would abandon her to the care of his family? Even if he were her father three times over. Definitely.

In the Soviet Union the rights of the mother and child were completely holy. If the mother was not an unmitigated drunkard (about drug addicts we had then never heard of!), no, not one court would contemplate tearing the child from her mother. Be his father a general, or even the party secretary, the mother would still attain custody. And rightly so - not because the mother "has more rights," but because the child needs her more. Think about it, even a child's first word in 99.9% of cases is "Mum" and not "dad" and

street children left orphaned by the Russian Civil War. His approach to working with difficult children produced amazing results. Many of his pupils later became famous Soviet pilots, scientists and respected workers.

even "Baba" (grandmother).

But in the capitalist world nothing, as we now know, is sacred, and cannot be by definition, a believer would remind you here of a quote from the Bible that you cannot worship God at the same time as the golden calf. And it is the latter who is a global capitalist deity.

No, in the West, of course, the case is not as "primitive," as cases in Russia now when a rich father simply buys a child in court "lock, stock and barrel", his mother being thrown away as the used, disposable living incubator. Then he hires a dozen nurses and governesses, and still thinks seriously, apparently on a par with the judge counting the "royalties", that the child would be "not in want of anything" (this is how such domestic court cases are motivated!) . Sonny was not a "money bag". But in the West, with its straight-forward approach to "equality" (for some reason the fact that women are paid a salary is forgotten!), it has been recently decided that the rights of men and women need to be "equalized," throwing the child and her needs out with the bath water ...

In fact no one thinks about the child, though it is proclaimed that her interests are above all else. If they really thought about it, they would understand that this is the only area in which women and men by nature are "not equal" and never can be - because they are different. Regarding the child they have different functions. Here I am ready to sign with both hands under the words of Colonel Gaddafi - what he writes about women in his "Green Book". You do not need to be a Muslim - it is enough just to have one's head on one's shoulders, and not on a pine cone. The West also took away the single privilege of all women, the only one that she held in life here - the one given to her by nature itself. The right to raise their children safely, without harassment as it is fashionable to call it. Often literally forcing her to give a child on certain days to virtually any father - even those with an unstable psyche (but not officially sick), even when his only aspiration is revenge against his former wife, even to the cost of a child's life and his own life. And so in Western newspapers, we read almost daily about fathers who kill their children and commit suicide (well, though the last part is not always done) during such visits. Yet we are supposed to essentially feel sorry for these gross egoists! Oh, he had loved a child so that he could not part with her! If he loved her, he'd never raised his hand against her. If I feel that my child is in danger, then no one - no court in the world - will be able to force me to endanger the child simply to "satisfy another party's rights." Even under threat of prison. My reason, a child is not a thing, not the "common" property of their mother and father, but a helpless tiny person.

Unfortunately, it does not matter to the court. They do not think about the age. The capitalist court regards children exactly as the property of the couple, and which has to be fairly shared. The main concern for this type of court is to carry out the letter of the law and the very much talked-about "equal rights". But as a result the child is deprived of all his rights. I know a lot of children here who burst into tears every time, when the day of their "transfer into another side's hands according to the schedule" comes! (Of course, I do not assert that it concerns all fathers, but here the legal system does not protect either the mother or child from such "Othello's" as Sonny. And there are many such revengeful fathers. Moreover, they are found among the people of all nations! The main thing for them is not to get the custody of a child, or at least to see their child regularly, but to bring the former wife, who dared to leave him, down a peg or two.

Therefore I feel only loathing towards the fathers from the “Fathers for justice” organization, who climb roofs and posts disguised as Superman and other American idiots. Such inadequate behavior shows clearly that such fathers are dangerous for their children. They are obsessed only with their own rights and they do not pay attention to the rights of the children. But the main thing for the child is the feeling of peace and safety...

It was the first time, that I had seen Sonny since that ill-fated day. He did not look at me and his aspect was cold. We did not exchange a word during the court session.

That day, when Sonny and his lawyer came into the courtroom, I nearly smiled at the comical situation: he was with the Dutch blond lawyer and I was with the dark-skinned Surinam lawyer. At another time, perhaps, I would have smiled, but not that time. I had no feeling of anger in my heart; I had only some pain in my soul... Sonny, Sonny, what you have done, what troubles you stirred... I was sitting and listening to the charges, which were brought against me (“she had not noticed that the boiling rice has become burnt, because she forgot to take it off the stove on time, therefore I find it dangerous to leave the child with her”). I was listening to it without any emotion, because I knew what they could say. I was waiting for my lawyer to stand up and said the oratorical speech in my defense, because, when we had talked before, she was full of righteous indignation and made such oratorical speeches. But at that moment it seemed like the cat had got her tongue. She only said that she had attached all the documents, which exhibited Sonny’s bad treatment towards me, to the file. When the judge asked, “Have you anything to add?” she said only the phrase: “Mevrouw always cared for the child herself”.

That was it.

To tell the truth, I was a little disappointed. But to my mind it did not change the whole picture of the case.

Naturally, the judge said that he needed time to think and that he would tell us his decision. And we left the courtroom.

After that I could not stay still. I was bored at Katarina’s place in Amsterdam. She was at work in the daytime and I needed someone, with whom I could talk at any time... I needed a living soul to be near me.

Moreover, it was not long before I had to give my thesis presentation. I do not know, how I could do this, but I had completed it in time and even scored an “8” (in Holland the highest grade is 10. 6 is nearly our 3, and they give 9 and 10 very rarely, 8 is more like our 4+. And my average grade turned up, by the way, higher than the Dutch Crown Prince William-Alexander!)

After those events I went to Adinda and Hendrik’s in Twente for several days. It was quiet and calm there, so peaceful, that when I wanted to show them my favorite film about Michael Collins, they believed it to be too cruel. They were like doves of peace!

There are no such people left in our time.

The telephone call broke this peace in the sunny summer morning, when it seemed we all were entitled to live and be glad. It was my lawyer.

- Well, Yevgenia, be ready, now I will read you the court’s decision, - she said in a somehow too official tone of voice. But at that time I did not have the experience to discern what a person is going to tell me, by the tone of voice.

I only wanted everything to be over quickly and for Lisa to be to me again. I thought I would pet her and kiss her all day and would be all over her. Certainly, I would take her

further and further, to the place, where nobody, no power on earth, could separate us from one another. Of course, I would not tell anybody about it, even my lawyer. If before I sincerely wanted Sonny to be able to see Lisa after our divorce as often as it possible, but at that time I just was afraid of him. I feared for her.

As the lawyer was reading and I tried to understand the legal jargon, it seemed like someone's cold hand squeezed my heart stronger and stronger.

The judge decided that the case was very complicated and that they had to get the Council of Children's Protection on to it (this is the Dutch body of guardianship). The Council had to decide, which of us was more suitable a parent for Lisa. Simply speaking, he did not want to take the responsibility for that decision and put it to another's shoulders. But for me that information was not important. The important matter was written then – "while the Council will be considering the decision, the situation will not change and the child will live with father". In other words, "might is right" – who has power is right and if I first had taken her away and hidden her from Sonny, she would have lived with me and the court would confirm it. And it was not important that a little girl is crying in her pillow somewhere and is calling for her mother...

It was only once in my life, when I reacted thus to such awful news: I sat on down the floor near the telephone and screamed like a beast. Before that I had seen this reaction only in the movies, when the heroine got the "killed in battle" notice and it was very unpleasant to look at, but that moment I did not think was about it being pleasant or unpleasant for somebody to look at me. The grief was beyond my power, it was bubbling inside and needed to be let out.

I swallowed that scream with difficulty and asked the lawyer in despair, how the situation would develop and what I had to do then. She, who had been so indignant by Sonny's action only a week ago, answered quite calmly and even indifferently:

- I do not know. Many months could pass, before the Council will even start to consider this case. And now it is summer and everybody has gone on holiday. But I want to let you know – the more time the child lives with him, the greater the chance that she will stay there for good. It would be done so as not to change the living conditions and not to traumatize the child.

Just like this.

Instantly all my tears had been dried and the scream had disappeared, gone somewhere else. Only a cold malice remained in my heart and resoluteness that it could not be allowed. No. It would be only over my dead body.

I called Petra and asked for advice – she had a sensible and practical mind and knew her nation and the system much better than I did.

- You have just got a lousy lawyer! – She said without mincing her words. – And the arguments that she presented in court? It was negligible. Sit tightly; I am going to call and enquire about where we can find a really good divorce lawyer in our town. I will call you back.

In a half of an hour she called me back and gave me the number of a lawyer – the woman with a German surname. But I had never known her name. I called her secretary immediately and told her all about the case.

- Come here now, - the secretary said sympathetically. – Bring all the documents of your

court case with you.

And I began to pack. But firstly I called my former lawyer back and said that I did not need her services anymore and asked to her give me the documents, which she has. I could not say that she was thrilled, but she had no other choice.

When I screamed near the telephone in such a grief stricken way, Adinda and Hendrik became very afraid and then, after seeing my tears and hearing my conversation with the lawyers, Hendrik could not contain himself, he came to me and said:

- Zhenya, listen, we have decided... If you need... Just bring the girl here and I will drive you to Germany. You will be able to fly away to Russia. But in this case you will not be allowed to come back here.

“To come back to Holland? Let me only leave here and I’ll be damned if I return to this country again” – I thought.

Knowing that the Dutch are shy and law-abiding, I was really touched by this proposal. I can imagine what it cost Hendrik to take such decision. But, firstly, we had to get Lisa somehow and, secondly, as Adinda correctly noticed, we should try at first to return her legally. And only if we could not find another way... It was the backup plan. I was comforted that I had it.

Saying goodbye, I flung myself at Adinda and Hendrik necks. When I found myself in real trouble, the Dutch showed me that they are capable of true friendship too.

The new lawyer was a nice woman – gentle and mild on the outside, but firm and rational regarding her work. She had great experience in the conciliation of divorcing pairs.

Therefore, at the beginning of our conversation she asked me, whether I want to be reconciled with Sonny. I explained to her, why we could not do that, even if I had wanted it. She did not argue.

- There are people who, unfortunately, cannot be reconciled. I just wanted to know your opinion, the reason why it will not work in your case. To my mind, it is convincing evidence. He is a man with a dominant character. Yes, there are such people... I will put pressure on the Council to consider your case more quickly, pointing out the fact that the little child has been separated from her mother for several months.

Having talked with her, I understood that my former lawyer had made a bad speech in the courtroom because she was swept over by emotions and my new lawyer would never give way to her emotions, but only use the indisputable arguments. Maybe, it will be the kind of arguments, which can move the judge to pity, but by no means aggressive. They are not like American courts where people strongly engage in mutual mud-slinging. It was the Dutch approach to the matter: without beating around the bush, essentially, searching for the answer to the question and not only to call somebody a fool.

Having talked with her, I became calmer – so that I was not deranged by Sonny’s telephone call (he had already known that I lived in Katarina’s place). I tried to speak politely with him, but it turned out that he had only called to grind my nose in dirt again – at first he cruelly gave me much time to listen to Lisa’s chirp somewhere in the background (of course, he did not allow me to speak with her!) and then he said contentedly:

- Well, have your friends helped you? There it is... So, have you come far with them? Ze hebben mij als kwaadaardige Antillaan afgeschilderd! It won’t work against me!

And he hung up the phone. As before, he thought only about himself...

But I did not lose my nerve.. Not willing to stay home and complain to Katarina about

my life, I found a temporary job in a distribution centre in Sassenheim and went there by train and by bus every morning. It helped me not only to earn money, but also to stay clear-headed and self-disciplined. I could not let myself to lose my head.

... There is a little green blackboard on the wall of Katarina's kitchen. She writes notices on it in chalk. I wrote on it in Russian: "Lisa, I will bring you back!" And every morning, when I was preparing my breakfast, I looked at this inscription... And I felt inspired.

Time went on and my Irish life was full of different events, which were either joyful or not so. For example, the story about Michael's shish kebab party had been cheering me for a long time. Of course, it is a bit sadly when one comes to something primitive.

"At each sunset near my house a young fellow's walking..." – so the words of the song are sung. So Michael did. But, unlike the heroine of the song, I had not noticed it before his sister pointed out to me that he looked at my windows.

- Why don't you go to the restaurant with my brother? – She asked me quite unexpectedly. – He is handsome; he has a good job, a house and a car. And he is a true gentleman – he will entertain you and accompany you home without any familiarities... She spoke as if reciting from a speech and did so a bit reluctantly, in such a way that I understood: Michael himself, perhaps, when he came to visit her, pestered her every weekend with his requests to introduce him to me.

To her surprise, this description of him did not get me interested... It reminded me of the conversation with a Lithuanian who was returning from his holiday in Scotland. We were sitting next to one another on the bus. By the end of our journey he concluded that I was "a true lady" and ardently wished me "to meet the authentic, tough new Russian with money and other advantages..."

He went bug-eyed, when quite sincerely and spontaneously, words escaped me:

- To meet a new Russian? What for? We will not find even the common topics of conversation!

What? To have a husband for conversations with him? He couldn't understand it...

I continued to ignore Michael – without any malicious joy after I became aware that he liked me, but just because really he did not interest me. Only a year later I talked with him for the first time. It was the day, when his sister took me with her to eat shish kebabs in his garden. He held this party every year and invited the people who he thought could prove useful to him in the future.

For Michael his status in the society was very important. Therefore he helped some charitable organizations (of course, he reimbursed his own expenses).

It seemed, Michael liked everything in a big way. His garden was full with fake antique monuments and little fountains, he rented a large green marquee for the invited musicians and there were about 150 guests. His brother Paddy, a tall and thin man, was tinkering with shish kebabs, and was bent down in the corner of the garden. He had a sarcastic sense of humor, and he was not as successful in life as Michael was. Though he was already 40, he had neither house, nor car or a good job. In spite of that he was a Jack of all trades. Usually Michael hired him to do the work, which he himself could not do it properly: to mow the yard (because the lawn mower broke every time, when he wanted to do it himself), to paint the fence, to roast shish kebabs for 150 people (previously Paddy had been the chief in the restaurant and moreover, he could do practically any kind of

work).

When Michael saw me, he gladdened. But I felt like a piece of lemon was in my mouth in spite of the fact that I had to show a smile. However, my mood quickly improved, when Michael decided to demonstrate to me all advantages of his house. He told me about it with such pompous pride, like a peacock demonstrating his luxuriant tail. It seemed he wanted me to fall into a swoon near the house door, having seen such luxury.

I was nearly falling into a swoon, and near the house door. But it was not from admiration, as Michael had wanted, but from the burst of laughter.

Michael decided to show me his bedroom, which only the ogre Ellochka (a heroine of satirical novel “Twelve chairs”, a kitsch-loving stupid housewife) could like: there were pungent wine red walls, a chandelier with candelabra in baroque or was it rococo style, the counterpane was in tiger skin colors, the table with cherubs. And among this pseudo-royal splendor there was a TV-set in the corner close to the ceiling. It had a huge remote control, which lay where it could be seen – on the downy pillow - easy for the master to reach it...

Having folded up from fighting back my laughter, I with difficulty went out of the house. But Michael did not notice anything. He was too self-centered to notice.

- Well, do you like it? – He asked me.

- Nice built-in cupboard, - I said honestly not going over other details not to offend him, - It was Paddy who built it in for me, - he pointed to him, having nodded in the direction of his brother who had already finished preparing the food for 150 guests and sat modestly in the kitchen with a piece of meat on his plate. I looked at Paddy – and saw suddenly that his eyes were laughing behind his thick lens glasses: unlike Michael, he saw and understood everything. Both of us snickered loudly without a signal. But Michael did not hear even this incident. He was gulping down the tasty meat, which Paddy cooked, and chattered like a magpie, showing me his diplomas from the culinary school, which hung on the walls.

Michael was a qualified baker. Once, when he was passing his sister’s house, he noticed me in the garden with a book in my hands.

- Reading? – He asked.

- Reading.

- And I don’t need books. I have my trade, - he said with effect, giving an impression that he was accomplished.

Another time I had to go to the farm in the mountains to collect a kitten for myself.

- Michael will drive you, - his sister said gladly. – When you are looking for a boyfriend, - be sure to choose a man who has a car! I do not mean Michael, I mean in general...

Naturally Michael drove me to his house instead of the farm:

- I’ll show you my new windows...

In the garden patient Paddy was mowing the grass. He waived to us cheerfully.

- Well, how do you like my new windows? – Michael asked, expecting a delighted response.

- Not bad windows, they are as they should to be. Well, were we not going to the farm...?

Of course, we did not find the farm that day though Michael asked the neighbouring farmers directions. So, the day after that I had to take a taxi. The farm was not so far away – Michael drove by its turning twice... Perhaps, he was busy thinking about what else he could show me.

In a month Michael put iron-grids on his windows. He spoke to everybody about it to excess, saying how much money he had paid for it, and waited for everybody to respect him.

A month later he was fired. It hurt his pride painfully. After that I did not see him for a long time.

- And how is Michael? – I asked his sister, when there were no ready topics for conversation. She signed:

- How? Nothing has changed. He wants to keep open house, but now there is no money. He is running his house in the same way as he runs his head into the noose - on credit. Recently he withdrew all our sister's savings from the bank, using her book which she had asked him to keep, while she is in Australia. I asked him: "How will you pay the debt back?" and he answered: "Don't worry, sister, I have money. I am going to take a second loan on my house ..."

- And how is his job status? Is he searching for a new one?

- No, he does not even think about it. He now says that he would rather be a dishwasher than work as a baker! Though bakers are wanted everywhere, you know ... Once he even worked in a Swiss bakery!

- And how about the shish kebab parties?

- He continues to throw them – he cannot lose face with his acquaintances! It does not matter how much it costs. Moreover, Paddy does all the work...

I remembered Paddy's shortsighted laughing eyes, his quick-working hands and his lanky figure in worn shabby jeans, cap and the same T-shirt in any weather. He had ants in his pants. I remembered him and asked humorously:

- And is your Paddy available, by chance?

It did not matter that he had not got a car and a house with an antique garden and a royal bedroom in which there was a "Sony" TV-set!

...Once, not long after that ill-fated shish kebab party, my acquiescent Veronique, a French woman, who heads a group that visits the applicants for political refugee status in the Belfast prison (remember Boris?), asked me to go with her to Magaberry prison: a Russian man from Latvia had been put there and he very much wanted to speak with somebody in his native language.

As a matter of fact, the applicants for the refugee status are not supposed to be imprisoned. To ask for political asylum is not a crime, but it is in other countries. Not in our snake pit... The Northern Irish law enforcement understands very well what the imprisonment is. They are used to it and they are specialists in that area. They are such specialists that even feature films about their treatment of political prisoners have been made, not to mention the fact that they had to pay fines worth many thousands, to the prisoners in the local gulags because of cruelty to them.

It would not be truthful, if I said that in Northern Ireland everyone who asks for political asylum is sent to prison. But they are in considerable number there. And you can never foresee, whether they allow you to live freely (as they did to dodger Kostya, whom I described above) or not. Allot of people are put into prison there – even Americans and South Africans. Imagine how they deal with Slavs and the likes– Romanians, Russians, Ukrainians, Latvians and so on...

Thus Kolya, a Russian from Latvia, found himself there (Latvia wasn't part of the EU

back then). To his mind, he was guilty of this himself: He made a mistake, having received a refusal for political asylum, and not knowing that one should appeal against it he started to panic and left for London so as not to be deported. However, when they explained his rights and he returned in Belfast to appeal against the decision, he was imprisoned to prevent him from traveling all over “Great” Britain... “Preventively” – as Mr. Bush, a big friend of freedom and democracy, says.

The main Northern Irish gulag, the notorious Long Kesh or H-blocks as they are called officially, were closed in the summer of 2000. They have still been arguing about its future, those who remember the political prisoners, who died in its torture chambers, want to turn it into a museum, and those who seek to wash away the blood from their hands and want humanity forget about the British authorities’ crimes in Ireland, - want to wipe Long Kesh from the face of the earth and build a stadium on its place. Kolya was imprisoned in Magaberry – where, by the way, his inmates were not only republican dissidents, but also “arrant” loyalists led by infamous Jonny Ader – “the symbol of the loyalist people’s resistance”. He was a drug dealer and had similar views with neo-fascists.

So, I went to visit Kolya and his mates –men from Iraq and Pakistan. They were quite an international company: The Zimbabwean woman Zobeyda and the French woman Veronique became like patrons for those “not at fault” prisoners, bringing them food from their native places every week, something which the prisoners could not have in prison; newspapers, sometimes even a video in their native language, that is if the women could find it...

Many imprisoned foreigners could practically not speak English. Though English teachers came to them twice a week, it did not help. In Northern Ireland research was written about the effect of imprisonment, and how it influenced those foreigners who had sacrificed so much on their bid for “freedom”. That research concludes that prison is quite unsuitable for such people and that such treatment is absolutely inhuman. But things haven’t changed at all...

The tall walls, decorated above with rings of barbed wire, surrounded Magaberry. I did not know if it was charged with electricity, but anyway we were not going to test it...

The guard, who opened the gate for us, behaved in a friendly manner to “the young foreign women”, because we were not so called “Fenian bitches”, as many people of this nation, alas, still like to point the finger of scorn at catholic women...

To visit “non-dangerous” prisoners (because it is quite clear that Kolya, Ali and Aziz were not going to subvert the power of Her Majesty British Queen on the territory of Ireland!) is nevertheless quite difficult. At first they make a temporary admission badge for you and you have to lay your hand on a “black box”, which identifies the palmatogram with the plastic card. You get this in exchange for your passport. You can use this card many times, because these datum can be deleted and record again.

Then you go into the building, where the unlucky prisoners are. The prison consists not only of one big bleak building, but of many two-story little houses, scattered all over its territory. The houses are white and look cozy enough, but for the iron grid (with different razzle-dazzles, perhaps, for better mood), which is also painted white, and the giant “daylight” lamps constant blazing into the windows ...

There is a grid on the door of the house too. Many Russian houses after perestroika, when

we became “free”, had to have such grids put on the doors. So, we have already become used to it.

But at first you have to go through the control post. Everything looks businesslike, but nobody is rude. My friends told me though, that I was lucky; the very polite officers were on duty that day. Not all of them were notable for politeness...

A redhead guide (“like ragout with orange agarics” – the line from R. Rozhdestvensky “Ballade about paints”) was waiting for us inside. He told us to carry our bags through the device, like in an airport, including the boxes with onions, rice, mayonnaise and buckwheat, which we brought as a presents.

We had to give him our mobile phones and he put them into a special bag. I looked at his face, had he seen that my mobile phone was covered in the Irish flag colors under the leather case? But did not pay attention to it...

Many things are forbidden there, for example, fruit with stones in them such as peaches, apricots (I do not know, how about sweet cherries?).

- Why? – I was surprised.

- What if the prisoner would like to commit suicide by swallowing the peach stone?

Hm... In such a way? I could not imagine it...

It was forbidden to bring dark clothes to prisoners – what if they wanted to run away in them? They would not be seen. Money could be given as a cheque, which is made out in the name of governor of the prison. Also the prisoner number should be written on it.

Kolya told me then that he received only 20 pounds out of the 50, which had been sent to him by the Russian church in London. Well, policemen also need money, the tip...

After our bags had been checked, they let us go inside (the door opens only if the data of the card and palmatogram coincide!). There was an old woman, strict-looking, who searched us. She did it formally – turning out our pockets. Doing this she helped me to find the misplaced pen. We had to give her our bags and purses. We brought only presents with us, but not all of them, Ali would have to sign up for clothes the morning after that in the presence of the governor...

After the control post we could go into the house of the prisoners. We rang the bell and another woman (she was a guard in the men’s department!) opened the grid door with a screech. We went up to the first floor – into the “recreation room”, where we could see a pool table and a TV-set. The conditions to be honest were almost the same as in hostels in Waterford in the North of Ireland, in which free refuges, waiting for the decision; or the women, who had run away from their abusive husbands, were accommodated. The difference was that the latter could move freely outside the building... But where could they “move” to on 15 pounds a week?

All three “prisoners” were healthy, young men of quite intelligent appearance, who were totally different-looking to, say, the criminal goon Johnny Adair. We went in pairs and Kolya began his unhurried and unadorned story about himself, about his life in London after escaping from there, when he was frightened by the first refusal and his nightmares about deportation.

It is very hard to be an illegal immigrant. There are a lot of people like us in London. We work a 16 hour day without any rights. They do not give any insurance, if you became ill. Everything is on your head. Don’t you like it? Starve like a dog... Many people sleep under bridges, everywhere they can find shelter for themselves... The cheapest sleeper,

where two men have to sleep on one sofa, costs 35 pounds per week. A private room costs as much as 50-60 pounds. Usually you have to work one day a week to pay for your lodging alone (16 hours!), a day – to pay for your food, a day – to pay the transport expenses. It means that you have to work 3 days a week just to survive. Only on Thursday and Friday can you earn for yourself...

There, where I came from, Russians live hard. Everybody lives hard there. Everybody, who has not big money, drinks a lot to forget their problems. The people, who have much money, play around with drugs... You want to study the native language? Yes, there are courses now unlike in Soviet times, but, do you know, how much does it cost? You have to pay half of your salary for lodging, so... You begin to choose, do you pay for a bed or do you not eat, or maybe it would be better to learn the language... You will get neither citizenship nor a good job without knowing the language... It is a vicious circle. You cannot even open a business. The Mafia has their people everywhere. When you go to register your business and the strapping guys are there at the same moment... anyway why am I telling you this? You understand all this unlike they who are here... They cannot imagine all these things and I cannot understand why they cannot imagine it...

I have a good lawyer. I have a hope... four months have passed, since I have been here. Now I am waiting for the second hearing. They say that I have a chance... Some men have been sitting here for about a year. But anyway people come and go from here constantly – somebody is deported, somebody is put here ... What do I do here? I sleep. Now I can sleep 16 hours a day. What else can I do here? Well, I study the language... They bring us to the gym once a week. We can go for a walk in the yard for an hour a day. But is it a yard? Two rooms like this equal the size of the yard, bare asphalt and a ball lying in a puddle... It is good that we have a television in the cell. But there is nothing to watch – they always show something sadistic and on the news they savor that somebody killed a child –all the time till the next child is killed... My belief is, they purposely show it to the people. “Do it with us, do it like we do...”

I cannot call home. The prices are so high that I can speak for only 40 seconds with my telephone card. Word for word: “How are you? I’m fine. Say hi to everybody for me...” – and over and out...

No, I do not complain. Were these guys put into our prison – they would not survive even a day! Unlike here... Well, when it was New Year’s Day, they did not lock us in all night. They brought pea soup for us. But other days they unlock the door at 8 o’clock in the morning, lock the door at 12:30 for 2 hours, then they unlock it again for 2 hours, then lock it again and then unlock the door till 8 o’clock in the evenings... and then – lights-out...

I kept silent instead of asking the question which people usually ask prisoners “And what are you here for?”, but he did not try to justify himself, as the criminals usually do. He knew that he had “broken the immigration laws” – without knowing about it. He did not ask himself, whether it was too cruel a punishment for it and, unlike Kostya, he bored himself with dignity.

At parting I asked him, what tasty Russian food he would like me to bring him the next time.

- Maybe, a slice of pork fat – I want to fry it myself... or... no, do not worry. I don’t like to ask...

On the way home we were given back our things in reverse order: bags, then mobile phones, passports, and then our plastic cards. The guards waved to us in a friendly way – to a Muslim, a Catholic and an atheist woman.

And I could still see his eyes, full of bitterness. He was one more man amongst the millions, whom the newly minted “honorable citizen of Dublin” deprived of a normal life on their native land by his “historical deeds”...

His eyes, they told more than words.

...In a week after our visit the police informed Veronique’s group that from now on they would have to fill in a form, which was designed not for prison visitors, but for those, who wanted to get job there. This form includes questions about the private life of not only those, who fill it in, but their parents, brothers and sisters (“list all those, with whom you were in a relationship with for last five years: full name, surname, date of birth, address” – this is an example of only one question).

Seeing Veronique became nervous, because she did not want to share her private life with the local policemen, I advised her to ask one more piece of paper, saying, that there is not enough place on the first one, and to fill it with different exotic names like Mohammed and Nuretdin.

I would fill it in this way myself. If you want “to amuse” the gendarmes, you should use all your sense of humor!

... There are certain things in life that because they are constantly seen, they become routine to the extent that you become blind and do not notice them.. This is until someone, one of your friends pays attention to them and allows you thereby to assess and see them in clear view.

It was eye-catching things that I had not noticed: many of the Irish, Dutch and representatives of other nations, even the inhabitants of the Caribbean, with absolutely no relationship to the United States wear clothes and shoes with American symbols. They do it without thinking and not because of a close relationship with the special overseas Evil Empire. Why? And why am I, having affection for, say, Cuba, why can I not easily find similar items bearing its images, unlike American junk, with which shops are littered in the most remote corners of our planet?

When Señor Arturo sent Lisa the Stars and Stripes t-shirt, I was not mad at him: He may not have been thinking about what he had bought for her. But I did feel indignant: My child had her own country, even a few countries, and none of them, fortunately, was the United States!

When I expressed my feelings (“why do we have other people’s symbols imposed on us, why cannot I find, for example, the same thing: some jeans with patches of the Irish” tricolor”, even in Ireland, not mentioning beyond?”), to my friend, a human rights lawyer Patricia, she amazed me with her calm and laconic reply, noticing what I had not thought as well.

- But this is what no one else does, no normal country –just the U.S. and UK! - She told me. – For everyone else it would be pointless.

Looking carefully, I realized that Patricia was right. You will not find anywhere else in the world in women’s clothing catalogs; say a sweater with French flags sewn on, or socks featuring the Turkish crescent. The only thing that could be compared with the sick protrusion of those symbols was African women’s dresses at election time, decorated with

the portraits of local political leaders. But - again, they are local. No other country besides America and Britain, as far as I know, impose so tiresomely on "the natives" of other countries that are entirely alien to them the "stars and stripes" or "Union Jack". It is clear, of course, that they are symbols of "cultural imperialism" from the above-mentioned countries ... But still: What is behind this? It is hard to believe that everyone, for example, Belarusians, who got a second-hand t-shirt with the image of the "starry-stripes," would certainly pay attention to it and become ardent fans of the "American Dream". Maybe this way we are prepared for the coming times when, according to the designs of the self-styled "masters of the world" and tailing Yankees John Bulls their flags would be hoisted in the central squares of our cities? So it would not affront our eye?

Although I have a few things with Soviet symbols that I found with great difficulty, until recently, I was not at all eager to wear something like that – until the events that befell our country, and it disappeared from the map. Maybe sometimes I put on these articles now because of my longing for it. The pain of what happened.

But what does it have to do with America and Britain? After all, they won the cold war, as they assure us all. From where did the winners get such a violation of their dignity, such frustration, a desire to impose them on everybody - if they really are the winners and as such they feel? After all, winners are known for their tendencies to be generous and for a complete lack of desire to prove anything to anyone, their victory has to be proof enough ...

I have long been faced with the fact that the reality is not as they said. I did not connect this before with suchlike phenomenon, as these T-shirts, scarves and jeans.

I was young and prone to asking naive questions of the kind that to this day are asked, without giving any answers to them, in analytical articles by commentators in some Russian newspapers: why have we been hated and feared for so many years after what has been declared as a "victory of Western democracy"? Especially those whom we did not even make anything at all - for example, in panic fears by the Dutch, whose feelings towards the Russian on average is a statistical case of a curious mixture of fear, hatred and desire to hit on the sly. After all, we did not even enter Amsterdam in 1945, Holland was liberated by the Canadians. After all, they practically do not know us at all!

One day my mother, who was a very glamorous woman, paying me "a friendly visit" in Holland, went to the Dutch city of Leiden, when on the street she was spoken to by a Dutchman who apparently wanted to get acquainted with her. When she succeeded in broken French to explain to him that spoke neither Dutch nor English, the Dutch gleefully exclaimed, "Oh, vous-etes Francaise"? My mother's answer was: «Non, je suis Russe! "

The poor guy was visibly contorted. "Oh ... Russe ... very nice, very nice to meet you ..." - and a second later he flashed his heels down the street ...

The case is very typical. However, not all Dutch are so weak-hearted. If a Dutchman thinks that he can hurt you, he begins to pour out his bile on you by listing the various disasters of Russian life that he was supplied with on a massive scale by local television, apparently in anticipation that you would finally start to cry.

Usually, I do not give them satisfaction. Somehow they will survive. I smile when I hear them mention our trade in women, and say that this one we learned from them, from the Dutch. Moreover, that the Netherlands was the last country in Europe, which officially

abolished slavery in the past century ... Reminders of this usually discourage them to continue their verbal sadism.

No, maybe the Dutch behavior is so flawed because it's such a small nation, and we - a (still) large one? No wonder that even towards their neighbors, the Germans they feel such ill will, so that they "could not even eat in peace": Dutch Germanophobia is the more striking because even the first line of the Dutch National Anthem "Wilhelmus" says the father of the Dutch nation was "van Deutschen bloed" ...

No, the Germans are not the cause. Maybe it is the fact that winners are not just really the winners?

I realized this particularly acutely after seeing videos about our country - "Russia" from the series «VideoVisits», targeting the travellers.

I had seen videos from this series before, but none of them had so much unbridled hate. The malevolence and painful political judgments that are in the video of this sort are not necessary. It is not propaganda nor was it pretending to be a scientific documentary series, but a garden variety scenery film about our attractions and culture.

Much of what was said was made by a really angry that contradicted what was being shown on the screen. Before I had time resent his statement that "communist" Moscow "had no cultural night life" (this is in Moscow, then ,what about all its theaters, concert halls, circus', clubs, and cinemas!), speaking of "culture", we have seen what an American "culture bringer" means ...

- "But now young people have places to go to!" - He cried, and we are shown a dark bar with bored boys and girls, who, under the deafening thunder (the music could not be called music even at a stretch - so tells you a person who in childhood, gained love for a disco!) sipping alcoholic beverages from their glasses. They all had the aspects of those literally dying of boredom ... And we are now shown some new arrivals, who are thoroughly searched by the "security guard" at the entrance lest they carry firearms or knives ... Freedom, you know!

The voice has to agree, but still, like a stubborn sheep, does not want to see the reasons shown

- Unfortunately, the new freedoms have led to some problems - for example, an increase in crime ...

Why not say openly, mister - "unfortunately, the free market economy will inevitably lead to more crime?"

Somehow, showing the light into Irish history in the film from the same series about Ireland, its authors do not give their own political assessments of the Easter Rebellion in 1916, or of the struggle by the Irish people against the conquerors of Cromwell. Why, then, do the same U.S. (judging by the accent and style) filmmakers when regarding Russia simply not just list the facts? Why does the anger in them rage so high that they have to spit out something like "Here before you is a monument to those killed in the civil war ... These people really believed they were building a better future ... If they only knew ..." The Americans who fought once for their country's independence from the British Empire, certainly did not know what a moral monster and world scale bloodsucker it would become in the future. But is this suitable to mention when facing a monument to these people?

I have long listened to vomit aimed at us from "the winner in the Cold War." Then it hit me, winners just do not behave thus. Only losers do – they are ready to gnaw the ground out of their own wicked weakness.

If it is true that we "lost" and they "won", why can they not settle down and live their life? Why are they haunted by the memory of a society that was built by our fathers, grandfathers, mothers and grandmothers?

Winners do not behave thusly!

Yes, it hurts to look at the world in which we live today. We are witnessing the genocide of the Palestinian people - which could not even be loudly called genocide, because the executioner of the Palestinian children is "the best friend of the American elephant." The front pages of newspapers do not report it, but instead describe the queues for the funeral near a coffin of the British queen-mother, who had lived without any sorrows and needs. Or else the press writes allegations about whose bust is bigger, that of, Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera ...

"Arik-bulldozer" destroys more and more civilians, and he is not only not targeted by the rain of bombs, such as with NATO is "fighting against ethnic cleansing" in Yugoslavia - no, it was not even discussed by the B&B (Bush & Blair) alliance which was employed only in trying to realize the cherished dream: how to finish what was not finished by Daddy Bush and deal with Saddam Hussein who for a long time had not bothered anyone.

Sometimes it seems that all of this is just a bad dream. But it's impossible to live any longer like this - not only for us but for all the peoples of the world which make up the majority.

The day will come when the storm brakes. It's inevitable. For he who sows the wind, sorrow, tears and death will reap in the end such a hurricane, which he had never dreamed of ...

I went to Nice for St. Patrick's Day.

Actually, it happened almost by accident. I wanted to forget everything at least for two days. Throw the bad dreams out of my head. And yet – I was tired of the constant gloomy - in unison with the endless rain outside the window - news reports: "Last night a Catholic school was burned... the home of Catholic family was attacked with homemade grenades ... a Catholic Church was desecrated ... the police called for witnesses to come forward Police shoot several volleys of plastic bullets at the crowd in the Ardoyne ... David Trimble, the Unionist Party leader made a claim to the British government to recognize that a truce with IRA was being violated by the events in Colombia ... a crowd of Protestant residents in North Belfast has once again attacked the Catholic schoolgirls on their way to Holy Cross School ... Loyalists required that the schoolgirls went to the school by the back door ... so what is in that story about the IRA in Colombia, and the role of Cuba in this?" And so on - in the same spirit.

And now I'm disembarking the plane far away from Northern Ireland on the Southern French shore. I arrived without incident, that was a surprise for myself, I discovered that the London Luton Airport "squeaker" that should be triggered only by passing metal through the detector, consistently reacts to everyone, even if one does not have any coins in his pockets or metal buttons. I witnessed them search an old disabled lady in a wheelchair...

That was disgusting; this falsehood, if you want to search all people, who could prevent you? Why play these stupid games with the metal detector where he just could not work? Indeed, in that same dress I went through an Irish airport, and during the return - in France, and neither of them made a sound. But these are Englishmen for you. This polite hypocrisy and belief that all around are so silly that they could not notice this is as purely British thing as are the books by Agatha Christie.

- Paranoics - I said, not raising my voice, and without changing the tone, while an Englishwoman patted her hands over the alternate legs of my jeans. Your conscience is unclean, so you all are so afraid.

She started, but pretended that nothing was said. I knew exactly how she would react - that is the same way as the Dutch. Here they cannot take the polite mask off, at least not in front of witnesses. A stab in the back is usually applied.

... But at last all this is behind us: fences with electrified barbed wire, armored cars on the streets, politely-lying British. And I'm out of the airport in Nice, where I am enveloped by an almost tropical compared with Ireland, stuffy and dark spring night. Silhouettes of palm trees are dark in the windows of the bus, and the white-toothed smiles of the bus driver - a dazzling, handsome dark-haired man, the likes of whom I had not seen for many years. The famous Promenade des Anglais and its casino shone with multicolored neon, and the very fine, delicate fragrance of mimosa blossom and vanilla muffins spread around me in the air ... Oh, my God, is it really not a fairy tale?

... When you first walk through the city you think, this is a fairy tale. Is it not how communism should be – across the horizon of the seaside boulevard stroll trouble-free, perfect looking and still devoted mature couples in sporting slim form, carefully holding each other's hands?, Young boys and girls fly by as fast as an arrow on modern bicycles and roller skates. Everyone was tanned, calm, cheerful, and energetic –they were in true mental harmony with their physical development, as in our old textbook on scientific communism. From everywhere came amazing smells of the most incredible dishes, and the prices were also quite affordable (for locals). On my way, eating an amazing roll with cream, I watched above the sea many passenger planes swirling in landing maneuvers. People around were very friendly, very polite, and everywhere the stunning French is heard, which I miss so since high school, and "L'Humanité Dimanche" ("Vive la Grande Revolution Socialiste d'Octobre!" - I remember...), to my surprise, my broken French is understood and even praised.

The hotel is small and drowned in a sea of flowers. The hotelier looking like two peas like the police commissar from the movie "Octopus" was half-French and half-Italian and knows a few words in Russian. There are more and more of our compatriots, they stand out between the walking public along the boardwalk with their criminal faces. He enjoyed telling me that he had been married in a Russian church in Nice, which was built before the revolution by the rich Russians who favored holidaying here. Never mind that he is Catholic. He does not understand - and does not hide it,- what is going on in the Northern Ireland.

- It's a long story - I told him.

I fall asleep with the window open - this is in the middle of March! – But there is even no noise, as happens in all cities in the normal weekend nights. Nobody is singing drunken songs, breaking windows, burning cars, and there are no screams like if somebody is being sliced. I guess I was just lucky that there were no nearby fellow citizens, I thought

as I fell asleep. First, I dream constantly about a humming, low hanging overhead helicopter - as it happens day after day, seven days a week in Belfast. But then I gradually relax, lost myself in a dream - and now I see the Irish Leader smiling at me with a sprig of mimosa in his teeth. I took his hand and we both said nothing and walked slowly along the Nice Promenade, watching the last rays of the setting warm French sun disappearing over the horizon. He turns to me and tells me in perfect French: "Mademoiselle, qu'est-ce que vous voulez faire ce soir?" "How come he knows French?" - I think feverishly and wake up. It was getting lighter outside the window. Cursed habit of getting up early for work! I turn to the other side. And out of the window came the fresh, warm vanilla muffin smell ...

At breakfast, the young Moroccan brings me hot chocolate and croissants. Tired of smelling burnt sausage and ham with sour fried tomato, the Irish traditional breakfast ingredients, which chased me even in sleep, I'm almost ready to cry as Avessalom Iznurenkov: "Ah, ah, high class!" I go out to the street, feeling 10 years younger than the day before.

Everything around still sparkles. White houses, whose windows are closed from the sun with wooden shutters. Expensive boutiques. And still the same young people around on roller skates. Dazzling turquoise sea, calm, and, in contrast to places where I live, there is not the slightest breeze. At the Place Garibaldi fish restaurants prepared for opening, waiters laid out on display fresh seafood. Smells like fish. Around the corner it smells like dried flowers and perfumes – they are selling the traditional Provencal goods here. It seems that if you look at this beauty after that poverty, which I saw on Curaçao or at home, here is already built what we only dreamed of. Some people know how to live! But the fairy tale is interrupted by rude reality, when I nearly stumble on a beggar sitting on the ground, not noticing him. Asking for money nearby a refugee from Kosovo sat with her four children and then a pretty French woman with a white rabbit in her arms. Clearly, she hopes for a handout out of pity for the rabbit. After walking a few streets, I noticed that begging with animals in beggars' hands must be obviously a local tradition I have not encountered anywhere else.

In Pieton, a pedestrian zone, crowded by tourists - the Africans, dressed to attract attention in national costumes, are trying to sell their souvenirs, and Romanian Gypsies perform a sultry tango on accordions. When I get to the station, I find myself quite unexpectedly in places, remarkably reminiscent of the Rotterdam Delfshaven where I lived for almost 5 years, there you can meet just anyone but not locals. Apparently, they are afraid to come here. When you are here you wonder, where are the fit, well-off-sporting symbols of the capitalist fairy tale living in a society of abundance? This is a noisy and stuffy place. Around me heaps of debris lie and Moroccan children in not so fresh clothes are going. The Africans haggle with the Arabs about the price of fruit. The buildings' walls are inscribed with graffiti. But I am accustomed to Delfshaven, and feel a surge of nostalgia. I lived there for five years, in an area that was considered a ghetto - and no one ever told me a hard word. Here as well, a slightly intoxicated elderly Moroccan invites me to drink a cup of coffee with him and in response to my polite refusal tells me an equally polite compliment and goes her own way. What are they afraid of, the locals? Or do they just not want to see someone else's poverty because of guilty a conscience?

I get to Old Nice: narrow streets, as in Italian films. On the rocks sit a group of drunken

and somewhat dirty local tramps. "La France pour les Francais!" - One hissed through his rotten teeth when I walked past - and spits with gusto. Far away on the horizon one could see a white luxury villa bought on her honest hard-earned money by Tatiana Dyachenko, or whatever she is called now...³⁶⁷

Blowing from the Mediterranean Sea, at last, a fresh breeze comes. And with it fades away the haze of the sweet fairy tale of capitalism around me. My gentle, handsome hotelier with a frustrated face cuts broken flowering bushes around the hotel.

- Such beauty - and sure people would spoil it!-he is indignant. I ask him how to lease here a private apartment for a week.

-You'll need to know good areas - he enlightens me. - Read the signs on the doors, take a look first, what sort of names. Or you could get some of ... those - and looks with a disgusted expression at a passing Algerian.

The sun was slowly and solemnly coming down through the horizon, there are the first stars. To the Promenade – it is so romantic! But I look around at all these fit, healthy, well-groomed, relaxed, respectable people - and neither one of them I would want to go with hand in hand. Better to dream about the Leader!

... Yes, my life was in full swing key, there was no time to be bored. But once I was issued a free minute - for example, in bed at night before sleep – as I closed my eyes, before my mind's eye immediately appeared the stranger with his white-toothed smile and thick eyebrows. Now I did not need sleeping pills or antidepressants - I peacefully fell asleep; lulled mentally by the cold light of his Irish blue eyes...

I was very much looking forward to May.

³⁶⁷ Tatiana Dyachenko (now Yumasheva) – is a daughter and an adviser of former Russian president Eltsin.

Chapter 16. Particularly important task

*"Ardent and passionate feeling
Let me declare at last,
I know not your name, fair fellow,
But love is the future for us. "*
(P. Armand. "Clouds Are Leaden in Narva")

... In Ireland it is seldom hot, but that spring was not especially Irish. I sat in the garden, trying to hide in the shadows, when the gate creaked and a man appeared, whom I definitely saw for the first time in my life - and at the same time he was surprisingly familiar, like someone very close to me.

- Good morning – he said with a high, but husky voice, like the voice of Shusher The Timid, in the Kir Bulychev's book about Alice³⁶⁸. - I am Brendan O'Reilly, Fionntan's brother. "

Fionntan's brother? Of course, this could only be him! The same hooked nose, the same blue eyes - but Brendan is taller and heavier. I remembered that Fionntan talked about him.

"Brendan worked with us in the organization of former political prisoners in Dublin. But it is very difficult for him to work with people, he became too sensitive after being in jail. He was good with computers, video recordings. But if someone said something wrong - he would quietly leave everything, go out the door and never come back ... "

Fionntan always talked about his younger brother with great affection. Almost paternally, I would say, as he is 9 years senior. I had the feeling that Fionntan wanted to protect him from life's misery

But today, everything was the opposite. Fionntan, a Republican veteran, is in distant Latin America, in one of the most dangerous prisons in the world. Together with his two young companions, he is accused of military training of local guerrillas. Proof? Yes, the same as that of the Northern Ireland Unionists in almost all recent political matters relating to the Irish Republicans in Ireland itself: "We do believe that ..."

Today Brendan O'Reilly is my guest. Many times I talked to him on the phone, but I see him for the first time. His nerves are utterly strained: he is the only one from the family, who visits Fionntan overseas, he is depressed with the uncertainty surrounding the fate of his elder brother, whom he admired since childhood. Recently their eldest sister died, who served as mother for them: she was not even 65...

³⁶⁸ Shusher the Timid, an alien from "The Little Girl Nothing Ever Happens To", by Kir Bulychev (1934–2003). It was a [pen name](#) of Igor Vsevolodovich Mojeiko who was a [Soviet](#) and [Russian science fiction](#) writer and historian. This book is from well known series of Bulychev's stories are young adult stories about Alisa Seleznyova, a young girl from the future.

- She burned out like a candle - quietly says Brendan. - Fionntan never got to say goodbye to her and grieved very much over this. I think that what happened to him played a considerable role in the sudden and unexpected worsening of her health.

*".... It was nice to get a letter from you. I also was interested in these talks. Irish long evenings in a relaxing home atmosphere and a glass of Irish coffee it is enough coffee here, but only coffee without adding whiskey!
We were unlucky, that the Army / American Embassy decided to arrest us and throw us in jail, but the good news is that we found ourselves in a very interesting situation because of this. The country where we are, quite possibly, will be the first country in the world in which a major revolution of the XXI century will take place - something comparable with Vietnam by historical significance. The great capitalist project of corporate globalisation, it seems, does not work in Latin America. And this country will become a battleground of the Left and the Right, because the United States seems to have decided that it is so important to them strategically, that it is a matter of life and death to crush the left rebels here. We are in an excellent location to observe with our own eyes how history is happening - of course, we will have to get out of here alive to tell the story! Another lucky thing is that I am finally able to learn Spanish - the language of the Revolution in the world today, and that I was fortunate to meet and live among and talk about everything with prisoners, guerrillas, paramilitarists, soldiers of the local army and police, and even some Americans working here for local government. Finally, the third blessing of fate - is that now I will have free time, at the moment, for painting. When I was free, I was always too busy, and I never had time for it due to the pressure of the events taking place around. "*

(Letter from Fionntan)

Fionntan was born on the day that changed the world - the day of the U.S. atomic bombing of one of the Japanese cities - in Rathmullen, county Donegal, in the north-west of the island of Ireland. Maybe that's why during his whole life he has also tried to change history?

".... I received your book about Peter the Great, it's very interesting! After tomorrow, I will be able to dig into it. What's so special about tomorrow? Tomorrow the trial begins! To some extent it has already started today. Today there was a press conference organized by our lawyers. For many weeks before we tried to foresee difficult questions we can be asked, all tricks of prosecutors and unfriendly-minded journalists, and to acquaint all of our team with all the details. It is not easy in a country where there is actually a state of emergency, the new zones with wartime laws, the economy in a catastrophic situation. The currency plummeting down and the demands and threats of the IMF and the World Bank causing massive unrest among those who still have jobs and the despair of those who have already lost them. But anyway, the press conference was held in the morning - and it seemed to be a success. Government media, which so happily savored every word of the accusers last year are now able to publish in the same way every word of the defense - and all this even before the official court! We are told that

many people are watching this on TV with greater interest and pleasure than they do their "soap operas"! Of course, when all of this is over, they will return to their everyday life, and we will try to get the best possible results - and hope. Tomorrow it will become clear whether the prosecutor will claim to condemn us for military training for guerrillas or focus on the less serious charge of using false passports.

All this case is highly political, and if it is exploited, will involve this country, Ireland, both North and South, Britain, America, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and maybe Europe (after all, we are European Citizens). For false passports, people are usually just deported ... "
(Letter from Fionntan)

... Ironically, the county in which the most geographically northern point of Ireland - Cape Malin Head – is situated, politically relates not to the North but to the South - Republic of Ireland. The reason is simple: the majority of population in Donegal, are Irish Catholics, and if it had joined "Ulster" in the 20s, the local descendants of Protestant colonists would not be able to secure a majority in it. That is why they refused to take in Donegal as well as other counties, historically part of the Irish province of Ulster - Monaghan and Cavan. This Ulster - not the fictional country of "Protestant government for Protestant people" - repeated in miniature the fate of the whole Ireland, being artificially divided.

Maybe that's why Ulster people of the Irish Republic always understood their Northern brothers better than Dubliners who are far from "all these problems". Ulster's people have always been at the forefront of the struggle for the reunification of the country.

Talk to an ordinary farmer in Cavan, or a car dealer in Monaghan or to those forced to emigrate to England in their youth in search for a job, like Fionntan was in his time, and you'll see that.

Donegal is one of the few places in Ireland where the population (or at least part of it) still retained their native Irish language. However, according to Brendan, their family was not Irish speaking:

- Yes, Fionntan is fluent in Irish, he loves language and is always trying to promote it. His children also speak Irish at home, but he learned it when he was an adult, among Irish Republicans in a British prison. The Northern city of Derry was very close to us - just across the bay. In our childhood we often went "abroad" - to the North, and what we saw there, the way how authorities treated the same Irish people as we were, deeply shocked Fionntan and determined the course of his whole subsequent life.

"... Around now there is a lot of noise and confusion, because it is the second day of this trial, and we have many visitors. It's all because of the positions of the court - the authorities did all they could to make our defenders speak first, and thus to expose any weakness in defense, which they then could use for instructions to their witnesses. But our lawyers said that the defense has a right to hear the charges first and to reply only after it.

The result was that the case was postponed - first to the 5th, then to the 6th, then to the 7th. It is advantageous for the authorities for two reasons: it gives them more time, and makes the defense spend money bringing witnesses from Ireland and observers from several different countries, again!

On the other hand, it also exposes the fact that the authorities have no truly reliable witnesses and serious evidence that makes it easier for us to obtain the support of public opinion and to expose the local judicial system, and at the same time this whole rotten political system and the role of U.S. supporting it...

"This week we were visited by several members of the Irish parliament and a senator, as well as by very good lawyers (two Irish, Australian, two Americans). I think that we were able to cause substantial damage to the local political system and American assistance to her - but time will show. American lawyers were acquainted with Latin America, and they have no illusions about crimes this government commits on its territory ...

*I feel well and will try to start painting. With greetings and love,
Finn."*

(Letter from Fionntan)

Fionntan, like many Donegal fellows in the 70-s, had worked in England, building roads. "Almost all roads there were built by our Donegal guys. This is despite the fact that in Donegal itself there are still no real motorways" - recalled Farmer Frank, a good friend of Fionntan from those days in London,. - "At that time Fionntan had a black beard, which made him look like a thief from an Irish folk song. We knew him as the Engineer ..." It is said that in his youth he was in the rank of the "Engineering department" of the IRA" - but Fionntan never spoke much about his past.

"... Well, the entire public portion of the trial has finally ended - the judge will have few months (3) to render a decision. The army has expressed its stance last week that no one should believe in our innocence, according to the General, who is the head of it. It was wondered, whether the judge was impressed by the large number of foreign observers at the trial - or for any other case, if he thought to indulge them."

Today we read a local magazine which is similar to "Time" in America. There was an article about this process, almost in the same spirit, which was suggested by the General. The tone of the article was to mock at our defense.

The judge, perhaps, also remembers what happened in one of the local towns about 5 or 6 years ago. A German citizen was arrested and accused of cooperating with the guerrillas. When it came to trial, the judge declared him innocent and released him. Shortly thereafter, the judge was arrested and spent 2 years in prison. Warnings of the army should be taken seriously. Despite all this, publicity of our case makes the position of the prosecutors difficult, and we can be discharged in training of guerrillas. But we

can be seriously punished for passports, the maximum sentence for this is 8 years. Well, we shall wait and see.

How long do we have to wait? By law, the judge has three months. He told the media that it is a very complicated matter, so he would need some time to come to a decision. I think he wanted to say that he will need all 3 months - or almost all. As soon as he pronounces the sentence, the prosecutor can appeal the decision - and will surely do that. This appeal will be considered by three judges, who will have 2 months. So it can take a long time, until at last we will know what to expect. Of course, the decision could be made faster and ...

.... We were in court only one time - to read our statements. Now we should get used to waiting - but at least there is no longer the need to prepare for saying or doing something.

Now I can concentrate again on the Spanish language classes and art - or just relax.

Maybe I will read something.... "

(Letter from Fionntan)

Fionntan was imprisoned in several prisons during his life, both in Britain and in the Irish Republic, in Portlaoise. Often he was on the run from the authorities. People tell stories of his wanderings in "safe houses" (farms, which hid the IRA members, in the border counties of the Irish South) and about how he managed to escape from the police at the last minute ... Last time he was released in the second half of the 1980s and since then he has been actively involved in the political life of Ireland. Having settled in Dublin, he made a family there. He never climbed to the party top positions. He decided to play a useful role – to educate the Republican youth. Together with his comrade, who had settled in Ireland, an Englishwoman called Violet, Fionntan began tireless work in political education of young people who have decided to join the Republican ranks.

In contrast to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, where for some reason it was assumed that ideology is an elementary thing, so it can be in the hands of any idiot (and because of this we ended up with a crash and lost our ideological war), the Irish Republicans - and by that word I do not mean wealthy upstart nationalists, like my already mentioned "rising star", but namely people like Fionntan, those who are not so visible, but are, so to say, the true backbone of the republican movement – were well aware of the importance and necessity of a thorough, though not formal political education, which gives a basis for forming in many young people empirically revolutionary convictions and a genuine avant-garde group of young people who at one time would come to replace them and lead the country to the implementation of the republican dream of a united, socialist Ireland, not allowing the "fellow travelers", whom are so many in the Sinn Fein today, to regenerate the party from within, as happened in our country. And this task is not easy, as you can imagine.

"Education – a political education! – has supreme significance now. It will play the decisive role of defining in whose hands our struggle will be in the future, and what way it will go," - Fionntan used to say. He was really one of the few genuine communists in

such ill-assorted Irish national liberation movement people. We could discuss for hours what happened with the Soviet Union, how it happened, how our Communist Party got out of control and rotted from within, what mechanisms are necessary to avoid this happening in other countries in the future, how people should carry out continuous and effective control over those in whose hands lie the power - and Fionntan has expressed some of the most interesting and quite practical ideas

".... It is impossible to be sure that we will be released in the visible future, because this is the country, whose system is based on the inequity towards its own people, so what to say about foreigners like us!

One of the local imprisoned guerrillas, who lost both arms in the explosion, is writing a book about his guerrilla life. I wanted to help him to publish it, but he was transferred to another prison, and I lost contact with him

.... Barry now is reading "Mother"³⁶⁹ by Gorky ... We are almost all the time indoors with artificial light, and it lasts for seven or eight months, that is why it is very difficult for me to focus my eyes, and I try not to read too much. In addition, the effect of expectations of a sentence makes it psychologically very difficult to concentrate on anything whatsoever - instead I'm trying to learn Spanish.

By nature I am not very sociable and quite silent, and it limits my ability to practice the language. I'm more inclined by nature to spend time alone with myself, draw or write. To learn Spanish, It would be better to talk, about any nonsense, but I find it boring to talk nonsense ... For example, card games and various board games are very popular here, and people talk a lot during the game, but I'm not interested. It is also popular to watch TV, but it is also a very passive occupation. When I recover from the flu, I will try to communicate with others "

(Letter from Fionntan)

I was attracted to Fionntan's shy openness. Unlike many Irish nationalist politicians, this discreet, gentle, modest man was concentrated on more than just his own nation, its pain and problems. He was interested in everything about other countries and cultures, he tried to meet different people from around the world - and talked with them without any prejudice.

".... This time they tried to make our relatives nervous during visits, trying to force us to accept less favorable conditions than those which we had before. But in the end they were forced to surrender, and everything remained the same.

Here in this country, a former president of the largest trade union was arrested and charged with having links with the guerrillas. This must be seen in the context of the planned strike in the oil industry. They arrest political opponents and union leaders, especially in areas with the developed oil industry, and accusations of having links with the guerrillas are very difficult to deny for any socially active person. This means that

³⁶⁹ Mother (1907) - novel of Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), the first work of socialist realism. The book tells the story of a mother who takes after her son to socialism and works for it.

you can keep people in prison for years - and when the process falls apart against them, they can say: "Our justice is true!" - Because these people were not sentenced!

.... With a new regime here we can no longer have any electrical appliances, including CD players - nothing, except for a small radio. I hope I see a lot of new movies when I get back home to Ireland.

.... The rules are getting stricter for us. This is most likely the influence of the American administration, but perhaps this is due to lack of money in the budget. From next Sunday we should give back all electrical appliances or they will be confiscated. This includes TV sets, and even some kitchen sets, like mixers. This means that we should not even dream about video. We have long had a copy of the movie "H-3"[\[1\]](#), but we did not see it. I never had any electrical appliances here, so I have nothing to lose, except for some things in the kitchen which could help when I had something to cook in a hurry in the evening.

(Letter from Fionntan)

Brendan O'Reilly visited me shortly before one of his numerous trips to Latin America. He told me what the relatives of Irish prisoners have to face visiting prison. About long queues of visitors waiting in line under the scorching sun. About the fact that children are allowed to visit their fathers only one single Sunday of the month. About how an Irish woman who led the campaign to release Fionntan and his comrades, was not allowed to enter the prison simply because she was wearing trousers, but women while visiting prison should be wearing a skirt. About shouting of numerous paramilitary guys when Fionntan comes to the common space in order to see his relatives About the attempts to poison the Irishmen and to separate them, bringing the only Spanish speaking one unexpectedly to another prison, many kilometers away from the capital.

"... Your story about that Canadian tourist shows how the propaganda works. They spread a rumor that we are mercenaries: a blatant lie, but many believe it. I think that there are people who believe in much worse lies about us. I wonder what this venal press will write when our verdict is announced?"

I have not heard before that the British are lobbying for the change of the name of Bobby Sands street in Tehran. Britain and America intimidate Iran as the next possible victim of their joint aggression. But I hope that the Iranians will not allow themselves to be intimidated! "

(Letter from Fionntan)

Fionntan often wrote letters to me, but I received them mostly through his relatives or through Violet, with whom I quickly became friends through this. Violet was an extraordinary woman. Coming from a wealthy English family, she was the sole heir of her parents and received appropriate education and upbringing. For example, she was introduced to the Queen of England during her first ball. She finished one of the prestigious British universities with a degree in economy. When she was a student, Violet

became fascinated by Marxism, and was deeply upset by the fate of working people – something she had no idea of in her childhood. Violet tried to help them herself, handed out nearly all of her inheritance, and then ... Then, on the path of her life she met an Irish revolutionary, with whom she had fallen in love. And Violet became an IRA volunteer. She took part in some daring operations, about which she did not like to talk. But I was told about them by Dermot. For example, how she was pretending to be a French aristocrat, high jacked a helicopter in Donegal and forced the pilot to drop on a police station in the North ... a bomb placed in a large farm milk can. But it got stuck when they tried to drop it. Since then Violet was in prison twice. After the trial she declared that she was proud of being guilty!

Violet got married, gave birth to her son and raised him up till he was 3 years old - all that while being behind bars. She was a living example to prove that an outsider could eventually become part of the Irish liberation movement. But those were different times, the times of direct action, when such people as she, were needed ... And yet, talking to her, I tried to understand what was her secret, how did she become what she was. I do not mean that one should certainly go to jail first, but her quick wit and recklessness were definitely to my liking. Though not everyone liked her in the ranks of the Irish, and exactly for the same qualities. Well, Fionnuala, for example, was not very fond of Violet...

Meeting her, it was impossible to say that this small, skinny woman was an aristocrat. Her manners were sharp, her voice was low, almost masculine, smoke-filled. Violet smoked a lot, coughed and used quite firm expressions almost after every word. But, knowing her life story, I did not feel any dislike - even though actually I can not stand swearing.

- Fionntan is such a wonderful person... - she said, and she did not have enough words to describe it, and tears came to her eyes, which she immediately wiped: a revolutionary should not cry.

They worked together for many years, and some Republicans who did not know Fionnuala even believed that Fionntan and Violet were a married couple. He did not have any prejudice to her English origin, and after communicating with her I knew that Fionntan treated me so well because I probably reminded him of something in the young Violet ...

No, of course, I was still a long way off from this brave and selfless woman in all respects, but the very thought that people could see something in common in us, evoked a feeling of deep satisfaction in me.

Fionntan once sent me a letter directly to my home address, a registered one. You should have seen how our postman looked at me! Strange that Fionntan did not think about it. Maybe he has already forgotten what is our life like over here?

Hopefully it will change for the better by the time he finally returns home ...

... I started counting out the last week before the forthcoming meeting with my blue-eyed stranger. The closer the day came, the more nervous I became. Not because of the possible surveillance - although I took the issue seriously - but because of what the meeting itself will be like. What did these guys need, what should I do in order not to let them down – something like that.

On Tuesday I was called as a translator in Bangor³⁷⁰ - into a refuge for abused women. It made me very upset, because it has reminded me of my own recent past. I took time off from work at noon and rushed there.

... And here before me I see my old acquaintance! It is Marina again, sitting opposite to me, keeping her hands on her knees in the lock and holding back tears. True, as soon as she opens her mouth, and I hear her voice, I realize that these are not the tears of a woman hoping for sympathy, but of one who was driven to despair, the very stubborn, resolute desperation that can move mountains in difficult times. From my own experience I know that a person reaches this state only having passed through hell first, and for a short period of time. It is a kind of second wind that suddenly happens when you have almost thought that you will now fall by the side of the road, like an exhausted horse destined to be shot. When you have almost prepared yourself for certain death, but suddenly think: "Why should I give up? No, I'm not going to let them do this to me!"

Marina is surrounded by all sorts of social and other workers who by their position are supposed to take care of her and her two daughters. Instead, she has to fight with them for the simple, basic necessities.

... She appeared in this shelter for beaten women, as she says, by accident. She never thought that she - a doctor with a nearly 20-year seniority, a respected, educated, dignified woman with two wonderful daughters - excellent students, gentle creatures, would ever find themselves in such an institution.

Last summer Marina, a divorced middle-aged Russian woman, attractive, active, intelligent, married a "Northern Irish" man. Everything seemed to be good now. In the native Stavropol her daughters were envied by their classmates: now they will live in a civilized country, a new future opens to them! Who would have thought that this respected gentleman - a farmer, who already had grandchildren, will beat and mock her?

Marina had poor English when she came here, and had no idea where to look for help in such a situation. However, seeing her children suffer from watching their own mother suffer forced her to make a desperate step. She called the police twice (usually it takes our women several years to make up their mind, Marina needed only few months). And finally, she secretly fled with her daughters from her new home to a shelter. No, not to this one. This, in the seaside town of Bangor, is a decent place compared to where they were until last week, in North Belfast, the area of the worst conflict.

³⁷⁰ Bangor (from [Irish: Beannchor](#)) is a large [town](#) in [County Down, Northern Ireland](#). It is a [seaside resort](#) on the southern side of [Belfast Lough](#) and within the [Belfast Metropolitan Area](#)

What she experienced there was worse than what had been in the house of her second husband. It opened her eyes on local "civility". What happened, she could tell me before her social workers gathered.

- I have never seen anything like it in my life. It's just not the place for a decent man. Alcoholic mothers who do not care about their children getting under their feet. Mothers leave at night – for a "spree" - while leaving the shelter is forbidden as well as leaving children unattended. Little children cry at night, call for their mother, while the mother is somewhere drunk with a man ... and men, too, were taken into our home, though it is strictly forbidden. My girls and me were given only 20 pounds a week, for the three of us. They said that more than that is not allowed, that I do not have any rights, and that I being Russian, should get out back. Try to feed three persons with only 20 pounds per week!

It's really almost impossible. Sonny and I, more than 10 years ago used the same amount for a week to feed both of us (in Holland life was cheaper than here!) - And we nearly starved. And that was back 10 years ago, adjusted for inflation....

- And every day one Irish kid ran in the kitchen and looked starving. He was always hungry and looked at me with such amazement – the poor boy had never seen real home cooking. Commonly, these kids' mums in the morning shove into their mouths a bag of chips - that's their whole breakfast! First we gave him food to eat, as we felt sorry for him, but then my oldest said, 'Mum, sack him! He will keep eating with us, but no one will compensate us for it, we will have to refuse! He has a mother!

Our food was stolen from the refrigerator all the time. I wanted to talk to them, these mothers - but workers told me that it is better not to do it - Marina shrugged.

I nod: indeed, it is better not to do - if you do not want nasty pranks played on you every day, such as finding the buttons have been cut off from your coat, or that your windows have been broken, and the like. And this is only the start - then it did stop for a long time. This is how people in Northern Ireland react when criticised - even if their behaviour is outrageous. One can shout with a neighbor or relax at home - but not here...

The last straw for Marina was a larger theft.

- We have been asked to leave the shelter for the weekend, we were offered a hotel ... Hmmm ... I would immediately suspect that something is up.

- We had a large glass window in our room, facing the corridor. I have long wondered at the headmistress: "And if someone climbs though the window?" But she assured me that this did not ever happen. We locked the room and, satisfied, went away for the weekend, in the clothes we had. And when we returned, the first thing we saw was a broken window. I started screaming, girls too. We opened the door – everything was turned upside down, practically everything was gone. We came back a little earlier than we were expected. It was Monday, early morning, the staff had not yet arrived, there were only tenants. I called the police. So you know what started! Workers charged out of nowhere

and told us that our belongings had been collected and locked in a closet - after they saw that the window was broken – so I should stop the hysterics otherwise we will find ourselves in the street. Police also looked at three of us crying - and said that if I do not cease, then they will take me to the police... We had been robbed - and they would take us to the police! Nice laws they have here! What angered these workers most was the fact that I called the police. And what would you do in my place? And what was wrong about it?

What was left of our stuff was brought to us. Some things were kept, but the most valuable things were lost. I also had a backpack with medicines that I brought from Russia - a stock for a year for all occasions - absolutely nothing left. And I was told: "Drugs? What are the problems? You can come and buy them!" And these bastards knew that I have no money even for food - many of these drugs are generally not sold here! After that, I realized that I can no longer stay there ... And now we are here. Here, of course, there is new furniture, everything is clean, but I do not trust anyone, I simply can not after all this. Such places are not for decent women and normal children.

Of course, they aren't. Well, what to do if there is no other place at the moment? One can only grit one's teeth and endure...

The social workers meanwhile are looking at Marina trying, apparently, to guess what exactly she is saying to me. The official part of our meeting to which I was invited as the translator, has not yet begun. They started with their usual "songs": they just want to know her better now, to know what are her family needs, why the older girl does not attend school, although she was provided with a place? That's not right...

- School? Let the child recover after her humiliation, - Marina explodes. - She was given a school place - and they immediately made a test to determine her level, before accepting her there. And how can she pass the test in English? She asked whether she could use a dictionary to translate the questions at least. Then she would cope with everything without any problems, except for this very English of course. But she was told not to use a dictionary! So how can they determine her level? The child is upset now and doesn't want to see anybody or go anywhere. How long will they mock us?

I translate all this - hard, but in quieter tones, as in Anglo-Saxon (including the Anglicized Irish) culture sensibility: being excited and speaking loudly is not considered a sign of humanity and the fact that you have heart, but rather as a sign of mental instability, and almost always plays against you in the official instances. This fact is very difficult to explain to our people, who are new arrivals. Until you "get burned" a couple of times, you will never believe it.

However, they still see her emotion. I'm just trying to soften the consequences.

- We noticed that Marina often takes things into her own hands, without consulting with any of us - accuses the headmistress. - For example, last week without a word she applied to the Ombudsman. If she had first applied to us and asked for our help...

I translate.

Marina passes to the offensive - and this time, despite the emotion, gets to the point, what arguments to use.

- Yes, I went alone. Didn't I ask for help before and got no result? You are, of course, new people for me, but can you understand that after what we experienced at the previous place, I can hardly trust anyone. Besides, this woman... - Marina points to a social worker who accompanied her and was attached to her even in the previous shelter - She is with us for a long time. Long ago I asked her to find out what my rights are here, but she repeated the same thing: "You have no rights, you should return to Russia." I do not know whether she called somewhere to make inquiries about my case and tried to find out something or not, but the ombudsman explained everything to me yesterday They took my hand and brought me to an immigration lawyer. Well, I have the same rights as the people here, and I am entitled to all benefits - do you hear, to all, without exceptions? Even to stand in the queue for social housing! And when I told him how my daughters lived on £20 a week, as I tried to explain that children need vitamins that I am a doctor and I know how good nutrition is important for children, and their response: "You should eat beans and eggs, there are many proteins there " - he was horrified at all." I myself have children, " - he said - "And it's just barbaric! "

At the mention of beans and protein the old social worker turns red, and I feel it is quite clear that this "friendly" advice comes from her. The very person whose duties included helping Marina - and who did not even bother from August till November to call a few times for necessary information, but handing out advice on immigration law as if she had any special education. Yes, not only our country is - as we joke - the country for advices³⁷¹ ...

By the end of the conversation social workers are convinced that Marina should be handled with gloves – one can be pricked. But will it be any better in the future? Knowing the local customs, it is hard to say.

They leave us alone, and Marina shares with me things to which I have already stopped paying attention, but which are so striking for a newcomer in our corner of the world. How disgusting, bloodthirsty Western TV is. ("We do not have this yet!"). How idiotically stupid the advertisements are (" in the park the girl happily takes of her pants and swings them above her head... Guess what they were advertising? A new botanical garden opened!"). How useless the local standard of education is ("every year examinations are made easier and easier, in order to not humiliate children by giving them bad marks").

Fortunately, being a doctor, she did not have to deal with the local medicine yet!

..

I came from a shelter, depressed. I did not want to go home, and anyway no one was waiting for me. Instead, I went to the waterfront and sat there on the bench, listening to the noise of the waves ...

³⁷¹ "Soviet" means both "council" and "advice" in Russian

... After the first court decision, I temporarily worked in the distribution center of a computer company - and counted the days before guardianship authorities would take up our case. It seemed that Sonny, despite his bravado, expected another turn of the events. Yes, if you look, there was nothing pleasant for either of us - strangers will rummage in our lives and make crucial decisions about our child based only on the impressions they will receive from us ... I thought this was perfect nonsense, whatever would be the result of the case. It was Lisa whose situation was the worst among all of us, of course. The thought of it gnawed at me like a worm.

The fact that I worked, helped me to keep my spirits up and not go crazy. At work I had no time to savour my own suffering, but after work I was so tired that at least I could normally fall asleep. Also good was the money that I saved up for future tickets to Russia for myself and Lisa...

I had nice colleagues who were not nosy, but I in 2-3 sentences explained my situation to them: I will have to take off from work when the Council begins its proceedings. The only unbearable time at work was when the radio in the office started to play the songs of the time when we were together with Lisa. For example, her favorite Marco Borsato³⁷² or "Wereldmeid" by Katja Schuurman³⁷³ ... Oh, I do not mention «Mend my heart" (I still turn off the radio when this music begins) At such moments I would get up from my chair and pretend that I urgently need to go to the bathroom –the last thing that I need is to cry at work!

Finally, by mid-July I received a letter stating that I am summoned for proceedings.

"Before the day is over, you have to decide much – that will either make it or break it - all depends on what kind of impression you will make". My solicitor taught me how to behave there to make a nice impression.

- Please do not "rock the boat" too much against on your spouse. Do not hide what was wrong in your relationship, but do not accuse him of everything. What was good with him as a father, tell calmly, too. It would be a plus for you. In any case do not show any emotion, especially when you see your daughter again. The emotional individual is supposed to be unstable. No way should you cry when you see her - I know cases when parents lost their children because of it. It is thought that it upsets the child. I know that it will not be easy, but we must try. You can do it, you are strong, you will cope with it.

It was really sadistic to not cry! In Russia when you express your emotions it shows your humanity – it means that your heart really aches for the matter or for other people. But there is no sense explaining it here. I should have a good cry on the eve at home.

It is very important to have a good lawyer. My own experience confirms the experience of O.J. Simpson: without a good lawyer you are nothing, but with a good lawyer you are a person... I am thankful and have great respect for all that she taught me, what I did not know and could not know! Who knows how all this would have ended if it were not for her...

³⁷² Marco Borsato (b. 1965) - famous Dutch pop singer

³⁷³ "World Girl" (Dutch), Katja Schuurman (b. 1975) - Dutch actress and singer

The woman who met me in Council of child welfare, was a black woman from Suriname. My soul went down to my heels when I saw her: I remembered my bad experience with the first lawyer. But mevrouw³⁷⁴ Hoogeinde was calm, sober-minded and, the most important thing was that she wanted to know the heart of the matter.

I told her all – without embellishing myself, without blackening Sonni. I wanted very much for it to be clear to her, why he did it, that the point was not about Lisa, but about me. That he won't look after her, and that she was very attached to me. That most of all I was worried not by my own condition, but by my girl's feelings.

Sonny has already sent her to school - without telling me a word – in "white" school in Tilburg, because he really did not want her to attend a typically Rotterdam "black" school. –Just tell me, how will he get her to Tilburg, if he lives in Rotterdam? It means, that he is going to leave her for all week with his parents? You see ... And of course, he loves Lisa. And his parents helped me when she was small...

Mevrouw Hoogeinde approvingly nodded:

– It is pleasant to hear. Some parents whom we meet only accuse the other parent of every mortal sin. And you give due to parental qualities of your husband ...

- You see, there are always two sides in any story. But now the most important thing is that the child should not suffer. And I can assure you that she misses me, – I said in answer.

At the end, she explained me what will happen next. Now she will talk with Sonny and listen to his version. And then she will arrange a meeting between Lisa and me, here at this office. She will leave the room and observe through the window how I communicate with Lisa, and what will be her reaction to me.

Maybe this was logical, but at that moment I felt like a guinea pig in a fascist laboratory. Just imagine: meeting my child after several months of violence, under supervision - and to not cry. And then to play with her also under supervision. Can anybody endure this test?

«My God, give me strength!» - for the first time in my life I, the atheist, silently thought.

And the day began. I was in a trance, after several days of training myself not to lose my temper and behave how I was expected to, it was like I was on autopilot.

When Sonny entered the room with Lisa, he didn't look at me. But I also I didn't look at him – I looked at her, my daughter. Looked and didn't recognize her. My heart shrank, when I saw her: elegant, beautiful, with a stylish Antilles hairstyle – and absolutely meek and mild.

³⁷⁴ Mevrouw - Madam, Mrs. (Dutch)

What have they done for these two and a half a month with Lisa – my smiling little fidget, who never stayed in one place and chattered all the time?

In front of me there stood a small, although not a baby, a serious little girl. Like Sonny in photos when he was her age. For Louise it was more important what her children looked like, instead of how they felt. And she was raising Lisa now in her usual way.

Having seen me, Lisa lit up and reached out to me:

– Mum! –and then stopped, looked at Sonny and became silent.

Certainly, mevrouw Hoogeinde didn't see what Lisa was like earlier and couldn't evaluate all horror of what I have seen.

It turned out, that Lisa has been learning Dutch for two months. I believed in gradual learning, as if playing, without forgetting other languages, languages of both her parents, and now, looking at her, I was sure that she was beaten for each non-Dutch word and ordered not to cry...

Louise and Sonny didn't speak Dutch well. And now they had taught Lisa unnecessary intensive Dutch– instead of learning her native languages first, and then learning the foreign on this basis. Holland people were strangers to her, she knew nothing of them. She was just unhappy to be born here.

Naturally, I couldn't tell mevrouw Hoogeinde anything like this. It could cause me to lose Lisa.

Something in my eyes pinched hard. «Don't cry! Don't cry! Don't cry!» - I repeated to myself, hiding my clenched fists under the table.

-Well, mister Zomerberg, – said mevrouw Hoogeinde, – And now leave Lisa here and wait for us behind the door.

Sonny left the room with a dissatisfied face, mevrouw Hoogeinde also left the room through another door. So Lisa and I were left alone.

My first desire was to seize her in my arms and to escape. But that was unrealistic, naturally. Also I could not explain anything to Lisa, who did not understand what was going on. We had to sit here as if in a cage and know that our every word and gesture is watched by invisible eyes, and that on this basis it will be decided if we can be together or not. To speak with your own child the language strange to both of you, which you didn't ever use. “If I can just endure this then no Gestapo will scare me!” - I told myself.

– Mum, – Lisa said suddenly in Dutch, – Lion will not come?

– What Lion?

– The one that ate you. Daddy always tells me, when I ask, where you are, that a lion ate you.

I wanted to cry. But instead I smiled and said:

- No, Lion will not come.

– And who will come?

– Pussy-cat will come.

And we started to play with each other ... I tried to dismiss thoughts about the invisible Argus³⁷⁵.

– Enough, mevrouw Zomerberg, – said mevrouw Hoogeinde after twenty minutes. She took Lisa out, Lisa looked at me in despair, confused why she was taken away from me again, and I told her with a smile:

- Go to Daddy, we will meet soon.

Darkness was before my eyes. I listened to the analysis of my game with Lisa from mevrouw Hoogeinde, and not a single word reached my conscious, only that her “general impression” was positive.

But I couldn't even be delighted. I felt like *radio operator Kat*³⁷⁶ in the fascist torture chamber when they start to torture her newborn son by cold. Usually at this moment in the film I switched off the TV or went outside, not to see this scene. But now nothing could be switched off.

But I did not swoon that moment because I already knew: Sonny now waits for me on the first floor. He will not leave. And he is waiting for me together with Lisa.

... I was right. When I went downstairs, Sonny sat in the car on the street. Lisa squealed happily when she saw me – and again I saw her old self.

– Let's go home, *dushi*³⁷⁷! - said Sonny.

This part of my life I do not tell anybody, even when I tell about the divorce. Because when I do, I feel it again as in reality... It is above human endurance.

The cold wind has blown in from the sea in Bangor, and I come back to mind. My God, it is time to go home! I must catch the train, or I will be late!

And Saturday was approaching with implacability.

On Friday when my nerves were strained, as a pulling rope, a significant event happened in our office: we got a postcard from Barbados where our ex-colleagues had just celebrated a wedding ...

³⁷⁵ In [Greek mythology](#), Argus Panoptes or Argos, guardian of the [heifer-nymph Io](#) and son of [Arestor](#), was a primordial [giant](#) whose [epithet](#), "[Panoptes](#)", "all-seeing", led to his being described with multiple, often one hundred, eyes

³⁷⁶ Heroine of “Seventeen Moments of Spring” - a 1973 Soviet twelve-part television miniseries, radio operator Katherin Kinn working for the Soviet intelligence during the WWII who gets arrested by Gestapo.

³⁷⁷ Dushi - sweetheart (Papiamento)

None of us even knew that they met. All of us got acquainted simultaneously: getting a new job, less than one year ago.

... When Olga entered the office for the first time, it brightened all around us: cheerfulness and affability entered with this slender, dark-haired girl.

Native of a small Protestant town in Northern Down well-known for its potatoes, she spent 4 years in Belgium and had just come back. She returned as quite a different person, than she was brought up at home. First of all, Olga refused to fill out the questionnaire about religion which is obligatory in Northern Ireland when one receives job.

– I am a human, not Protestant or Catholic. I don't differentiate between people on this basis, – she answered.

When Dutch clients called us they thought she was Belgian by her accent, but Olga always answered them:

- No, I used to live in Belgium, but I am Irish, – and this absolutely normal statement provoked some of my colleagues, though many generations of Olga's ancestors have been living in Ireland, and even her surname was Irish. Olga Irish.

For you to imagine our office, I will tell you that from all our guys from our "lump" (the guys belonging to the same community and possessing a similar world view) were the Swede Matias, the Norwegian Torodd, the Dutchman who has grown in a Catholic family of his stepfather, by name of Jack, my chief, the German from DDR by name of Hans, and me. All the others were respectable Protestant young guys plus one not so decent Protestant girl.

Olga was out of any category. She could not be called a foreigner. She was born and raised in this country, spoke with a Comber³⁷⁸ accent and knew how to drink "Harp" and "Guinness"³⁷⁹ but you couldn't classify her as a representative of one of the communities. Her view of the world was too wide, not that she ignored her native roots: communicating with her, I clearly sensed her background. Olga was an exemplary worker, very diligent, never late, always reliable– she did it naturally and easily and it was obvious that she wasn't acting at all: it really was her nature. She wouldn't stand around with a broom on "subbotnik"³⁸⁰, sweep a little and then wait until her shift is over, as some of my compatriots at home did – she would sweep the street, finish the job and then go for conversations to a pub after that!).

Many people were serious as well: Mark, Gavin, two Andrews, two Stephens, Chris, Michael, William and James. But they communicated mainly with each other (and, of

³⁷⁸ Comber (from [Irish](#): *an Comar*, meaning "the confluence") is a small [town](#) in [County Down](#), [Northern Ireland](#).

³⁷⁹ Irish beer brands

³⁸⁰ Subbotnik - (from [Russian](#): *суббота* for Saturday) was a days of [volunteer](#) work in the USSR. The tradition is continued in modern [Russia](#) and some other [former Soviet Republics](#). Subbotniks are mostly organized for cleaning the streets of garbage, fixing public amenities, collecting recyclable material, and other [community services](#).

course, with Kim and Olga, whom they considered to be “theirs”), and sometimes from their lips one could hear such things which gave information about their thoughts.

Until now I remember the remarks of Michael from Northern Belfast when the first results of a local election appeared on the internet (which we at work, God forbid, did not discuss with each other, because discussing politics without knowing the latest gossip in Northern Ireland is not just bad manners, but it could be mortally dangerous).

However, people like Michael do not even think that we foreigners in general can have an opinion about their policies and their political parties. He dreamed, for example, that before his summer holiday this year, when he and his family will fly for a cheap holiday to Spain, while "nothing would be left of Afghanistan." This is what kind of person he is. So, when the election results began to come (which many of us still secretly watched over the Internet), Michael could not resist and shouted at the whole office after he saw the results from Gerry Kelly³⁸¹ of Sinn Féin, "Kelly! That bastard! ».

We, in our Scandinavian-Benelux corner, just smiled at each other. There was another guy who did not fit into the overall picture, the only real local Irish Catholic among us, Joe O'Connor. He was, up to a point, small and quiet. He almost wasn't hired, because of the Protestant gentleman in charge of hiring. But Hans, like me, came from a socialist country, and therefore was a stranger to this kind of prejudice, calmly stated that in Northern Ireland there are just too few people who speak Swedish to neglect him. This is how Joe got to work with us.

Neither Olga nor Joe were interested in politics. They were just normal, good guys. Joe – who was obsessed with computers, Olga - by profession a teacher of English for foreigners. I remember her shock when she returned from a holiday in a developing Asian country, when she first traveled outside Europe: she could not imagine how in the world there could be such poverty and social injustice, and felt horribly guilty that she lived in the West. She wanted to do something good for these people, even if only to teach them English.

There were few females. I was older than all of them, Kim, the little girl from the ruefully infamous sectarian Ballymena³⁸² (she already has a fiance, the same religion), Lydia who was tortured by family and household cares, and - Olga. Young, feminine, nice - though not entirely free. In fact, her boyfriend stayed in Belgium. We heard many times about how she misses Gunter, each time for the holidays and vacation she went to him. And just when we became a little closer (it was not so easy, because I was her boss!), Olga admitted to me how disappointed she was by the fact that Gunter did not follow her to her native country.

- I lived in Belgium four years, for him, and he....

³⁸¹ Gerard "Gerry" Kelly ([Irish: Gearóid Ó Ceallaigh](#), born 5 April 1953) is an [Irish republican politician](#) and former [Provisional Irish Republican Army](#) (IRA) [volunteer](#) who played a leading role in the negotiations that led to the [Good Friday Agreement](#) on 10 April 1998. He is currently a member of [Sinn Féin](#)'s Ard Chomhairle (National Executive) and an [MLA](#) for [North Belfast](#)

³⁸² Ballymena (from [Irish: an Baile Meánach](#), meaning "the middle townland") is a large [town](#) in [County Antrim, Northern Ireland](#), with mainly Protestant population

She desperately wanted their love to be like in the books – for him to be willing to sacrifice everything and go after her even to the ends of the earth, just to be together.

Perhaps Olga was right. This can measure true love. But in our practical age there is less and less “true love” and Gunther, who worked on the Brussels Stock Exchange and earned enough there, honestly could not understand what he was wanted to do. He treated Olga nicely, they had in Belgium everything a soul could want... What else did she need?

When I was 23 I wanted the same things as Olga. And I had a man who was ready to sacrifice for me if not all, then much. But he was not a practical European. ... I still think that Sonny really loved me, when I remember how he was even ready to leave school and start working, just to stay together. We were not believed by the police as foreigners. "Why do you want to get married?" God, what a silly question! Of course, because we love each other! Why else do people marry?

But everything passed. And a few years later, having more or less comfortably settled there, he did not want to see how awful I was feeling there. "You yourself chose to come here, you were not asked," - was his favorite response. Until I became desperate enough to leave that country alone, without him ... I should have done it much earlier. Compromises work only when both sides are ready for them. But why speak about it – there is no use in beating a dead horse.

In short, I absolutely understood Olga. We became such close friends that she trusted me with things her parents didn't even know, not to mention other colleagues. She began an affair with our boss, Hans. Olga and Hans were not perfect opposites to each other. They were born under the same zodiac sign (Aries), and both, for example, were totally unable to lie. But Hans, "the man with the Communist past," a divorced man of my age, who has achieved the position of manager in the West (at the time, when in his native country one of every six was unemployed) just by the very cast of his life and circumstances was not the type to rush into a new marriage. To understand each other, one should be the same age and have some common life experience. But Olga wanted the things that Hans and I in our lives had already passed, just as we had already passed her age.

No one knew (except for me), that Hans and Olga were seeing each other. Hans did not know that I knew about it. Olga shared the development of their affair with me - and all (or almost all) of the guys at work secretly adored her, and hoped that she would pay attention to them, especially when it became known that a black cat had crossed the path between Olga and her Great Love in Belgium. Olga was so friendly with everyone - without mincing manners and flirting – and that unwittingly added fuel to the fire of their hopes, although she did not notice it. For her they all were friends.

I went to Cuba shortly before Olga desperately broke up with both her Gunter, and Hans. - I am happy with them, but it is not what I want - she said to me - I want true love, with a capital L!

I did not tell her that love with a capital often brings not joy but pain, and that for me, for example, it was the last thing I could want. But Olga was so young that there was no sense to try to teach her with someone else's experience ... As Lyudmila Gurchenko³⁸³ sang, *"when we were young and talked beautiful nonsense ..."*

I respected Olga after this action even more. Not every woman will voluntarily want to remain in splendid isolation at a time when she is enjoying the company of man who is a good friend. Her out-of-date idealism and maximalism even reminded me of Pushkin's Tatiana³⁸⁴.

But we keep talking about Olga. What about Joe? What did he do all the time and what kind of man was he?

After a couple of months working together I realized that he is not the type who can be pushed into a corner, no matter how and who tried to do it by virtue of their origin. Joe was a skilled worker, but never put on airs and was always ready to explain the details of a problem's solution to someone who did not understand.

No one tried to drive him into a corner. But I noticed that almost no one contacted him. Except for us foreigners, Olga, and one Protestant manager, who appreciated his skills and was his smoking partner during breaks.

About Joe's personal life, we knew little. Only that he learned the Swedish language, which was so useful for him at this position, because he was in love with a certain Swede. Joe was quiet, but no one could say he wasn't smart. He had a great sense of humour, and sometimes with quite calm face he unexpectedly shocked us with something, that we did not even know what to say ...

It was not safe for him to come to work - especially in July, during the "silly season» of marches. If Jack, whose stepfather was Catholic and who lived in West Belfast, was still able to successfully pretend a Dutch tourist accidentally wandered here, even to sing the Dutch national anthem, "*Wilhelmus*" – about William of Orange, then Joe had no protection. His Irish-Catholic background could be seen on his face a mile away. For instance his eyes were blue like flax. Our Swede, Mathias, who had a wife of local origin, didn't realize exactly how dangerous it would be for Joe to walk through the area, but kindly drove Joe to work in his car.

For Olga the time of the march was a sad period. She was ashamed. Even though she knew from childhood that it is a part of local life, as the many years she spent abroad expanded her horizons, she looked at it with totally different eyes than Chris, James, William, Mark, Michael, two Stephens and two Andrews (Gavin had already left us). Sometimes our entire team went to a pub after work. As time went on they communicated less with us, though always talked normally at work. We were alone, "The Benelux team" and "The Nordic team": me, Olga, Joe, Jack, Mathias, Lydia, and novice Torodd from Denmark. We even gave each other birthday gifts without any participation of «UK Helpdesk» - although we generously gave money to buy gifts for their department, too.

³⁸³ Lyudmila Gurchenko (1935 – 2011) was a popular [Soviet](#) and [Russian actress, singer](#) and [entertainer](#).

³⁸⁴ Heroine of the famous Pushkin's novel-in-verse "Eugene Onegin", Tatiana Larina

And then I went to Cuba for nearly a month - and, returning, on the first day noticed a strangely tense silence between our group and our "British". Jack was burning with impatience to tell me good news.

- Olga and Joe are engaged! They are now on vacation in Scotland, and in January, leaving together for Italy!

At first I did not believe him - could all this happen during only one month, while I was away, especially since I have not noticed any outward signs of blooming romance between the two, when I left? And Jack was famous in our office for his stupid jokes. But it turned out to be true, I was absolutely convinced, when shining with the light of inner happiness, the young couple appeared in the office after Christmas.

They held each other's shoulders and looked at each other's eyes, not hiding their feelings. And I only managed to notice briefly the sad face of Hans. But he kept his dignity, and gave no signs of wounded pride or a seriously wounded heart. One can not say the same about the rest of our company.

- They had stopped talking to us! - Olga complained to me.- They do not even respond to my greeting in the morning!

As they sarcastically say, «I wonder why ...»

It was not only the end of their secret hopes that Olga might choose one of them. They were deeply offended by the fact that Olga - "their" girl! chose a Catholic, one of those «Fenian bastards³⁸⁵». Although no one would say it aloud. Instead, they subjected the loving couple to the silent boycott.

Joe pretended that he just didn't notice it. No, he was not interested in anything but Olga at the moment.

Olga could not help noticing. She was sad, but she continued to go to work with head held high.

- Now you know why we are going to Italy - she told me. – And proudly added that Joe - unlike others! - was ready to leave everything for her, even his recently gained position of chief of the Scandinavian countries.

Recently in Northern Ireland there is more of what is called "mixed marriage." The phrase is very specific and doesn't mean people of different nationalities, but only Catholics and Protestants. There is even a Mixed Marriages Association- a special society, where they communicate with each other. However, this love is still far from safe: many people keep in mind the story of a young Catholic girl killed by her Protestant boyfriend's friends, who decided that she did not match him. Or children of mixed

³⁸⁵ Fenian was an umbrella term for the [Fenian Brotherhood](#) and [Irish Republican Brotherhood](#) (IRB), fraternal organisations dedicated to the establishment of an independent [Irish Republic](#) in the 19th and early 20th century. The name "Fenians" was first applied by [John O'Mahony](#) to the members of the [Irish republican](#) group which he founded in the [United States](#) in 1858. The term Fenian is still used today, especially in [Northern Ireland](#) and [Scotland](#), where its original meaning has widened to include all supporters of [Irish nationalism](#). It has also been used as a bemeaning term for [Irish Catholics](#)

parentage, the brothers Quinn, little boys, who were burnt alive in Ballymoney³⁸⁶ by loyalists...

... They threw themselves into the unknown. But Olga and Joe, like all young lovers did not think about it. They counted days prior the departure.

- How did it all happen so quickly? You can not be left unattended for a month! - I was joking. Olga laughed.

- Frankly speaking I began to notice that something was in the air long ago ... I once complained to Gunther, and Joe told me, 'What a fool! Yes, if I had a girl like you, I would ... "Well, then, from one to another ... Nobody ever understood me so well! I'm so happy that even they - she nodded in the direction of UK Helpdesk, - can not spoil it!

When it was the farewell day of Olga and Joe at work, none of them came with us out to dinner in their honor. They said that they were "tired after a long day at work." But we - including Hans – had a nice evening. Saying goodbye, we embraced for a long time with Olga and kissed each other on the cheek.

I still miss at work their sonorous voices and good-natured cheerfulness. Without Olga and Joe it became so cold ...

Why there are less and less good people in my life? And maybe not just in my life, but in the world ...?

... And finally, it was the Saturday. In the morning a stomach ache began - as before an exam. This was also a kind of exam.

I got up so early and prepared for a long time to leave home, though it is out of my character. Usually I prepare myself for work - including breakfast - in half an hour.

I left the house in time for the first Dublin bus. In fact, there was nothing strange about my trip to Dublin: I often went there, and it could cause no suspicion. But today everything seemed different, and I looked with "other eyes" on the world around me. I spent 3 plus hours in the bus as if sitting on pins and needles.

... So I entered the tiny - just a couple of tables - cafe and ordered coffee and pancakes. The time has come, he could appear at any moment, and my heart pounded with heavy blows, like the chimes of the Spassky Tower in the Kremlin³⁸⁷. The food wouldn't go down my throat, and I decided not to eat the pancakes until his arrival.

But a mysterious stranger, as in the first time, was late. And nothing could be done. I

³⁸⁶ Ballymoney (from [Irish: Baile Monaidh](#), meaning "homestead on the peatland") is a small [town](#) in [County Antrim](#). The [Quinn brothers' killings](#) in July 1998. The three [Catholic](#) brothers, aged 9, 10 and 11, were killed during a sectarian [Ulster Volunteer Force](#) petrol bomb attack on their home at Carnany Park, in a predominantly [Protestant](#) area of Ballymoney. The family had only moved into the house the previous week. The mother and her partner escaped, but couldn't save the three children. The family was of mixed religion, the mother's partner being [Protestant](#) and the mother [Roman Catholic](#).

³⁸⁷ The Kremlin Clock - is a historic [clock](#) on the [Spasskaya Tower](#) of the Moscow Kremlin. The clock dial is above the main gates to [Red Square](#). For decades, the chimes have rung on the quarter hour, with bells tolling for each full hour.

could not even call him and ask how soon he will arrive. Especially because I did not have a cell phone with me or his phone number. I did not even know his name.

After a while I started to think that everyone was looking at me. Strictly speaking, the cafe was empty, except for me, so "everyone" meant only the waitress. So, I ordered coffee again and started reading a book, which I brought with me trying not to think what to do next.

Maybe I have mixed up something? Maybe he mixed up day, place and time? Maybe he couldn't find this cafe? Maybe he has decided not to come because someone was following him? Maybe I won't recognize him when I see him? The list of all possibilities spinning in my head gradually grew to infinity.

I was quite desperate when a familiar round-shouldered figure appeared in the doors. I looked at him once and said to myself: no, one could not help recognizing this person! Having noticed me, he smiled happily and hurried to my desk.

- My pancakes got cold completely, – is how I greeted him.

- Come on, I will order you some new ones – suggested my friend, embarrassed by my “welcome”.

- No, thank you. I no longer want any. Maybe you want coffee?

In English, there is no difference between formal and informal forms of “you” (the way it is with “tu” and “vous” in French, for example), so I translate it according to intuition. I wanted to call him "Вы", but judging by his tone, he started to call me with "ты" almost immediately. And it helped me to overcome barriers in communicating quickly and to become less formal. But I could be wrong, of course ... After all, this man was and still remains a mystery to me.

The stranger took his coffee and started drinking it in small sips. Between sips he spoke to me quietly:

- I will drink up my coffee, and we will go for a walk. Maybe you know any public garden or park around here where we can talk in a calm atmosphere?

Nearby there was really a small square, which I knew well. It was the very place where my Mum once had a fight to the death with the former Soviet officer, who became a refugee here. It was just around the corner.

When we paid (my pancakes remained untouched on the table) and went out into the street - bustling, full of hurrying for a Saturday shopping Dubliners - he without asking took me by the arm. Each step was booming in my head. In two minutes we reached the little park, which was empty, with only retirees with dogs appearing from time to time or a weight-conscious jogger running by.

We sat down on the bench.

- Well ... I'm sorry, I did not hear your name last time.

- Zhenya, - I said almost inaudibly.

- Well, Zhenya - And he did not wander around and informed me what *the guys* were interested in.

... I think that is not yet time to talk about it in detail. Even in spite of the peace process - or maybe because of it. Let forty years pass, it will become the property of the Irish history - and then ... In the meantime, please use your own imagination!

I can not say I was very surprised with what I have heard. Though the situation became to look like some kind of movie. I did not ever think I could find myself involved in such events. Something in his story was quite realistic, but something - the perfect fantasy in James Bond-style, so I even thought to myself, "I wonder for whom are they taking me? Maybe they think I'm some kind of superwoman? One should less watch Hollywood thrillers! "

- Well... - I said. And I decided at once to separate the wheat from weed and explained what, in my opinion, was possible and what not. Plus why.

He listened to me attentively and seriously.

- Well, I will pass it to whom it is necessary. And next time tell you what we think about it. Except you and me, only one person knows about the deal. My boss. And yet there is a person only for contacts - if we fail to meet for some reason, twice in a row, then get in touch with our mutual friend, he will contact this person and this person will contact me. And then in the same order I will give you a new date and time. Who knows, everything thing can happen, one of us can get sick or something like that ... If I see that I am being watched, I will not come. And you, when you go to a meeting, look around. Look, where security cameras hang in the streets, try to avoid them. And if we fail to meet only once, then come to the same place exactly one week later, but not in the same time, and, for example, an hour later.

- I am going home soon...

- That's good. We will meet every month, but it depends on the progress. We will negotiate each time about the next meeting. Do you have questions?

He quietly assigned me a new appointment getting ready to stand up from the bench and leave.

-

- Yes. May I know your name? - I asked timidly, feeling the soul goes to the heels from his gaze.

He gave me a white-tooth smile.

- Call me Oisín³⁸⁸, - he said simply. He gave me his hand at parting and left.

And I remained sitting on the bench, unable to rise from it and digest all heard. I was thrilled. Indeed, from that day my life took a completely new turn. So long and so much

³⁸⁸ The name Oisín probably originated in the myth of [Tír na nÓg](#). Oisín was the son of [Fionn mac Cumhaill](#) and was brought to the *land of youth* by beautiful Niamh.

wanted I to do “real deals”... And here it is - the real deal I did not dare to dream! Will I be able to cope with the orders? Can justify this trust?
I have to. I must justify it!

... Oisin! What an amazing name!
Why, oh why do I feel as though I known him my whole life ...?

... I've never been before in this Paris – not the Paris of the *Champs-Elysees* and *Moulin Rouge*, but the Paris of workers' suburbs, including the Paris, whose streets bear memories of fearless Communards who had gone into immortality as the pioneers of making a reality the centuries-old human dream of fair, decent life for all people.

I came here with Dermot, who had some of his party affairs here. The first day I looked closely at the streets - so French, but nothing like the sugar-coated tourist trap, absolutely commercialized Paris center. I inhaled the aroma of spring leaves on its boulevards and happily smiled at its inhabitants - representatives of Labor Paris. Paint peeling of the walls of the houses, lopsided shutters, a group of refugees who came to the charity for free soup, old streets of Paris' Jewish quarter...

Somehow my feet brought me to the legendary cemetery *Pere Lachaise* - well-known since childhood from Soviet textbooks of French. I entered the gates, being still surprised that this was not a dream, but in reality.

This quiet Sunday afternoon only a few visitors were looking for the graves of their cult figures - the singer Edith Piaf, actors Simone Sinore and Yves Montand and writer Oscar Wilde, whose monument's carved sphinx figure was covered with prints of lipstick kisses from his fans (men and women), and whose last words were, according to witnesses :*”This wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One of us has got to go.”*

Many other celebrities are buried here - such as the Armenian General Antranik Ozanyan, writers Honore de Balzac and Henri Barbusse, playwrighter Moliere, the actress Sarah Bernhardt, composers Georges Bizet, Gioacchino Rossini, and Chopin, the dancer Isadora Duncan, the rock star Jim Morrison, whose grave for some time had to be protected from visitors who wanted to smoke and use drugs on it...

But I came here not to see them. .
I was also looking for *my* cult figures.

The Wall of Communards³⁸⁹, near which the heroes of the Paris Commune were shot, in that long ago time of 1871. Familiar from photos known since childhood, the wall was modestly hidden in the bushes in the corner of the cemetery, not far from the monument to the victims of Mauthausen, Auschwitz and Dachau and monuments to the heroes of the French Resistance during the Second World War. Among them, judging by their names, prevailed two categories of the people most hated by Nazis - "Jews and Communists", and often these two categories were combined in one person.

³⁸⁹ The Communards were members and supporters of the short-lived 1871 [Paris Commune](#) formed in the wake of the [Franco-Prussian War](#) and France's defeat.

It was a bright, quiet, warm, sad, but peaceful spring day - and I wondered what these heroes would feel today if they saw what is being done under the cover of the memory of victims of the Nazi genocide – the “new fascists” in Israel. Did the Communards die in order that on their behalf today the genocide of the Arab people of Palestine is going on?

I walked along the monuments to the victims of fascism, the fighters of the International Brigade in Spain, the Communist women, the tomb of Maurice Thorez³⁹⁰ - and found myself near the Wall of the Communards. Under the shadow of the trees next to it there are the tombs of Marx's daughter Laura and her husband, Communard Paul Lafargue³⁹¹.

"Bourgeois morality is a pathetic parody of Christian morality, it anathematizes the body of the worker, it sets as an ideal the cut for the producer's needs to a minimum, the suppression of his pleasures and desires, dooming him to the role of the machine, leaving for him only work without rest and without mercy, "- I remembered his words.

Near the wall it was quiet, and there were laid fresh flowers. Not expensive bouquets of roses, like on the monuments to the French soldiers colonialists, who made short work of the Algerians, - here, not far away from the wall – but simple red revolutionary carnations. The very flowers which were vulgarized by the capitalist jackals from Tony Blair's Labour Party who made them their own symbol although they had no moral right. Carnations were also laid on the graves of Laura and Paul - just one flower on each grave.

I blinked - as if I saw before me that long distant shot.

The executioners of the Commune did not know that it is impossible to destroy it.

And I was inexpressibly sad and ashamed that our leaders - those who stood at the head of our country, which gave humanity hope, that had become such a breakthrough for the future - preferred a shameful betrayal and sale of the people. Like the African leaders, during the slave trade period, so well described in "Tamango" by Prosper Merimee.³⁹²

The eyes of the world watched us. They trusted us to take the baton to the Commune³⁹³ fire in the darkness of capitalist night. But we ...

And this fault can not be redeemed except with solidarity and common struggle with all honest people of all nations of the world to fan a new flame from the smouldering

³⁹⁰ Maurice Thorez (1900 – 1964) was a [French](#) politician and longtime leader of the [French Communist Party](#) (PCF) from 1930 until his death

³⁹¹ Paul Lafargue (1842 – 1911) was a [French](#) revolutionary [Marxistsocialist](#) journalist, [literary critic](#), political writer and [activist](#); he was [Karl Marx](#)'s son-in-law, having married his second daughter [Laura](#).

³⁹² Prosper Mérimée (1803 – 1870) was a [French](#) dramatist, [historian](#), [archaeologist](#), and short story writer. He is perhaps best known for his novella [Carmen](#), which became the basis of [Bizet's](#) opera [Carmen](#).

³⁹³ The Paris Commune or Fourth French Revolution ([French](#): *La Commune de Paris*) was a government that briefly ruled Paris from March 18 to May 28, 1871. It existed before the split between [anarchists](#) and [Marxists](#) had taken place, and it is hailed by both groups as the first assumption of power by the [working class](#) during the Industrial Revolution.

sparks of the torch, which we shamefully dropped. This new flame should burn out all the dirty, nasty, sticky evil that surrounds us today!

For what did the Communards give their lives? For their distant descendants to act like fools from morning till night with the fools in other countries, even the stage sets and the attitudes of the hosts of idiotic TV games like "Weak link" in which participants - and spectators with them! - learn how to punish the weak, and cast them out of their ranks, as a herd of wild animals do? Is it really "entertaining" ? "They will crawl on all fours, and we spit on them ?" And how can we consider ourselves human beings, if we follow these principles in life?

I touched the cold stone and stood silently, holding my hand on it for a minute: I wanted to talk to those who gave their lives for our sake more than 130 years ago. I wanted to convey to them my feelings and pray for forgiveness for how we had so shamefully thrown their burning torch into the mud ...

I was torn away from painful thoughts by Dermot.

- Do not be that way, - he said. - Life goes on. The struggle continues.

We went out of the cemetery and found ourselves at the "flea market", where several lively Ukrainians were selling Soviet regalia - busts of Lenin, military uniforms, museum paintings depicting Lenin, Dzerzhinsky, sailors, workers, farmers, who were given free and eternal use of land, pictures of the Great Patriotic War torn out from the books of a Party school

- Look, look at this picture of the museum, a genuine Soviet museum, which was liquidated .. Only 300 euro! I have all the documents! - One of them told us in poor French.

And I would be very sad if not for a little French boy who suddenly exclaimed joyfully surprised behind my back, showing his parents his finger on the counter: "*Maman, papa, regardez, regardez, Lenin! C'est Lenin! Je l'ai reconnu!*" ³⁹⁴

The revolution continues.

³⁹⁴ Mummy, daddy, this is Lenin! I recognized him! (French)

Chapter 17. I want to be in the Soviet Union.

| "Every day one brick falls off
From the palace of our lives. "
(*Iranian wisdom*)

"Negative nostalgia - preoccupation of some immigrants ... with how bad their country of origin was""³⁹⁵
(*Salman Akhtar, "Immigration and Identity"*)

... Has anyone noticed that on the forums of various Russian Internet media the most spiteful persons are those who do not have any reasons for being spiteful? Most of them are exasperated by the current situation in Russia and by the fact that most Russians prefer the Putin regime to Yeltsin's, rejoice over Russian problems and stamp their feet in anger when some of them are partially resolved, our former compatriots who left Russia for so-called "civilized" and "developed" countries.

Why be so spiteful? You have settled there, in your dreamland. In your opinion, all Russians must envy you, you regularly shout out, "How fortunate that I need not live in *that country* any longer!" . Then why with such maniacal persistence worthy of a better use in reading newspapers of *that country*, when you are enjoying such bliss having fled from it ? Don't you want to confine yourself to "The Guardian" and "The New York Times," or even better – to the "Daily Mail", the more so because they write about Russia in a manner so pleasant for you?

But there, nothing can hold back former compatriots and the reason is a cocktail of emotions. They want to be envied by those who remained in Russia, and proved to be right for making the choice to leave, and to teach us, "uncivilized" ones, the right way to live. Especially insulting it is for them when no one envies, and if no one has even noticed that such an outstanding person has left Russia. When they see that, their last doubts that all those who did not leave are "uncivilized", disappear.

But what about freedom of choice? They made their choice, but cannot assume that the Russians may have other dreams and aspirations. Instead, they immediately start to scream about "bloody intrigues of *gebnya*"³⁹⁶.

Sometimes one can get the impression that many of these people spend days and nights on Russian websites trying to find what is bad in Russia. And enjoying it every time they succeed. But every time they learn that something has become better in Russia, they begin to stamp their feet, like the wizards of "The Tale of Time Lost"³⁹⁷, whose time

³⁹⁵ In reverse translation from Russian

³⁹⁶ Ex KGB members in post- Soviet Russia

³⁹⁷ The Tale of Time Lost by Yevgueny Schwartz (1948) - In this classic Soviet fairy tale, four old sorcerers show up in a small town intent on regaining their former vigor and youth. But to do that, they must find four people who aimlessly waste their time. Fortunately for the magicians, they find just the guinea pigs in four lazy school children and quickly change places. Perhaps too late, the children realize the error of their ways and must try to change

is over and they are about to disappear. They remind me of that Arkady Raikin's³⁹⁸ hero: "There are people who feel very bad, when someone else feels good ..."

These "civilizers" of Russia on internet forums can be divided into two groups:

a) the ones who have left, but need a constant confirmation that they did not leave for nothing. These cannot forget Russia. And not because they love it, but because they consider themselves to be unappreciated in their homeland. They think of the rest of us like Dunno³⁹⁹ - "*they are not mature enough yet for my music.*"

b) those who do not know the real life in the "civilized" world, but were brought up on movies like "I Want to Be in Jail," by Alla Surikova⁴⁰⁰ and other "masterpieces" of the 1990s, when because of this, our people considered the West to be "flowing with milk and honey", where even in prison one can find paradise and grace.

First a few words about the unappreciated "Dunnos". Among them there are many Russian ladies who married foreigners, as well as emigrated IT workers who are praying for their employers, and "political" refugees. If in the 1990s those departing at the Sheremetyevo airport and beside it were looked at with admiration (especially if they were presenting a foreign passport), now they do not experience such attitudes toward themselves and they are terribly upset about this. Like Shurochka who got accustomed to such an attitude in Russia and started to demand the same abroad, saying: "I am not by any means some Turk! I am married to a Dutchman! "...

"If things are improving a bit in Russia, then did we leave for nothing? Did we live in vain with our unloved husbands, did we suffer in vain, when we were forced to work overtime without payment, were in vain our hard efforts to learn languages, did we lie in vain about how we were persecuted for "political reasons"? "

Perhaps they do not admit it even to themselves, but many of them are secretly gnawed by such thoughts. They are especially offended because the day came when in response to their arrogant attempts to teach Russians how to live, Russians more and more often reply with: "Who do you think you are? You have gone away, so stay there. You have lost any moral authority to advise us about anything."

The second group consists of those who have not stopped watching the first group with their mouth open. They will assure you, as one woman doctor did in the pages of one of our newspapers: "only our nurses glue orphans' mouths with scotch tape because they cannot cope with the workload, but in the West it is social workers who perform nurses'

back, but it can only be done at a very exact time and place. The race is on to switch back or be doomed to the short life of the sorcerers

³⁹⁸ Arkady Raikin - (1911- 1987) was a [Soviet stand-up comedian](#). He led the school of Soviet and Russian humorists for about half a century

³⁹⁹ Dunno, or Know-Nothing ([Russian](#): Незнайка, Neznayka; from the Russian phrase "не знаю", don't know) is a [hero](#) created by [Soviet children's writer Nikolay Nosov](#). Dunno, recognized by his bright blue hat, canary-yellow trousers, orange shirt, and green tie, is the title character of Nosov's world-famous trilogy, *The Adventures of Dunno and his Friends* (1954), *Dunno in Sun City* (1958), and *Dunno on the Moon* (1966).

⁴⁰⁰ Alla Surikova - one of the few female Soviet movie directors. "I want to be in jail" -1990s slapstick comedy whose hero wants to be in a Dutch jail rather than living in Yeltsin's Russia

duties "(does she seriously think social workers in the West feed and wash patients?. It would be interesting to know which country does she have in mind!) Sacred belief in Western "civilizational superiority" over Russia is like a drug for such people. When you confront them with contradictions between their theory and facts, they simply dismiss the latter, and if you insists , they may even become aggressive, like drug addicts deprived of drugs. When their belief is undermined, the "cold turkey" begins for them. Their "argument": "It cannot be, because it just cannot ever be."

"*In that country*" : the representatives of both groups love to repeat these words. Immigrants sometimes dare to say "at your place ", but rarely, because this phrase immediately deprives them of any moral right to teach Russians how to live, while this is the real aim for them when commenting on the situation in Russia.

Title: "Girl hit by a car." Comment: (dreamily): "Ah, you know what compensation she would be paid if it happened America ?". Counter-comment: "Then why don't you leave for America and dash there under the wheels?" ...

"*In that country*" nurses treat patients badly, there is bullying in the army, there are "streets full of blacks (immigrants)", and women "are afraid to give birth."

"*In that country*", you say? And in what country under capitalism is it different?

In my daily life in the USSR I had no established contacts with black market dealers selling jeans and other such stuff. I had a different range of interests, and my first real contact with a human manifestation of domestic Eurocentrism⁴⁰¹ occurred during the entrance examinations for my postgraduate study. I have already mentioned it. It was October of 1989. We were getting through the exam in Marxism-Leninism at the Academy of Sciences. Before me in the queue there was a young man, one of those who in those days were called "*boy-majors*"⁴⁰². "What institute are you going to enter, young man?" asked his examiner. And the young man said in response, with the same kind of obsequious reverence as a priest pronounces the name of Jesus - "*The Institute of Europe!*" The expression on his face was that with this name everyone should bow down at his feet, not because he is so wonderful, but because of **where** he is going to be doing his post-graduate course. I remember how I looked at the young man and thought regretfully that something was wrong with his head.

Reverence for Europe (or America, or both) that such people have is best expressed by the words of Nekrasov, "*Wait till the landlord comes...*"⁴⁰³ etc. In the minds of such Russians Westerners are highly cultured and humane people whom one can (and should) complain to in trouble, and they will help for sure. Like Dutchmen in the movie "I Want

⁴⁰¹ Eurocentrism is the practice of viewing the world from a [European](#) perspective. A eurocentric worldview often seeks to show the superiority of Western customs to analogous developments in other, often earlier cultures.

⁴⁰² A show-off, yuppie

⁴⁰³ N. Nekrasov. *Forgotten Village* (1856). In this verse, the whole village is waiting for the landlord to come and sort out their problems and injustices, instead of taking matters into their own hands. A landlord is a sort of superior authority for them.

to Be in Prison!" by Alla Surikova, who seem to exist in the world only in order to be benefactors to their Russian guests.

It somehow floats by their consciousness unnoticed that the "pious» UK Gordon Brown who is so deeply concerned about the problem of hunger in Africa, ties British "assistance" to this continent to an indispensable trade liberalization and a whole list of blackmail economic demands, as a result of the implementation of which the number of hungry people in Africa will be many times more than now. Without benefit for themselves those "civilized" countries would not even fart, pardon the expression. Or maybe this attitude is the very essence of their "civilization"?

Our "Westernizers" (not those who are paid grants by the West, it's all clear with those; I mean the sincere believers in superiority of the West) are not confused by the fact that Western "human rights activists" to whom they appeal, do not see the huge beams in their own eyes. For example, in the Netherlands, whose military are involved in the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, there is an organization in defense of human rights in Chechnya: but what about human rights in those countries invaded by Dutch soldiers?. Or when the West writes with indignation about the deportation of Georgian immigrants from Russia, no one mentions that the Netherlands was preparing a bill for the deportation of young people born in the Antilles who came to the Netherlands, although these young people are not at all illegal immigrants, they are by birth citizens of the same country that is hoping to deport them! Nobody writes about the Netherlands' recent attempt to create a database of citizens on ethnic grounds⁴⁰⁴ (imagine what their reaction would be if anyone would try to do the same in Russia !)

For many years we have been told about Western "democracy" and "freedom of speech and expression": but afterwards, how should we react to the fact that in Northern Ireland in the Democratic Unionist Party (the largest local political party!) candidates for election sign a contract with the party leadership, that when they are elected to the position, if they publicly disagree with the party line in some things, they will pay a fine of 20,000 pounds (though later the sum was slightly reduced) and if not they will be immediately fired?

Many of our Russian "left" still enjoy the Eurocentric illusions that the "highly cultured" Western "working class", will for sure come out in favor of social liberation movements in other countries. In reality, the positive attitude of the majority of the Western "left" to any phenomenon in the world today is *a litmus test* to judge *the safety* of such a phenomenon or a movement for imperialism (the Zapatistas, anti-globalists, the modern African National Congress, and now Sinn Fein which these days is cited as an example for the Iraqis and the Palestinians: that's the way you should behave yourself!). When the powers of imperialist West begins to be truly threatened by someone or something, many of the Western "left" often turn away from those they used to support (such leaders turn into "dictators" and countries - into "dictatorships" for them.). There can be any excuse for such "change of mind" of those Western "left": that dogs are ill-treated in the country in question, or it can be a "gender issue" (for example, one Western feminist in her

⁴⁰⁴ This attempt was eventually abandoned.

preface to the book of the Lebanese Communist Souha Bechara⁴⁰⁵ has consistently stressed that Arabs "ill-treat women," and therefore it just has to be very unpleasant for women in the communist party to carry out the leadership's orders!). Sinn Fein, having become a "ruling party" (which will be allowed to make local decisions about a small area with a population of just 1.5 million people), is not only about to vote for a tax reduction on foreign corporations, but all the more shameful, supports the introduction of "international forces" (read: of Western imperialism) in Darfur! As usually, because "human rights are violated" and "genocide is committed". But our "highly cultured" Irish "left" somehow modestly keep mum about ethnic cleansing of Serbs in Kosovo. At their Ard Fheis⁴⁰⁶, they have long recognized its "independence", despite their previous parading through the streets of Dublin against the NATO aggression in Yugoslavia. *Tempora mutantur*⁴⁰⁷ ...

And we are supposed to rely on the support of such people when the time will come for the West to give back the loot? And we are supposed to follow their advice on how we arrange things in our homeland? .. *It is sad, girls*⁴⁰⁸ ...

But I have run a little ahead.

.. When "children of Albion"⁴⁰⁹ meet Russians for the first time, many of them are quite arrogant, still full of "imperial complex" and the idea of their own "uniqueness". Therefore they often do not know even basic things about other countries, but still desperately try to remember what they do really know about our country and to demonstrate that knowledge. " *The Gulag Archipelago, The Archipelago Gulag*,⁴¹⁰ — they exclaim like the hero of an old joke, with all the fire of indignation at the brutality of "Stalin's regime" in their Anglo-Saxon eyes ...

I do not want to rub their faces in the dirt by showing my awareness of British history. No, it's not even about Oliver Cromwell. "What about the H-Blocks of Long Kesh?"- I answer them. Because in order to recognize a brutality, the British do not have to go far, not only geographically but also in time: in the 1980s the Margaret Thatcher regime pursued a policy of repression against the Irish population in the Irish North, which in brutality concedes nothing to Hitler's "heroic deeds". For years, political prisoners were

⁴⁰⁵ Souha Fawaz Bechara (born 1967) is a [Lebanese](#) woman who, at the age of twenty one, attempted to assassinate General [Antoine Lahad](#) of the [South Lebanon Army](#). Lahad survived the [assassination](#) whereas Bechara was quickly arrested and held in the infamous [Khiam prison](#). She was finally released on September 3, 1998, following an intense Lebanese, [European](#), and even [Israeli](#) campaign in her favour. In 2003, her [autobiography](#) — Resistance: My Life for Lebanon — where she relates her life in Lebanon before and after the assassination, was published.

⁴⁰⁶ Ard Fheis is the name used by many Irish [political parties](#) for their annual [party conference](#).

⁴⁰⁷ Times are changing (Latin). Full phrase: *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*, meaning "Times change, and we change with them"

⁴⁰⁸ Catch phrase from the satiric novel "12 chairs" by Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov (1927)

⁴⁰⁹ Reference to the title of A. Chekhov's short story "Daughter of Albion" - satirical portraying of an English woman in Russia

⁴¹⁰ Paraphrase of a Soviet joke. Brezhnev meet an Uzbek man, man greets him: "Salam aleykum", Brezhnev's advisors tell him what to answer ("Aleykum assalam"). Then Brezhnev meets a Soviet dissident, dissident shouts: "The Gulag Archipelago!", Brezhnev thinks and answers with "The Archipelago Gulag!"

kept in isolation, subjected to beatings and torture, including many persistent and humiliating corporal punishments and "intimate " strip searches of all the orifices on a human body in order " to find prohibited items", with brutal violence and the use of mirrors. After reading Bobby Sands' story, "One Day in My Life"⁴¹¹, you begin to understand why he voluntarily decided to die on hunger strike. To go on living as he lived, was, in my opinion, worse than death. And he describes his life for us, in secrecy from the guards - on scraps of toilet paper, with the stump of a pen which he was forced to conceal in a place that is unbecoming even to mention.

What right do British authorities have to moralize about "human rights violations" in Russia and other countries, to upkeep groups of hired "human right defenders" from our own compatriots, who do their best to earn their bread by regularly reporting to their foreign "sponsors" on the "terrible life" in Russia? The saying in the Bible about seeing the splinter in someone else's eye and missing the log in one's own: I think it must be about Britain ...

I am sure these words of mine can be confirmed by the refugee Kolya, whom we visited in a Northern Irish prison. Even recently, he experienced the "delights" of British democracy.

One of the loyalist prisoners was found dead in his cell. Kolya, of course, had nothing to do with this, but because of the investigation into the circumstances of this death imprisoned asylum seekers, though innocent, were moved away from ordinary cells into isolation for a few days .Here is what Kolya told us after spending three and a half days in solitary confinement, where this our former compatriot, along with other foreigners, has experienced a very small part of the sufferings of Bobby Sands and his comrades : Having faced bullying by the guards, the foreigners too went on hunger strike and fasted three full days: "We will never forget those three days. It was pure torture. On Monday we went for a walk at 8 am and returned to our cells 9:30. At this point we were suddenly transferred to solitary confinement, which is a place of punishment for inmates who violate the regime, - without any explanation. We thought it would be for a few hours, so no one had brought anything with him, not even cigarettes. We were closed in for 24 hours in small isolated cells, in each of them there was only a bed and the Bible (many of the asylum seekers are Muslims!)

Magazines were brought in for us on Monday night, but none was allowed in , so we could get to read them only on Thursday. We were not allowed to call anybody, not even our lawyer. When we asked for a meeting with the prison's governor, we were told to shut up. We were verbally abused: the Africans were called "Black bastards". Food was thrown on the floor for us . We agreed to declare a hunger strike and have not eaten anything all this time. At some point, the guard opened the door of my cell, turned his back to me and farted loudly, laughing and telling me that it would be "good for the

⁴¹¹ Bobby Sands was 27 years old when he died. He spent almost nine years of his life in prison because of his Irish republican activities. He died, in prison, on 5 May 1981, on the sixty-sixth day of his hunger strike at Long Kesh Prison, outside Belfast. "One Day in My Life" documents a day in the life of Bobby Sands in prison.

Russian boy." On another occasion, he poured milk on the floor and scattered the corn flakes on top, saying that it was "a good breakfast for the Russian."

In the cell of one of our guys the floor was drenched with water from the toilet, and the third one was freezing the whole night through, because he was placed in a cell with a broken window. I had managed to take in a few cigarettes, but my lighter was confiscated. One night a guard opened the door, flicked a lighter into my face, laughed and wished me a good night. We were searched every day, and the day we returned to our cells we were stripped naked and had a full physical search ... If you know what I mean. One of us was taking their food all the time because he did not understand about the hunger strike due to a language barrier, and he is now suffering from severe stomach cramps ...

... I wonder what will Russian "human rights activists" say about all this, being so enchanted with police entertainment when they were here. I mean those "activists" who at the British authorities' expense recently visited the North, admiring the local police's "professionalism", and participating in parties with them? At these parties Catholic policemen (they are very few here!) specially trained for the occasion sang Irish folk songs for the Russian delegation. And our "activists" then were really puzzled: "why is that Northern Ireland Catholic population so unhappy? One can only dream about such life! ..."

A Frenchwoman, Veronique, who visited the prison was in complete shock. Unfortunately, all these sad scenes that Kolya has described, were not a surprise for me. The police in Northern Ireland have been and remain the same: sectarian and racist, and their actions speak for themselves better than any words or songs. Can it be different in a country where all its mass-tabloids cultivate primitive, bestial chauvinism with their readers? For example, during the World Cup, it seemed they want to outdo each other in contempt for those teams that ever played with the English ("Can we help you collect the suitcases, guys? Are you sure you have not forgotten anything?" - about the Argentina national team), acting like gorillas beating their breasts ("Beckham showed them", "England will make your noses bleed!") ... And then they will wonder how come that England has such hooligan football "fans"...

The more I see such hysteria, the more I realize the weakness of Britain. Strong people behave with dignity, only those whose history is fading are fussing and offending others. Policemen are typical readers of those moron tabloid publications and piously believe they are not on Irish soil, but in a mythical "democratic United Kingdom."

Is their sudden "gas attack" surprising, then? They behave exactly the way the state which they represent behaves!

What I saw around me filled me with disgust and a lot of cold anger and only strengthened my resolve to make a small but practical contribution to put an end to the way things are. My "clandestine" meetings with Oisín have become quite regular, although infrequent. In fact, the word "clandestine" could be left without the quotes, but I

still put them in, for one simple reason: shyness. I considered my contribution to be trifling and unworthy of being named without the quotes.

Did I ever hesitate when I was asked for help? No. And I'm not going to wobble, wriggle, least of all to justify myself. To whom? Why should I justify myself? After Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq? After Palestine, Chile, Grenada, Vietnam and other countless corners of the earth? After the things that had happened with my native country and after seeing how, in response to the cries of my people, the "free" world stuffed its ears and went on marching away with a cheerful song «*Door de bossen, door de heide, door het zomerdronken land ...*»⁴¹²? I shall never forget their callous "Maar Moskou floreert!"⁴¹³

How "free" is the world that so boastfully calls itself "free", may be judged by their reaction to simple words of the American actress Rose McGowan who has said that if she had grown up in Belfast, she would have supported the IRA one hundred per cent . As if from the horn of plenty, "crocodile tears" in the "free" media followed immediately, along with reproaches that McGowan's words "insult the victims of terrorism and she should apologize", plus the movie studio's solemn assurances that they do not support her position, and that it was her personal point of view, which they "regret." If they won't say that, you see, the CPSU.... sorry, the global "market democracy"! - will "gobble them up"⁴¹⁴! And this comes from those who cry out, "there is no freedom of speech in Russia or in China."

"She should have limited herself to ridiculing the Palestinians It's much safer for all celebrities" - wrote one respondent on the Internet. And more: "If someone have said that he would gladly join the ranks of the U.S. Army, no one would have made any remarks about it" Everybody is welcome to glorify this gang of occupants and cutthroats!.

Indeed, Rose McGowan "should follow" her compatriot Britney Spears who, when asked what she thought about the war in Iraq - which has cost just in a couple of years many times more lives than all the Northern Ireland conflict in more than 30 years! - replied: "I think we should just trust our President and support any decision he takes."

Every day this "free" world murders, rapes and mutilates spiritually millions of people around the globe, and we are required to apologize that we are trying - each in our own way - to resist it. It is demanded of us that we make constant excuses for being unwilling to give ourselves up. All our energy should be spent on these excuses and on thinking out of intricate statements that we have repented our daring to call the spade a spade.

⁴¹² Song "Auf der Luneburger heid" translated into Dutch (used as a Belgian scouts song in the comedy film "Koko Flanel"). When the main hero who is stuck in a tree calls for help, the scouts turn away from him and walk away singing this song

⁴¹³ But Moscow flourishes! (Dutch)

⁴¹⁴ Paraphrase of the old Soviet joke: a child comes home from the kindergarten, crying: "Our teacher is scaring us. She says "CPSU will eat you up" (play of words: "S'ezd KPSS" (CPSU party congress) sounds almost the same as "s'est KPSS" (CPSU will eat you up)

- Never mind, you! _ As Sharik from the cartoon “Prostokvashino⁴¹⁵” used to say. -
Don’t you hope you’d get it!

We and the Irish people have common enemies . And helping them, I would help to see the light at the end of the tunnel also to the people of my own country.

Each time going to meet Oisín I had a list of news in my head to tell him. And I learned it by heart until I was exhausted. Every detail seemed important to me.

Oisín came to the meetings invariably empty-handed, not metaphorically but literally: if I had at least a handbag with me, he did not have anything but a small notebook in his pocket, in which he made notes about when our next meeting was scheduled for . As a rule, he wrote it using just a couple of letters and not on the page of the day on which we were actually going to meet, but using his own system. He naturally did not record anything of what I had told him .

The meetings were, to my regret, short: half an hour each, not more. I really wanted to talk to him and to listen to him forever, but I knew it was only an unrealizable dream. And what we were involved in, was not a game, so I could not let myself relax or be lost in daydreams. Yet, during our conversations, I learned gradually what kind of person he was. He seemed very shy. Although he talked to me freely, I felt a kind of strong internal constraint, unnatural for his age.

I supposed him to be a little older than me. Small details helped me to gather his image - like an investigator who makes a “photo robot” portrait picking up parts like mouth, eyes, nose and lips. So, from our conversations, I learned that his parents were long dead, his mother probably had passed away much earlier than his father, that he had many brothers and sisters, that he "inherited" Republican views from his father and brothers. Where he was born and grew up, he just could not help becoming Republican.

When the English lost in a football championship (I do not remember which championship it was exactly) and flew back home, there was general mourning at my place of work. But for me, on the contrary, it was like a celebration. I told Oisín about this, and he laughed:

- We were taught by father from childhood: no matter what kind of sport, when the Brits lose, it's always great!

I was terribly curious to know his full name and his life story , but I was also well aware that I could not ask him about it. Yes, I did not want to expose him to the slightest risk, the closer I got to know him, the more dear he became to me.

I found out his full name and life story later, using my method of collecting information step by step. At first I found out his horoscope sign - by asking him. Of course, he had to be a Capricorn! Like Volodya Zelinsky⁴¹⁶. They both had similar external light bravado,

⁴¹⁵ Prostokvashino or Buttermilk Village is a fictional rural village.that serves as the setting of a very [popular series of Russian books and cartoons](#) by [Eduard Uspensky](#) about a lad nicknamed Uncle Fyodor who runs away from home to Prostokvashino. The story mainly focuses on his life there with a cat and dog

⁴¹⁶ See part 1 of “Sovietica”

combined with powerful internal constraint, a strange mix of internal heat with considerable mental coolness. To believe horoscopes, Capricorn and my sign were an ideal combination, but I still remembered too well how my feelings towards Volodya have ended...

- How many years have you spent in prison? - I asked Oisín once.

- 12 - he replied, even with some pride. - Actually, I was given a 17, but then I was released under the Good Friday Agreement, as all our guys ...

- Wow! - I whistled with respect in my voice – It's hard for me even to imagine.

And Oisín began to look even more proud when he heard it.

- If we are ever seen together by one of those who shouldn't see us, - I told him - I mean, one of your own, you can tell them I am interviewing you about your prison experiences.

Gradually, I learned that he liked Italian food, rock music, that he was unemployed, a carpenter by profession, and that he enjoyed watching the series "Sopranos" on TV.

- And "Star Trek"? - I asked suspiciously.

- No, it's not for me - he drawled, and I cheered up. That gave some hope!

He never mentioned anything about children and I concluded that he did not have any. Once he mentioned his girlfriend, but a girlfriend is not a wife, to me, it's just someone temporary and not serious. ("Irish Republicans of his age usually already have grand children, but he is still not married!" - I said to myself almost gaily). In any case, when he talked about his girlfriend, his voice didn't sound romantic at all:

- I never talk to her about where I go or what I actually do. But I think she knows, - he said. Only with these last words did his face light up with human affection for her. In the sense: you see, she is not stupid .. But not a bit of love sounded in his voice (and judging by how recently he was released, he did not have enough time to settle down and pass from falling in love to the everyday ordinariness of family relations. So, if he did love her, he should still have been in romantic love at that stage). That's why it did not hurt me the slightest when he mentioned her. And back then I did not allow myself to admit fully that I was in love with him. I thought to have myself under proper inner control.

Sometimes he asked me about our local Republican affairs, and what I thought about them. He was interested in my opinions about certain people or events, and I answered him honestly, but so as not to offend anyone. When he asked me what I thought of our local MLA: that one, who intended to take me to the mountains for "making passionate love" to me, - it did not even come to my mind to tell Oisín about it. First, out of respect for the old man (even though he did not deserve it!), and secondly because I still was a stranger for them, and whom in this case would they rather believe? That's right ... And they would just think that I was thrusting myself on this man! Or even that I was only slandering the poor veteran.

By the way, I told to Dermot about this case. Despite the fact that Dermot had no rights over me, he treated me like a jealous owner, and I was well aware that he would believe me. He really did believe and since then he hated this MLA passionately. And I thought

to myself, my God, that would start things, if Dermot knew how I much liked "our friend" as we called Oisín conspiratorially! That would really be "a sea of blood!"

My point of view on the "*overseas uncles*"⁴¹⁷, to my delight, perfectly matched with Oisín's. About the "Stars and Stripes," he had absolutely none of the illusions Dermot had (not to mention his senior comrades who annually on their national holiday ran (oh, excuse me, flew out!) to report to the president of a foreign country about their internal affairs⁴¹⁸). It reminds me of the Russian princes who at the time of the Mongol-Tartar servitude went to the Khan of the Horde for the authorization to reign in their own land. When I suggested that one of them should invite my famous namesake to a local festival to talk about his life, at first he was really enthusiastic about it. Oisín was also delighted with this idea. But there came an "*order from above*" that it cannot be done: "fearless revolutionaries" prompted this decision by saying that such an invitation ... "will scare away the sponsors!" I, by the way, am not joking.

Oisín was as disappointed as I was.

- What sponsors? Is this festival not for people? Many of our people could only dream about meeting this man!

Probably we'd simply fallen behind the requirements of the current stage of anti-colonial struggle: to accord it with the interests of the sponsors ...

Once I had a discussion with Oisín about opportunism, and I raised the topic of "*wolves in sheep's clothing*" in political parties and how a party can degenerate, taking as an example our CPSU.

- But why should we go so far for examples! - I cried. - You have enough such people among your own party members.

- Whom do you mean? - Asked Oisín, but I did not want to tell him that it was Hillary. - Don't tell me, though: I think I know. We meet all of them before they take up their positions, and they swore allegiance not to go against our line. It's a woman, isn't it?

And I was forced to confirm that yes, it is ... It turned out he fully shared my opinion about her. But it was beyond his power to change anything: he had not a high a rank in the army. I realized that limitation.

- I do not aspire to the highest ranks - he said to me once - I'm a man without ambition. My position is quite suited to me. The main thing is to be useful for the cause.

And because of this I liked him all the more.

I noticed he was asking me the same questions several times – as if checking, should I answer him for the second or third time the same way as for the first. But I was not

⁴¹⁷ American relations of Sinn Féin

⁴¹⁸ Refers to annual trips of Northern Irish politicians to Washington on St. Patrick's Day

offended: our proverb says, "Trust, but verify." And in a case like this even more so.

Oisín and I had some mutual friends among my locals. For example, our Big Gerard - when I saw him I always tried to imagine how with such "dimensions" he could fit into a small prison cell. He was very clever, judging from the way he worked out the local election campaign. Oisín was with him in the same block in prison. Naturally, I could not mention in a conversation with Gerard that I was familiar with Oisín. Nobody should know that.

- In general, I advise you to stay away from all our meetings, marches and other events - he told me. - Even better if you just cease your participation in your local branch. You stand out so much in our crowd that you will certainly provoke undesirable interest from the Brits. It would be better to lie low . Too much is at stake in our work

And I promised to "lie low" with all the vehemence of a person eager to prove herself.

Meeting places had to be changed from time to time . We met in parks, cafés, in the woods, in a pub, and even on the beach once, in various parts of the city.

Once we failed to meet, and that in the most ridiculous way : agreeing to meet in a pub on the south side of Dublin. As usual, I came earlier than he did and waited for him inside. The pub was as dark as the inside of an African man's stomach, as one of my classmates foolishly joked back years ago. And there were almost no customers, well, what fool would go into a pub in the morning, when all its customers are sleeping after the previous night they spent in it?

From inside I could clearly see the street. Oisín was late, as usual. This time even more than usual. When I started to get nervous, I suddenly saw him through the half-shaded window: for some reason, he quickly passed by our meeting place , not looking at it, and his face was distorted by some ridiculous grimace. I waited another five minutes, expecting him to come back, but he did not return. And then I decided to go outside to see where he was.

I went out and... almost ran into Farmer Frank. The world is really small, especially in Ireland! Thanks to his obvious limping he could be seen in the crowd from far off. I did not know what he was doing on that day in Dublin, but I immediately ducked back in at the door. If he had just noticed me, I could not avoid some question like "What are you doing here?" Yes, and rather loudly, for all street to hear! Just something that could be expected of him!

The situation was almost comic, but it was not funny for me. It was obvious that Oisín passed by but not because of Farmer Frank. Because of what then? Were we really being shadowed

?

I waited for him for nearly an hour. But he did not appear.

And then I ran to the bus station at a gallop. I hurried to get home as soon as possible, to contact Dermot!

Of course, we could not talk on the phone about what had happened.

- Dermot, I urgently need to see you! - I told him. - If tomorrow morning I come to you in city for half an hour, will you have time for me?

His city was more than 3 hours away from my town.

The tone of my voice showed that something had happened, and he agreed to meet.

That night I could not sleep for a long time. And not because I was afraid of being followed. Simply, I finally realized how I was afraid that Oisín would disappear forever from my life. Just like he disappeared that day out of sight, flying down the Dublin street like a meteor, passing me by...

Fortunately, he had not disappeared, and after a few weeks, we resumed contact: thanks to Dermot. But he never told me what happened to him on that day, and why he ran past. If he had been shadowed, probably he should have told me, should he not ?

... Before going home - my first serious test - I was extremely nervous, though trying not to show it. Oisín and I went again over all the things that were to be done, and stood up together from the bench in the square.

- Well, wish me good luck! - I told him and stretched my lips to his cheek. A friendly kiss on the cheek, I did not think that this could do Oisín any harm or cause any offence. But for me it was a sort of encouraging guarantee that everything would be fine.

But nothing could prepare me for what happened next.

Instead of turning his cheek to me, Oisín turned red and stretched his lips to my lips ...

... He had left long ago, but I was still standing at the entrance to that small square, unable to move. I wanted to sing, to hump up and down on one leg and to cry at the same time. What happened was almost as unattainable as to be accepted into the ranks of a certain organization. Something I did not dare to dream of!

This time I did not sleep all night. And in the morning, like Gogol's Oksana⁴¹⁹ I realized that one cannot ignore reality: the more I tried to push it into the background of my memory, the more I was forced to admit to myself that I was in love with Oisín no less than Oksana with Vakula ... And like Oksana, I did not need the slippers of Tsarina to

⁴¹⁹ Heroine of Gogol's "Night Before Christmas". Blacksmith Vakula is in love with Oksana, but she tells him she won't marry him unless he can get for her the slippers off the [Tsaritsa](#)'s feet. While he is away trying to get those slippers, Oksana gets upset because the villagers have been passing around the rumor that Vakula has killed himself. She knows that Vakula would not do this, and that night she falls deeply in love with him. She is delighted to see him return and agrees to marry him even before he shows her the slippers.

admit that. Oisín's kiss fanned the fire of such hope in me that I feared for the consequences.

... Shortly before leaving I was asked once again for interpreting. This time they asked me to accompany a Russian woman to the hospital. A hospital? OK, be it a hospital...

Natasha turned out to be a small, slender girl. Silent and withdrawn: not like Kostya. She reluctantly talked about herself, but I do not like questioning people: if they want to tell me something, they can do it themselves. In her turn, she asked nothing about me. She only enquired what is life here like and what like are the people. She understood English well, but her spoken language was still poor. She had arrived recently, about a month ago. I did not ask her too many questions even when I saw exactly which doctor we were going to visit ...

Still, Natasha had to speak about herself: precisely because of the kind of the doctor it was. When a lady doctor - a strict middle-aged Unionist - started asking her questions of an intimate nature, Natasha looked at me blankly and said with feigned indifference, obviously expecting me to turn away from her in disgust:

- I do not know how many partners I had. I worked for one and a half years as a prostitute in Estonia.

For eighteen months? Natasha was little older than 17, so she was forced to become a sex slave when she was not even 15.

It's hard for her to say such things to strangers. It was no less harder for me to translate these things for the doctor.

- Yes, we used condoms. Yes, always. No, I do not know what nationalities the clients were. We were not allowed to talk to them. No, there were no Africans. But there have been foreigners: many of them. How many? Well, I do not know ... Approximately 8 men per day. We were kept in a house like that ... When was my last time? 2 months ago. How did we get here? We were brought here to work.

From Estonia? Suddenly it all became clear for me. Recently local newspapers published news about the "scandal case", raised in the local Assembly by the member of the Women's Coalition, Professor Monica McWilliams: about work permits which were issued by local politicians for foreign workers really "desperately" needed for the Northern Ireland economy: strippers for the first strip bar. In the permits they were described as "dancers": it caused increasing anger from Professor McWilliams: "We all know that we are not talking about the Bolshoi Theatre ballet here".

The politicians who issued these permits were unable to justify their decision clearly. By the way, this permit cannot be passed on from one employer to another. If your employer kicks you out, you would be deported: and so you almost become a slave of someone you work for, even if it does not involve "the sex industry", which of course, could not be said about the Estonian "dancers"! It is clear, of course, that Irish girls are not eager to

do that kind of “work”: they do not have economic need for it . But is that a reason to justify humiliation and exploitation of women from other countries?

By the way, about humiliation and its incompatibility with human dignity. Our "liberators" in Russia are striving to abolish these words from our vocabulary. That wind is blowing steadily: from West to East. Take, for example, an American action film of the 1990s, "Independence Day", which endeavors to instill into the girls the same thing the local newspapers try to convince the Irish girls in: that to be a stripper / prostitute (there is actually no difference!) is a “normal, respectable job”, there's nothing wrong with it ... However, Western women who so far, due to Western overexploitation of the rest of world, do have a choice, do not tend greatly to pole dance or to work as “escort” . How then did little Natasha get into that?

- My mum died when I was five years old. Dad left us earlier, I do not remember him... Do you know why people get divorced? - With unexpected bitterness Natasha asked me when we go out of the office and wait for the result of the test. The doctor was amazed by her grown-up, serious attitude to her health in particular and to life in general. "This is a big step: to contact us having just arrived in a new country without knowing the language" ...

Seeing that I do not turn away from her with condemnation , Natasha melts and begins to speak ...

- I lived with my grandmother in the Ukraine. And then, when I was 14, two girlfriends and one guy said to me: "Let's go to Estonia! It's nice there, and there is lot of work ... ". I said," But if I don't have a passport? "And they said:" That doesn't matter! "I thought about it then, but I was young , stupid. So we came, they took me to a house like this and there they told me: "You're going to work as a prostitute." I even laughed at first: I thought they were joking. I was so young ... And they started to beat me ...

Natasha recoils, silent. Then, after a pause, she continues:

- Once I ran away from them, went to the police. But the police drove me back to them, to those bandits. I did not use ... drugs. I mean, I was not injected. Tablets were given to us , some antidepressants . So that we wouldn't crack up ... Was it difficult to come here? Yes, it was hard. It is very difficult ... - she obviously does not want to talk about it-. Now I cannot even look at men. It's disgusting But I would like to have children someday. It's hard to be alone, but to be with a man is disgusting. I do not know which is worse. What do you think?

The doctor returns and gives Natasha some pills as a preventive measure, invites her to come next week again. She asks Natasha, after a little hesitation:

- And while here, are you going to go on with your job?

Natasha's face darkens, she is becoming frightened and so child-like:

- No, no! I hope not!

It softens the harsh reaction of the doctor:

- You have no one even to talk to! Is there anyone who cares for you? – She exclaims

now quite humanly.

- Social worker,- says Natasha trying to look strong.- After all, I am still a minor.

- We are taught English. Soon I will be given a room - she says. Her face brightens again. And I look at her, thinking that I could have children almost of her age. I think about an image of prostitutes that our "democratic" media present us with: a cheerful, sprightly girl, engaged in this trade purely for fun and purely because of her own depravity ("it serves them right"). About how unrealistic this image is and the reality: a little girl hunted down like an animal, deprived of childhood, of faith in love and of faith in herself as a human being, accustomed to consider herself a thing. She became an adult ahead of time through no fault of her own. Do these journalists wish all this to happen to their daughters? Or is mocking an orphan and destitute is quite all right?

I would impose penalties for prostitution not on such Natashas, but on their fat pimps, on police and gangsters, and - most importantly! - on their clients: those "respectable people" (because, if it were not for them, it would not flourish so luxuriantly !). I would impose castration with confiscation of property. And put that thing through the meat grinder! It will be just right. A normal, decent, respectful man will not go to a prostitute. He will not humiliate himself and a woman like this.

What, am I calling for violence? And to rape girls who didn't even grow up enough to become women, is OK? And to pay for "voluntary" sex with women who go to it because otherwise they cannot feed their children? How about it, gentlemen, with that ugly worm in your pants that keeps you occupied; you, "civilized humanists" with a "human face", who have deprived us of a decent, human life?

Ksenia Virganskaya⁴²⁰, known in the "civilized world" more as "*Xenia Gorbachev*", is just a couple of years older than Natasha. She did not have to work as a prostitute, as the orphan Natasha who has become a prostitute thanks to Xenia's grandfather, who had sold himself to capitalism, as the saying goes, "voluntarily and with a song."

But if he had sold only himself! First of all, he pawned all of us overseas. All his people, all of our Natashas and Sergeis. And it's using this money, Xenia goes on her debutantes party today in a hired Dior gown: money that was granted to her granddad for destroying millions of human lives - destinies of an entire generation, Natasha's generation that was born at the time when this Judas, the favorite Teddy Bear of Madame Thatcher, came to power! 15,000 for a hired dress for a party of offspring of various global Mephistopheles⁴²¹ in Paris....

So what makes Natasha any worse than Ksenia? Why in this "society of equal opportunities" do two girls with roughly the same intellectual abilities, and almost of the same age differ so much in the human rights that they have? It's funny today to hear

⁴²⁰ Michail Gorbachev's granddaughter

⁴²¹ Mephistopheles is a demon featured in [German folklore](#). He originally appeared in literature as the [demon](#) in the [Faust](#) legend, and he has since appeared in other works as a [stock character](#) version of the [Devil](#).

about the privileges of the Soviet bureaucrats: although it all began with them, of course, and these privileges so much had tickled the appetites of all kinds of “gorbys” which has led to the current malevolent state of things. But never in the Soviet time could “gorbys” get so out of control as to send our children on a conveyor belt into prostitution! In order to “spread their wings” those criminal apparatchniks had to destroy our social order first! Having, of course, laid down the “artillery barrage” in the form of PR and glorification of the “call girls” “luxurious life”.

I looked at the pale face of Natasha, who had no place to return to (her Ukrainian grandmother has died during these years) ... *"We are children of Russia's terrible years"*⁴²² ... A generation not remembering socialism – because it was born too late - now begins to turn to it, looking for a way out from the hopeless life in the brothels and in the doorways that were prepared for this generation by the “civilized world.”

... *"A well known Chechen Don has been kidnapped in Moscow ..."*

My God, people, are you nuts? For whom is he “well known”, why are you talking on the national radio about a “Don”?

I am at home. I awoke with the sounds of a news program on radio "Russia". My mother has a habit: radio and television should be on almost all day long. It works on my nerves, especially now, and I usually try to switch them off straight away when I come in. But she, on the contrary, seems to miss something if they are not on! Even if they talk rubbish. This habit has remained with her from the Soviet era: when, perhaps, radio used to be boring sometimes, but did not broadcast such gibberish .

When we lived in our old house, my mother had a little portable radio and in the evenings she listened to it until late. She especially liked the concert *"For those who do not sleep"* and the weather forecast done by a hydro-meteorologist with a mysterious and beautiful name, Teimuraz Galaktionovich Ivanidze. She thrilled to his voice and compared his broadcast with the one from "Vremya" TV program. When the weather forecast on TV began , with the music and pictures of different parts of our country, my mother always sang the words of the song that was playing in the background - "Manchester et Liverpool"⁴²³ – or rather, its Russian text.

*"You have whispered "yes", this word
The water and the willow at the river heard.
I forgive you, but alas
They cannot easily forgive. "*

On weekends my mother’s little radio wakened us up with *"Hello, comrades!"* on Saturdays and *"Good Morning"* on Sundays. *"Sunday is a day of fun, songs are heard all*

⁴²² Verses of Alexander Blok (1880-1921)

⁴²³ French song performed by Marie Laforet (b. 1939) “Manchester and Liverpool' is a song that had served as the background music to the weather forecast at the end of 'Programma Vremya' (Time), the main Soviet TV news programme at 9:00 PM. 250 million people had listened to this same tune day after day for more nearly twenty years!

around, Good morning, good morning and have a nice day!" This joyful, upbeat music really inspired us for the whole day.

And we listened to the radio programme "Yunost" - "*Field Post*" Youth ", with songs on request for soldiers serving in the army, then the same request concert for long haul truck drivers who were always somewhere on their way. And the request concert "*In the working afternoon*". In our country we had a lot of professional holidays: Teacher's Day, Geologist Day, Machinist's Day, the Day of the Metallurgist, the Press Day. And Little Tamara celebrated Physical Culture Day as her professional holiday. We even made gifts for her on that day. And what Days should we celebrate now? Merchandiser Day? Sponsor Day? Stripper Day? Broker Day? Sales Manager Day?

.. In the morning on the radio there was the industrial gymnastics at 11, for exercising during a pause at work - just after my favorite children's programs, from 10:00 to 11:00, with the famous radio storyteller Nikolai V. Litvinov and, adored by all children of the USSR, the "Radio Nanny" in which with humor, jokes and songs we were taught the rules of Russian language and the good manners Now all this is considered to be the "vestiges of totalitarianism!"

And then, after midday news, began the "*Time, Events, People ...*" radio program. Literate, smart people worked on the radio- not sleazy, vulgar, semi-literate DJs, whose jokes *make my ears wither*. However, what's the use in taking offence from some creatures with a defective state of mind? It is worse when the philistines are smart and talented people. For example, in Leningrad (for me it will always be Leningrad) there is a singer and songwriter who, judging by his work, should be a talented, fragile, vulnerable person. I loved his songs. And therefore with great pleasure one day I went to his concert in our city.

And ...I left that concert 15 minutes after it started! No, his voice was great. And the songs were still good. But for some reason he felt obliged to fill in the pauses between them with juicy stories. And the hall was full not only of women, but even of children! And no, not one was offended by this bawdry. No one closed their child's ears. The people just looked down shyly with their eyes, but were still clapping to him, as if at gunpoint! My people, do you have at least one grain of self-respect?

I sat in the second row among the public. I stood up quietly, tore the ticket to shreds and threw it on stage. After that I left the hall. Nobody expected this, especially not the singer, and it seemed to me that no one really understood why I did it.

But I just could not do otherwise. Because I am *Soviética!*

...I did not feel like coming to my own native country any more. When I realized that, I became very scared at the thought that I now only come here because I have to. Every time I came to Russia, my homeland seemed to become more and more sad looking and life - more and more unbearable. When you see bad things in a foreign country, especially in one which has never even known any other life, it is much easier to accept

than to see your own native country crippling in front of your eyes. To see it and not to be able to do anything about it, that's what was beyond my human strength! It was like witnessing a person close to you being tortured and not being able to strike at the butcher's hands ! This is a torture in itself, worse than any physical suffering.

That's how I felt myself at home now. But even my mother did not, in my opinion, fully understand it. She could not even yet believe that everything Soviet, everything dear, kind, humane was disappearing before our eyes forever. She still felt that it could not be vanish: like air, like sunlight, like the stars in the sky that can only be temporarily covered with clouds

.. I did my best to help Oisín and *the boys*. Not all was in my power to do. Our work progressed slowly, but he told me that I should not worry about this: better slowly, but surely.

- We also say: haste makes waste! - I told him. Waste -human waste!- were really those who were supposed to “keep an eye” on us. My country had nothing in common with them. They, those people, have never been and by their nature can never be neither our partners nor, even more so, our allies. Whatever they may say. To equate Northern Ireland with Chechnya is an incredible stupidity, because by doing this we thereby willingly equate ourselves with the colonialists. Relations between various ethnic groups in Soviet time were completely different. By the way, such comparisons come to mind of only very few people in Northern Ireland, mostly of the ignorant ones who do not see the difference between a bum and a ladle just because they are both round. The "Masters" of Northern Ireland are the enemies of our country as well as of the whole mankind. And that is why my conscience was perfectly clear.

... When we returned to Ireland, things took their course. Lisa began going to the same school again, the one with lazy, shopping teachers. There were simply no other schools, but to name “learning” what she was doing there, was too much. It was almost the same as to consider CPRF⁴²⁴'s leaders to be true communists.

Mum as a true Soviet citizen could not accept such “education”. And when we received a note from the school that some pupils there had head lice, and that we should now check our child's head every day at home, both my mother and I went speechless and were horrified.

Lice?? I cannot even imagine what they look like! It was something from the period of the civil war and homeless children. Soviet children got rid of lice when my mother was just at primary school, almost 50 years ago. In my own memory there has not been a single case of lice either, in our school, or in neighboring ones. Lice were something shameful, remnants of the past, like religion and private property. Well, maybe they really go through life hand in hand?

⁴²⁴ Communist Party of the Russian Federation

During my mother's childhood, if there was even one case of head lice, the whole school would be closed immediately and workers from the sanitary epidemic station would thoroughly disinfect the building! Including the pupils. The day after elections my school was usually closed for disinfection if the building was used as a polling station. Here they do not even change shoes at school⁴²⁵. And they do not give flowers to teachers on September 1, because "my boy will not go down the street with a bunch of flowers - he's not a poof"⁴²⁶, ...

Middle Ages. Full stop.

I had great difficulty keeping mum from telling these shopping (during their work time) teachers all she thought about them. But I felt that one day it would burst out, like a dam in New Orleans.

...Oisín was quite satisfied with how events progressed - no, I do not mean anything personal. We never discussed personal matters, for us it was like in a Soviet song: «*What matters isn't anything personal, but work and results we achieve*⁴²⁷». And our results were substantial, although quite modest yet.

- Do you like to work with me? "- He asked me suddenly, when I really was not expecting it. - Do you think we have established a good relationship?

I nearly lost my bearings at this question.

- Of course - I said simply. - I get on very well with you.

That day was rainy, and he came to the meeting wearing a ridiculous hat, so that I almost laughed out loud: it was high, with narrow rims, a kind of hat that no one has worn for about 30 years, if not more. Oisín looked as if he was preparing to go fishing. He lacked only a fishing rod. Yet I, as Pisces, was caught in his net even without it. But did he have any idea of that?

I managed to suppress a laugh, looking at his hat: because the last thing I wanted was to hurt his feelings. We walked along a quiet, deserted street in Dublin, overgrown with tall trees. That day I had something to pass on to him. Both of us were wearing gloves: like in the song of Vladimir Vysotsky⁴²⁸, "*so as not to leave prints*". For myself, I was once again amazed at what we were doing.

- Now we will turn the corner. Pass what you have to me on that turn, - he said softly, quietly.

I did so, and he hid the bag under his coat. I was not afraid for myself, but very much for him: because he could be stopped somewhere on his way back.

- Listen, I have a strange feeling that all of this is happening not to us, but to somebody in a movie - he told me confidentially. - Don't you have a feeling like that too?

⁴²⁵ In Russia all children change their outside shoes for a different pair when they are inside the school, on a daily basis.

⁴²⁶ Poof -homosexual (derogatory term)

⁴²⁷ Line from the Soviet song "My Address is the Soviet Union" (1970s)

⁴²⁸ Vladimir Vysotsky's song "Parody on a bad crime story"

And he became shy of his own words.

-Sure, I do! - I confirmed.

Do I need to add that I felt myself especially “like the movie” because after each of our meetings he stretched to kiss my lips? Like that cat in the joke - “*voluntarily and with a song*⁴²⁹.” No, he certainly did not sing, but his face showed clearly that it was the most eagerly awaited moment in our meeting. For me, to be honest, too: I’ve been waiting for this moment all month. It has turned into a kind of nice parting ritual for us.

After the first time I was so afraid to believe in what had happened that when I met him on my return from my trip I did not even approach him at the end of our meeting. I did not want him to kiss me just because I wanted it. But Oisín himself came up to me and said, “Well, congratulations on a successful start!” He repeated this *death defying act*⁴³⁰ that we did a month before. Do I need to explain how my soul trembled after that! And when it happened for the third, and fourth and the fifth time.... Now, there could be no doubt: he liked me, otherwise why would he do this, above all, if he has a girlfriend?

Soon a day came when it became unbearable for me not to know who he was. And with a sinking heart I studied for hours lists of inmates of Long Kesh posted on the Internet, hoping to reckon Oisín by a combination of different factors: date of birth, his neighbor in the prison block, our fatso Gerard, number of years of imprisonment to which he was sentenced, and things like that.

Oisín Monaghan? No. Maybe Oisín Duggan? Or Oisín Moriarty? No, that is not the right one.... .. Bingo! My *blue-eyed fairy tale*⁴³¹’s name is Oisín Rafferty.

I had to wait until I got to an internet cafe to find some facts from his biography. I would never have looked for him on the Internet from my computer. That would be like death. And when I finally landed in an Internet cafe to search for the cherished name, and the screen gave me in a couple of seconds a number of links, my heart sank. When I started clicking on them and read what was written there, my heart ached with pity for him, mixed with a great surprise, but also with growing pride in him, almost in the same measure. Poor, poor Oisín! How many ordeals he had to endure!

... It was during the years of the armed conflict, brutal and unpredictable. Oisín was caught in an English wood with a small amount of explosives. He probably was hiding it there. I had long noticed about him that he was peculiarly licking his lips every time he was saying the words “plastic explosives”. Well, his life story explains it well. “*What the heart thinks the tongue speaks*”

⁴²⁹ Old Soviet joke: Russian, American and English men have a bet, who will make a cat eat mustard. American man opens cat’s mouth and pushes mustard in. Russian man protests: “That’s violence!” Englishman hides mustard inside a sausage and gives it to the cat. Russian man protests: “That’s cheating!” Then Russian man smears mustard under cat’s tail. Screaming cat licks it off, and Russian man says proudly: “Look at this: voluntarily, and with a song!”

⁴³⁰ Term for a dangerous stunt in a circus

⁴³¹ Expression from the novel “Seagull” (1950) by N. Biryukov devoted to heroic story of the Soviet partisan Lisa Chaikina.

He was sentenced immediately to 17 years of strict regime, and far from home: in England, where his relatives could seldom come to visit him. In fact, no one was visiting him, except for two sisters, and they could do it only a couple of times a year. This I also found out through the Internet, because his case caused resonance and even reached the European Court of Justice, so badly he was treated in prison. A few years ago, he and his comrades escaped from one of the most secure prisons in Britain. The escape was desperate, with all the elements of an adventure movie: intimidating the guards, sawing bars and climbing on ropes up the high prison walls. I began to respect him even more: if Dermot just had a smart head, then Oisín was a real dare-devil. It was hard to believe! He gave an impression of such a timid man often mumbling to me instead of speaking. I wonder was talking to me scarier than escaping from a heavily protected prison?

...Unfortunately, the escapees were caught almost immediately (oh, how sorry I was not to have been somewhere nearby with the car at that time, to see him and take him with me!). And, of course, they were beaten then. So much that when they were released, they took legal proceedings against the British authorities demanding compensation for ill-treatment. Oisín asked for an impressive amount. But, alas, received nothing. The British tabloids were indignant that he received legal aid for this case. Amnesty International in their documents put forward his treatment as an example describing the violations of human rights in Britain: the prison regime in which Oisín stayed for so many years was so cruel that all the people who had been subjected to it, were mentioned as having mental health issues after that. Maybe this was the reason for him to pass me by the day we were to meet in that pub Dublin? Because of some ugly recollection experienced only by him.

Usually when I like somebody, I begin to load this person with gifts, mostly of the intellectual kind. But I could not give anything to Oisín: because even the smallest gift could be evidence against both of us in what we were doing! It was bothering me for a long time that I could not give him even a small gift that would remind him of me. Until finally I gave him a box of our Russian chocolates.

-You can eat them on the train, -I advised. - Then, there is no evidence left. Try it, especially because here you people just do not know what real chocolate is like. Just taste it.

It was true. British chocolate is similar to lute for window frames, in both appearance and taste..

He laughed, but took the chocolates.

And I told myself that on Valentine's Day I should give him a valentine card. Yes, it also was against the rules: to give it not anonymously and not sending by mail, but I had no other opportunity to make him understand that I was not indifferent to him...

...Relationship with Lisa's school evolved dramatically. Just as I believed, one day my mother exploded. It all started that day...

.... They sat in front of me like the medieval Inquisition. The only difference from the Inquisition was that even if they wanted to, they could not burn me at the stake. And they attacked me as their fear for their own skins grew and grew. For their status-quo in their hypocritical society where respectable middle-aged businessmen with a beer belly, wearing glasses, can come out at night wearing balaclavas straight over their glasses and becomes leaders of sectarian terrorists. Where what is going to happen to you and your children is defined by such "respectable people" who are oh so sure of their own racial, religious and sexual superiority (those WPM - White Protestant Males) behind the unhearing, unseeing walls of Orange halls and Masonic lodges ... "If people of the same kind are now at the helm in America, poor, poor humanity!", I thought. And then I braced myself: they are there to be fought. If you study them here properly and learn how to put them in their place, then this experience will be useful to us all on a global scale.

Perhaps it was not the right time to think about the global scale now, but I could not help thinking about it, when the same "Christian" fundamentalists, just like those in America, had mocked my family in the most sophisticated manner for months. They mocked my child - the most innocent and the most defenseless creature ever in this Jurassic Age country...

Lisa was "unlucky" three times: she was born a girl, she was dark-skinned, and when she was four years old she fell seriously ill and became disabled. She could hardly speak, although before that she spoke several languages and sang like a nightingale. This latter would be difficult to overcome even in the much more humane society where her mother was born and brought up. So what to expect then from this *terrarium*⁴³², this place which is like a zoo, where they both were strangers, and the only ones who sympathized with them were rabbits who rebelled against pythons' attempts to make a meal of them ?

When I thought about my daughter, I always remembered the day when I found a seagull on the beach. The bird was lying helplessly on the wet sand, unable not only to stretch its wings but even to move. I did not know what happened to it. I did not see any visible damage. But it lay there helpless and could only extend its neck threatening, as I was walking knee-deep in the cold water of the Irish Sea. "Do not be scared", I told the bird. "I will not hurt you." When I passed by and turned around I saw another seagull, a healthy one, not far from the sick bird. The healthy seagull did not want to leave the one in need alone. At this moment, my heart sank. I thought about Lisa and about the sufferings of millions of living creatures throughout the world, whom I, like this seagull, would not, could not abandon.

A couple walking a dog was approaching the seagull from the other side of the beach, slowly but surely. Having noticed the dog, the healthy seagull flew into the air: personal safety was more important than staying close to its mate. I felt as if someone had pushed me in the back: I realized that if I did not hurry now, a sick seagull would be torn into pieces right before my eyes with dog's sharp teeth ... I was in time, a second before the curious dog noticed the bird . At the sight of the dog the seagull became very anxious and

⁴³² A small enclosure or closed container in which selected conditions are created for snakes and other reptilians, such as turtles and lizards, where they can be kept and observed

began silently opening its long sharp beak. And when the dog rushed to the bird, it was too late: I stood next to the bird ready to defend it to the last. And the dog retreated...

"*Lovely day*", - its owners greeted me . The beach was the only place where you could truly relax and stop asking yourself questions about who was there passing you by on the road, "*these ones*" or "*those ones*". Of course, I could see that the owners of the dog were "*those ones*", but here it did not matter: as it should not matter in normal life. I gave them a friendly greeting. They smiled. "I do not know what to do with it" I said, pointing at the bird and hoping for some advice. But they pretended not to hear me, although I knew that they did. It was such a beautiful summer morning, and why should they bother their consciences and fill their minds with thoughts about some bird?

I was left alone with it again. I squatted down and asked the seagull in Russian: "Well, what shall I do with you? How can I help you? "Animals, I knew from my own experience, understand a variety of languages, unlike many English-speaking people who do not want to understand anybody else and cannot even pronounce correctly the simplest foreign name, which is easily pronounced by the French, the Chinese, the Africans and many other peoples . The seagull looked into my eyes with a penetrating and sad glance, but did not utter a sound. "I cannot just leave you here. The dogs will tear you apart. I live very far away, and I could not carry you to the house. My grandfather had doves, I remember the birds do not like somebody picking up or even touching them ... What shall I do with you? "

I reached out my hand to the seagull. It opened its beak and tried to turn its head and peck my fingers. The beak was long and hooked, and certainly it would hurt my fingers if the bird had enough strength to do it. But the bird did not have any strength. She never reached for my hand. I saw her pink tremulous tongue.

There was a struggle in my heart. What I called "*struggle between the Soviet me and the vestiges of the past*". The Soviet person in me would never let a deenseless creature die, just by leaving it to its own devices. I would not be able to sleep at night after that. But the years spent in a "civilized" society have left their mark on me, and a sweet voice of the "civilized individualism" somewhere inside me whispered: "Anyway, you cannot help it, the bird is doomed in any case... leave it... this is its fate, and everyone should meet one's fate. Do not poke your nose into others' lives. You've got your own. Well, what will you do with it, if you do take it now? You have so much to do at home ...»

For a moment I stood there fighting with myself. A "consensus" won,- a compromise between the Soviet and the selfish parts of me. "I will take it where the dogs will not reach it, and then I'll go home and bring it something to eat. But first I try if maybe it can swim, since it cannot fly." I picked up the seagull in my hands, surprised at how light it was: a big bird that weighted almost nothing, like a feather. It was trying to turn its neck in my hands and to get me with its beak, but was unable to do it.

I carried it to the water, gently assuring it all the way that nothing bad was going to happen, that I would not hurt it, that I wanted only good for it. But the seagull did not

move in the water, and I could not leave it there either. I carried it into the dunes, into a nook in the grass, where the bird could see the sea, where it was not hot, and where it would not be found by stupid dogs. "Sit here, and I'll run home and get you something to eat," I said to the seagull and ran home for a can of tuna-fish.

But when I returned, the seagull was dead ... It was lying lifeless on the wet grass, looking at the sky with dull eyes. And I felt myself so guilty that I had left it alone even for a second! I was not interested anymore in whether this bird was doomed or not: the Soviet voice in me finally crushed that sweet but insistent little voice of capitalism, it made me believe the seagull would have survived if I had not left her. Everything is in our hands in this world, if we are really willing to fight for it. We are capable of miracles for others, for those who need our help. You just have to take your fate in your own hands and be strong!

... I always remembered this seagull when I had hardships and wanted to hide in a shell, to escape from problems and to leave others to fend for themselves. The seagull could not fight for itself. Lisa cannot fight for herself. Even those who can, they still need our help! It's not the time to think about myself and to feel sorry for myself. That gone seagull became for me a symbol, not allowing me to make compromises with my conscience, no matter how difficult it was. A "consensus" of selfishness and selflessness in reality is a victory for selfishness! Everything that happened in my own country from the start of our "era of compromises" is the living evidence for that.

... In the beginning Lisa began to be mocked about rather subtly: first she was isolated from other children in the school. She was pushed into a classroom with three overgrown oligophrenics⁴³³ - they were kind teenagers, but seemed to be unable to learn anything anymore. Lisa still could be taught - if one would make the necessary effort. The way my mother and I did at home. But she started coming home from school rather drowsy, did not recognize anybody, even me. Then I started to ask the school questions: why my child does not recognize me when she returns home, why, when I change her nappy, she turns to the wall legs apart as if being searched at a police station, why during six months she did not receive the help from a speech therapist that we were promised? ". Then they stopped feeding Lisa. She returned home just at four o'clock, completely exhausted. "She did not want to eat except for chips and an apple," - those teachers-*Buchenvald* guards wrote in her diary, returning Lisa's home dinner unheated. All questions about how they feed her, why she does not eat anything, though at home she wouldn't leave the fridge, were met with blank incomprehension. Instead of answers, three or four times I received the form to sign for school lunches which they prepared there. The menu included the meals Lisa would not eat, and yet when she started to study in this school the principal - big-eared, like Tony Blair, with the eternally blocked nose, pale Protestant woman, presumably from a well-off family, assured us that there would be no problems with heating up meals taken from home. I tried to explain that Lisa would not eat school meals. "Do you mean, you insist that I should sign this form and if I don't, the child gets no food?" - I asked her straight. With a sweet little smile the principal assured me - "Of course not".

⁴³³ mentally retarded individuals

... At first, they stopped heating up her rice. Ordinary boiled rice without any additives. "It is against Health & Safety Regulations," - they said. I politely asked for a list of what they could warm up, and what not. I was not given any list, although initially they had assured me that such a list existed. A couple of weeks and two unsigned forms later the school refused to warm up almost everything that Lisa loved to eat: beans, potatoes and buckwheat (apparently personnel was terrified to see this unheard of strange dish!), Lisa started to lose weight and I demanded a meeting with the principal. Again, I was kindly assured that everything was in order, and Lisa was loved by everyone, that nobody thought to isolate her from the other children because she is "colored", just that there are no other places in school (at the beginning of the year Lisa was transferred from the class of children of almost the same age,- the reason given was that she was few months older than her peers – to the above mentioned group of those who were several years older than her!). Again, I was not given any list of banned food, but was provided with the name of the woman who had it, according to the principal. I promised to contact her. "By the way, why do children not change their shoes in your school?" - I asked. And when Lisa returned that day from school, I noticed a fresh knife slash on her new shoes ... Do not ask too many questions, mother!

Literally the very next day, the principal called me at work.

- An accident happened with your girl. She fell and hurt herself. We took her to a local hospital but they refused to help her, because they are only for adults. We want to take her to the Royal Hospital in Belfast.

Belfast was an hour's drive, and at the emergency department of the Royal Hospital one had to spend about 4-6 hours in the queue.

- Do not take her anywhere! - I cried, - I am a Civil Defense nurse myself. My mum will come now to take her home!

... My mother told me that when she arrived to pick up Lisa, she saw such a picture: the girl sat on a chair, bleeding, and around her stood four or five healthy women, including a nurse, who did nothing. They did not even disinfect the cut over her brow. "Let's go home quickly, away from these idiots!" - exclaimed Mum angrily in Russian, but grabbing Lisa's hand, she discovered that the girl was tied to a chair!

- Then I told them what I thought of them! In Russian, of course. Too much honor for them after this fascism to converse in their language. Five silly hens standing around... A child is bleeding, and they are tying her to a chair!

The school denied that Lisa was tied to a chair. Nobody asked how she felt during her absence from school in the following few days. Instead I received a letter about how "grossly and unacceptably" my mum had behaved in school...

There were no other special schools in the area, and I reluctantly hoped that our problems could be solved. I continued to insist on the therapies needed for my daughter to develop, I still did not get any clear answer about the list of forbidden food, from which the only conclusion could be that such list did not exist. The official answer to my direct question reminded me of the answer of Roman Kartsev to a question of Viktor Ilchenko⁴³⁴ in their satirical scene in the early 70's:

⁴³⁴ [Roman Kartsev](#) and [Viktor Ilchenko](#).- famous Soviet stand-up comedians

- "Listen, Koltsov, you were at work, of course?"
- "This is a towel!"⁴³⁵

It was the same sort of reply...

In the beginning of May, my daughter came home from school with pierced ears, from which the lymph flowed... The strike was calculated: it happened on Friday evening, and the doctor who could witness what happened was off until next Tuesday, because of a Bank Holiday... The situation was so unreal, so phantasmagorical that I could understand perfectly: nobody would even believe me. But the fact remained: it could have happened only in school. And Lisa was not able to tell who did it, but villains knew it well and used it. They obviously wanted me to take my child away from this "white Protestant" school. To give you an idea what kind of school it was: school's management had good connections with a famous restaurant in the most rabid loyalist village in the region, which was a sponsor for this school...

I remembered my conversation with the parents of another girl - an Irish Catholic, who was nearly excluded from the same school because she needed a special medical diet! These scum were not going to teach our children anything, they considered them a burden on society, and we probably, in their opinion, should generally be grateful to them for giving us a break, looking after our children and should not ask too many questions. When Lisa came home after a medical examination at school with her dress unbuttoned for example - no one had thought to button it up - I received the following answer to my question about this: "You seem to be unsure exactly how many buttons were undone". In other words, again, "*This is a towel!*" ...

One could laugh at their stupidity. But the incident with the piercing really scared me. I tried to imagine how this could happen: one person could not do it, even if they tied Lisa to a chair, she is strong girl. It means that she was held by two or three persons. One pierced ... She probably cried. Not probably, but surely. I was physically sickened by my own helplessness to protect the little girl, who never did any harm to anybody, who was already so severely punished by life without any reason. It was a thousand times harder than after the encounter with the seagull. So I decided not to surrender.

...The social worker, usually a nice and friendly woman, greeted me like an iceberg:

- This school has a very good reputation, we investigated everything and came to the conclusion that this could not have happened there.
- What exactly did you investigate? Can I see the results and the course of your investigation - in writing? - I asked. I am still waiting for these results up till this day... Instead I was offered the most frequent argument in this sectarian underhand outpost: "We **know** each other for a long time and we **believe** each other!"

Believing you'll do in your church, ladies and gentlemen!

⁴³⁵ Kartsev and Ilchenko – were famous Soviet stand-up comedians. This particular scene is about a man who was on the beach during his work time and is trying to get out of the situation by avoiding direct answers to his boss' questions

- It's not a proper argument. For example, I do not know any of you: does this mean, I cannot believe you? - I asked the social worker - Where could this happen then, if not in school?

Instead of answering the social worker grinned arrogantly and asked:

-Are you sure you do not want to tell us anything? It is probably so difficult to take care of such a child without help.

She hinted that if I insisted on an investigation, they would investigate me, and my mother, but not the school.

- No, I have nothing else to say to you. I asked you a question and I still have not received an answer, – I said firmly.

I knew that here, unlike at home, emotion is not a sign that you care about someone, it is «a sign of instability», as my solicitor had taught me at the time of my divorce proceedings. So I became a "Snow Queen", although my heart bled. The social worker laughed even more boldly:

-Then it must be a miracle!

-Yes, I have noticed that this country is full of miracles! - I said sarcastically, looking straight into her eyes and knowing that the social worker understood what I meant. It restrained a little her impudence with which my request for help had been met. But help still never came...

After two weeks Lisa came home with a racist picture: a black human face drawn on a huge sheet of paper, with an inscription "Lisa" right above it. The girl, of course, understood nothing. This was made not for her but for her relatives, for me. The school diary assured us that today they were "drawing magical pictures" and that Lisa "was very pleased." Actually, Lisa's clothes had no spots of paint, but there were prints of adult fingers on the picture. As well as that, Lisa could not draw at all...

- Yeah, magical... The same kind of magic like voodoo in Haiti! Are they really any different from the Haitians, these "distinguished ladies and gentlemen"? Uneducated, with complete ignorance of anything about the world outside their "piece" of Ireland, with the same secret societies... Did you read how they ran after goats in their lodges and halls during their initiations? Only Haitians are more kind and humane! - My mum grumbled, after we have had plenty of laughs over evil human stupidity: "educated" teaching personnel in a "civilized" country mentally functioned at the level of a junior group of a Soviet kindergarten. To be offended by them meant to fall to their level. But, of course, I could not leave it there...

... I had long been preparing to meet with the inquisitors-sectarians of the education authorities. Since then, however, as Blair has suspended the local Assembly, and these "historical old mushrooms" again stirred, believing that they could do anything. "But I should not, I have no right to give in to them. I will not leave my little seagull in distress!" - I was saying to myself during sleepless nights and coming to work almost collapsing from fatigue. It was hard to have spirit enough to hold together: when all around you there is one cohesive sect, all protecting each other's actions and you are a stranger,

how can you not give in to depression, how can you stay calm and strong, how to handle this and not break down?

Oisín helped me.

We met rarely, and I did not like to talk to him about my problems. I wanted always to seem strong and independent. But this time it was too much for me and I told him everything. Nobody could listen as well as he did. Because he went through dungeons, torture, beatings and humiliation, he was there next to me, as a living proof that one can overcome and survive everything.

- How can we help you? Just tell me! - He said firmly, so that my eyes welled up with tears of gratitude. I swallowed them in time without letting them overflow.

- I need someone to go with me to this meeting as a witness. So they cannot not go back on what they say, you know? Someone strong, who would support me if they press me, and not let me get emotional if I feel I cannot cope by myself.

- We will find someone like that, - Oisín promised - And you will cope. You are very, very strong.

At our parting, for the first time since we met he held me tight for a second as if he felt I needed his support and his human warmth, and that brief moment was the happiest in the past five years of my life. He was embarrassed by his own outburst and fled away like a schoolboy. And since that time when life became unbearable I recalled this moment in my mind trying not ever to let it fade away from my memory.

...At last I coped with it and found myself strong enough to meet them face to face. I knew they would lie to me and that I couldn't interrupt them or show any emotion. I had even stopped taking valerian tablets. I was just mentally repeating the names of Lisa and Oisín.

Except for me, there was no one to do it. Like Jeanne D'Arc: "*If not me, then who?*" Next to me sat Martin, the man whom Oisín promised to find: terse, old, strong local Republican farmer. He emanated such strength and such confidence that we were right, that I was reassured. Once again I felt as I did in times of the crisis: when cold anger comes to replace panic and hysteria: "We'll see who'll have the last word" It is the best mood for such conversations.

Usually I'm not fond of confrontations with villains, and to save my nerves I usually even turned off the TV when a shamelessly lying Bush, Blair or Trimble appeared on the screen: because I became angry and could attempt to argue even with the TV screen. But today, when a confrontation with villains could not be avoided, and discussion in a way I used to have back in my home country, was impossible, I was happy that I had waited for this meeting until I was in such a cold angry mood. "I must avoid unnecessary sarcasm!" - I thought. - We need to solve the problem first, and only then...

At the table sat a little Unionist old man by the name of Mr. Frost - a polite, smiling, and, unlike the big-eared principal, true professional at his business (he was defending, of

course, what he was put here to defend). Beside him sat "the lady pleasant in all respects", from the parents' committee, representing the school, and a likeable young dark-haired lapsed Catholic, admitted to the "trough" and trying hard to justify their trust. It was with him that I had my unpleasant correspondence all these months. "He acts as a personal secretary of the principal" - another mother who had been forced to take her child off that *serpentarium*⁴³⁶, has told me. She was also a foreigner, a Frenchwoman. The experience that she has shared with me confirmed my guess regarding the sectarian racism at the school and unwillingness of the staff to work properly and to make at least some effort to teach children with disabilities. When she started asking questions about her son, they began to place toys in his bag, declaring afterwards that he had "stolen" them. And she also told me that the free breakfast which I had not signed up for, the staff eats themselves and feeds it to visiting inspectors... So, they make Liza hungry in retaliation for what I have done. Is this society really more "civilized" than ours?

I was smiling throughout the hearing and was very friendly. But when Mr. Frost put pressure on me to "take back my accusations against the school that the child's ears were pierced there", I just smiled charmingly:

- What accusations, Mr. Frost? Do I accuse anyone specifically? I asked a question and I never got an answer. All I know is that Lisa was under school's care when it happened. How it happened, who did it and why, - I do not know and just wanted to find it out.

- It could not have happened at school.
- Why could it not? Is it because you know the principal and believe her? Or can I perhaps see the results of your investigation?
- Take back your false accusations!
- First I want to hear from you about the results of the investigation, and then you can expect some kind of response from me.
- I think it will be useful to register in the minutes of this meeting that between the time the girl was brought home, and the time you came from work 15 minutes passed.
- To whom may it be useful, Mr. Frost? To the school?

Then they tried for a while to confuse matters about the racist activities of Ms. Shields, a teacher of music. Mr. Frost, with a triumphant look gave me a pile of similar pictures and said - with obvious pleasure on his face as if saying: "You see how resourceful we are!" - that all the kids in Lisa's class received the same pictures. I was ready for this turn of events: this is what I was warned about by Oisin.

- If so, then why are there no names of other children on the other pictures? Why do other pictures not depict a black person? Wait, what's this? - With feigned curiosity I pulled from the pile a pattern of white circles on a black background.

- Sorry, what is that supposed to be? Is it a target for shooting?

Frost was covered with cold sweat, and I felt like a machine gunner, who just got to his turn to hit the enemy target.

- Uh-uh ... maybe it's a snail or something ... - the little old Orangeman murmured.
- A snail? Well, one should really have a rich imagination for that ... - I blurted out amazed by my own brutality.

⁴³⁶ Serpentarium is a reptile zoo or reptile park specializing in snakes.

They began to reassure me, of course, that nobody had anything malicious in mind.

- I'm not saying that you had, - I resumed briskly. - Oh no. But you know, Mr. Frost, how it hurt our feelings! What should I think on seeing this; especially since I had already spoken with the school about how sensitive we are to racial issues. After that I expected a bit more sensitivity from the staff...

- The school wanted to make children familiar with the contrast between black and white
- Mr. Frost did not give up.

- Between black and white? Why exactly between these colors? Why not between orange and green, for example? They are much more childlike, more cheerful colors, are they not?

Mr. Frost began to wipe his forehead with a handkerchief.

My main arguments I was saving as a treat, in case their pressure became unbearable. Their manner reminded me of Brother Francisco's trial in French film "Zorro" with Alen Delon⁴³⁷ – the favorite movie of my childhood: - *"He is a liar!"* – *"You'll get additional punishment for slandering an honest salesman"*.

But I could not afford being as direct as was Brother Francisco. An enemy should be hit with his own weapon! And in my mind I was sorry for them again, that they know nothing about the rest of the world and have not even seen this wonderful movie, as I successfully fended off their questions in the same style as *"It is a towel!"*, repeating *"I think that the interests of the child should be paramount"* as my answer for all their questions... Dermot has taught me that magic phrase.

When they again pressed me on the story about the earrings, I interrupted them - politely but firmly.

- I came here in the interest of the child, in order to find a solution to our problems. I hope you will help us. You see, I know that another foreign child experienced the same problems in this school, and I intend to take my child to another school.

Mr. Frost turned green.

- That child had other problems.

- Maybe the medical problems were different. But its parents faced the same problems as I did.

And I read them the entire list of the claims against the school regarding education. There was dead silence at the table. I could hear in the distance someone banging a drum and playing the flute preparing for the next Loyalist parade...

..

... When I walked out with Martin, the sun was shining.

⁴³⁷ French film from 1975 that was extremely popular in the USSR

- Shall I take you home? – The laconic farmer-Republican offered. I silently nodded. We drove through the "menagerie" of North Down leaving behind the pavement edges painted in the colors of the British “*butcher’s apron*⁴³⁸” and paramilitary’s flags just hung out for the new “parade” season.

- Did you notice how the old man said about the painting: "*Unfortunately, your child is colored ...*" I asked him straight: "Why is it unfortunately?" - "Martin said. - I am your witness that he did say this. We must not leave it like that!

- *Go raibh maith agat*⁴³⁹, - I said in Irish. - Thank you.

I felt as if a heavy stone had fallen off my shoulders. Although this was not the end of the battle, and the entire life of Lisa would be a fight by those who love her - a battle for her and for her rights. In this cruel world people children and adults like Lisa are not considered to be human beings. By those who do not deserve to be called human beings themselves. In Cuba, it was completely different...

I went home and thought about how in the evening I would go to the sea and dive into its cold water: to cool off after this experience. And if this time I find a seagull on the shore, I will not leave her alone. Oisín taught me so. I was like a wounded seagull, but he did not leave me in the lurch. I survived - and now I must pass his human warmth on to others, like a miniature torch of Prometheus⁴⁴⁰. This is the only thing worth to live for: not to leave in need those who are in dire straits. Those who are sticking with their heads just above water, struggling for life-giving breath.

After that incident I became so scared for Lisa that I could not resist my mother’s demands anymore when she decided to take Lisa home: away from the harm. Now even modern Russia began to seem a safer place, especially when, after all, my family, thank god, doesn’t live in Moscow. ...

- Insist on transferring her to another school, to the one that is not sectarian, - said my mother as we parted - and then we’ll come back.

As if there were other schools ...I faced a problem which was almost unsolvable in the local environment. So I was left alone again: for the umpteenth time in recent years. And my nightmares returned to me.

...I never doubted even for a moment that Sonny’s proposal to go home with him would be merely a continuation of my and Lisa’s torment. But I had no other choice. And what mother would not have done it to be close to her child at last? I did not see her for nearly three months.

⁴³⁸ Derogatory nickname for the British flag

⁴³⁹ Thank you (Irish)

⁴⁴⁰ Prometheus - hero in [Greek mythology](#) who is credited with the [creation of man from clay](#) and the [theft of fire](#) for human use, an act that enabled progress and civilization.

Yes, using the fact that Lisa was still formally under his authority while all the circumstances were investigated Sonny actually used blackmail to force me to return under the same roof with him. He did not do it for some refined sadism, but because he himself was confused and did not know what he wanted. And unfortunately, he thought only about himself and his own feelings at that time.

To begin with, Sonny told me that recently he had vandalized the tram stop because of his distress and for this he had to pay a large fine. As I listened to him I could not believe my ears: had he just made it up? Or did I really not know the person whom I had lived with for almost eight years? More than anything else I wanted to be with Lisa, but he would lock her in another room with the words "Go and play", telling me: "Leave this stupid child alone, and come to me". Because of the grief Sonny, once a teetotaler, started to smoke and drink. He took me to restaurants where he got drunk and finally became the soft and vulnerable Sonny I knew. But I understood that he would be like this only until he became sober. At such times Sonny cried, kissed my hands and said he understood everything, understood why he treated me so. When I heard it for the first time, a timid hope awoke in me. Maybe he really understood?

- It is very good that you understood it, - I said carefully.

- My younger sister died when I was 5 years old - cried Sonny - and the psychologist told me that's why I took care of you so much. I tried to protect you from the evil of the world.

And this was all? No, he did not understand anything... if he was seriously thinking that his treatment of me was "care and guardianship."

I was very sorry for him at such moments, but I could not forget, even for one second, how he tortured our little girl by his actions. It seemed he did not understand it at all.

- Sorry that I did not find enough time for you. We need to go somewhere together... to the cinema... - he cried. To the cinema? To watch "Terminators"?!

I gave up the hope that we could understand each other someday.

Once he took me for the whole night to a hotel somewhere in Scheveningen⁴⁴¹, leaving Lisa with Louisa (the little girl was so afraid of him that when he drove her there, she just looked at me sadly)... He took me there just in order to tell me in the morning:

- I love you, but I cannot live with you!

And I did not ask him to live with me. That night I lay with open eyes silently crying while he spent his passions. He did not even notice. For me, what he did was real violence, although none of the "civilized" courts probably would recognize that: because I did not shout, did not resist and did not say "no"...

If only I tried to say it! From time to time Sonny drove me out of the house for a couple of days "to teach me a lesson":

- You wanted so much to be independent? Do that then, there you go!

⁴⁴¹ Sea resort, suburb of The Hague

What I could not understand, why he did not think about the effect it would have on Lisa? Well, he wanted to "teach" me a lesson, but what about her?

The poor girl did not want to go to bed without me and repeated all the time:

- Just do not go away, mum. So that when I wake up, you are at home...

And so he drove me out early in the morning while she was still sleeping and then called me at work and with dissatisfied voice told me:

- Now this stupid child is asking for you all the time!

And at these words everything turned up and down inside me. But I could not say anything. There was no one to complain to, all the laws were on his side. But finally one day we, Lisa and I, were lucky: he put both of us out for a weekend. He said:

- I need to be alone.

In my opinion, his nerves were damaged, but to talk with him humanely at that time was impossible. Even if I did my best. He shut himself in completely. When I asked where are we to go, Sonny replied rudely that it was not his problem, since I had so many friends, and they could shelter me for two days. I would not argue with him - he could suddenly change his mind.

When I called him, this time from the flat of one of my friends who left me the keys when she was leaving for holidays - because I learned from my solicitor that Sonny was not starting divorce proceedings, he only wanted to apply for custody over Lisa and to take her away from me (so as to tie me to him), -he interrupted me:

- Tomorrow you will give her back to me. And you - get out to wherever you want.

I did not argue with him again. I just looked at Lisa - who snuffled peacefully in her bed - and realized that I could never do it. Let me be judged, let me be a fugitive, but I can no longer make her go again through what she had experienced during those months when he took her from one relative to another, none of whom really wanted her, and to her questions about me they answered that her mother "had been eaten by a lion".

After that we had no way back. I made my decision - although it went against the decision of the court. I phoned my solicitor and informed her that my girl and I were going to the refuge hostel (in Dutch it is called "Leave-my-body-alone" home).

Strictly speaking, they were not obliged to accept me - in such houses usually there were not enough places. But they felt sorry for us. We were lucky... or so I thought back then. I phoned them, got their consent, called a taxi and with a sleepy Lisa in my arms went in to the unknown...

...Where, where was I to run from these thoughts? Perhaps, to Short Strand? I found myself there with my friend Patricia's help.

....- Usually I think Palestine is a much more dangerous place. But I just came back from Short Strand, where the population is under continuous attacks from the loyalists, police and army. Once bombs were being thrown there every 10 seconds. The police did not let firemen pass and extinguish fires or ambulances to take the wounded away. Eventually, ambulance men reached there on foot and carried people on stretchers to hospital. It was a most awful night, - she told me.

"...We inform our listeners that the 18:30 buses on route to Short Strand will not travel because of communal disorder." – was the radio message on a Belfast independent radio station...

...Communal disorder. Just with this innocent set of words the local transport company described what was occurring during several months in this small area isolated from the outside world, where everybody knew each other and where until recently Catholics and Protestants lived as good neighbors. As if, to judge by the British press, one fine May day both communities suddenly were seized by a sharp attack of a spring fury which continued all the summer, to which only lower creatures like the local inhabitants are exposed to and only "true Arians" – British who can't catch this virus- can keep them apart.

An old fairy-tale in a new mode. In the isolated Catholic areas of north and east Belfast, such as Short Strand and Ardoyne, the fate of the peace process in Ireland was being decided. This is what happened there in reality, - not the dispersing of two groups of "gangsters", separated by brave policemen "anxious about the fate of peaceful civilians".

I had the chance to know it for certain, seeing it with my own eyes, having spent an evening and night among the Catholic inhabitants of Short Strand- something from which my good friends tried to dissuade me, being afraid for my safety. To tell the truth, I did feel really uneasy and had good reason for it.

FRAGMENTS FROM THE DIARY OF LOCAL RESIDENTS «SHORT STRAND UNDER SIEGE»⁴⁴²:

«Since Saturday, May 11th the Catholic population of Short Strand, a small enclave which is located on the edge of predominantly Protestant unionist east Belfast, is exposed to the organized surges of sectarian violence and threats.

...From the last house of Short Strand it's about 150 yards to the nearest medical practice, all Protestant houses are within 20 yards from it, about 150 yards to the nearest post office. There is no post office, post box, supermarket, dentist, kindergarten, no access to the social services in Short Strand. As a result of continuing violence Short Strand's inhabitants are deprived of access to all these services.

There are about 3000 Catholics in Short Strand. They are surrounded by the Protestant/unionist community of east Belfast who number about 60.000 people in all. There is one primary school, a church and some small shops in Short Strand. A Catholic high school is located outside the area - Saint Joseph's College on the Protestant Ravenhill Road. Children are transported there from Short Strand by buses.

Saturday, the 11th of May.

11:30pm. Evening. Loyalists gathered on the corner of Madrid Street and started to throw stones at the houses of Catholics.

Sunday, the 12th of May.

⁴⁴² For some more details see: <http://republican-news.org/archive/2002/May16/16sho2.html>

0:38 pm. Morning. Two home-made bombs were thrown at Catholic houses in Madrid Street. Police arrived at the place and occupied battle positions facing the Catholic quarter.

Sean Devenny, chairman of Sinn Féin Belfast, an inhabitant of Short Strand, tried to calm local residents. Police attacked them with batons. Devenny was hit on the head several times, and his skull was broken in two places.

He needed the help of a neurosurgeon. The incident was recorded on video and was widely presented in the mass-media.

...8:00pm in the evening. Houses in Madrid Street, Beachfield Street, Bryson Street were bombarded with marbles, golf balls, rockets, fragments of iron which were thrown by young loyalists from the roof of the primary school in Beachfield Street. Police silently observed all these attacks. When night came, the police cars started to shine their searchlights on the windows of Catholic houses.

Tuesday, 14th of May.

3:30pm in the afternoon. The police and the British army flooded Short Strand and began searching the houses. Inhabitants were put under curfew. The only things found were a small number of contraband cigarettes and a toy gun. Nobody was arrested. Angered by the deceit of police and army, residents organized peaceful but noisy protests under the windows of the searched houses. The police replied by shooting plastic bullets... The police shot five times, the British army 11. Six people were seriously wounded, including the photographer of the "Irish News". Wounds included broken bones. On the loyalist side no searches were made after the bombs were thrown from there on Sunday.

.... Friday, 31st of May.

6: 00pm in the evening. Loyalists who hung out flags on streetlight posts using hydraulic lifts, threw stones at Catholic children, two of six years old, two of 5 and 2 years old.

5: Saturday, 1st of June.

One o'clock early morning. Windows in all the houses on Clandeboye Drive were broken by rockets launched from Cluan Place. Some houses were set on fire by "Molotov cocktails".

3.00am early morning. Sectarian music was heard from loudspeakers from Cluan Place – until 7 in the morning.

2 o'clock in the afternoon. Two women and children of two years old from Short Strand were attacked on Albertbridge Road where they went for shopping...

Sunday, 2nd of June.

All night from Cluan Place "Molotov cocktails" were falling on us, home-made bombs, fireworks filled with nails, marbles and golf balls. The police did nothing to stop loyalist attacks which continued until dawn came...

Wednesday, 5th of June.

9.00am morning.

Loyalists in masks occupied the post office and ordered the postal workers not to serve Catholics under threat of death. Catholic workers in public health services who arrived

for work in the centre at Hollywood Arches, were told they should not appear in East Belfast during these uncertain times, because their safety could not be guaranteed. One Catholic woman who was receiving medical treatment for cancer, was attacked when she came out of the doctor's surgery. Another Catholic woman and a Catholic pensioner were attacked in a drugstore. The post office was closed.

10:10am morning. The funeral procession of a Catholic inhabitant of Short Strand John O'Neill was exposed to attack by loyalists. The church at the time of the funeral service was bombarded with bricks, bottles and iron bolts. The relatives of the deceased suffered verbal insults. The coffin had to be brought into the church through a back door. Among the Protestants there were men in balaclavas, with baseball bats in their hands; everything happened in full view of the police and the army, who did nothing...

9:30 evening.

A masked sniper opened fire from the roof of a house in Suzan Street on Catholic teenagers. Bullets hit the walls of houses in Comber Court and the primary school in Seaford Street.

The complete list of what local people had to endure has 55 pages. There are some hours of video recordings.

... I got in touch by phone with the head of the organization of Short Strand residents, Debby, and arranged a meeting with her.

- It is very important for us that you come, - she told me. - New tactics were introduced recently: it is being hushed up in the mass-media, what happens here. When we contacted journalists, we gave them video proof that attacks come practically from one side, that army and police did not do anything to prevent attacks, but they actively create conditions helping loyalists in their attacks on our houses. Journalists turn their eyes away, and the most honest of them say: *"You know, we are not allowed to show it ... We are not allowed to write about it ..."*

-We lived here together for 22 years, side by side, and we had no problems with our Protestant neighbors – mostly pensioners. Moreover, in our quarter there is one of the highest proportions of mixed families in Belfast. In our street alone we have about 15 mixed couples. They settled in Catholic areas, because unlike in Protestant areas, there is nothing to threaten them. If we were such fanatics as the press depicts us, would we live side by side for 22 years without problems? The Press also writes that today's crisis "is favorable" to republicans and "is unleashed" by them. Can you say what benefit can be looked for by troubles for people who are only 3000 in this area and surrounded by 60.000 unionists? With the additional circumstance that all the police supports them? It would be equivalent to suicide, and why should we do it? All we want is to live quietly in our own homes. The point is that we are not attacked today by our neighbors. They haven't lived in these houses since May. We have seen who looks out of the windows of their houses, they are people unknown to us. We know our neighbors! Our neighbors were driven from their houses by Loyalist gangsters from Shankill Road who then occupied all the area surrounding us, those who were at war with each other two years ago on the Shankill Road having arranged real purges among their own community. They were allowed to occupy the houses of our neighbors because of non-interference by the police.

Drug barons who have burned each others' houses on the Shankill have crawled away across all Belfast, like a cancer tumor. And wherever they appeared, they brought along with them grief and destruction. And there we are in such a minority that we are like some kind of experimental rabbits: mocking at us, gangsters from various Protestant groupings show off in front of each other. But that is not the main evil. Behind the backs of these gangsters there are the unionist leaders, using them for their own political aims. Their main aim is to break the peace process. Unionists need a pretext to talk about the "impossibility of remaining in government with Sinn Fein/IRA", as they call it. Republicans don't give such a pretext to them. The IRA firmly keeps the armistice and even made two symbolic acts of disarmament while Loyalists continue threats and murders.

And what have unionists not tried! They tried for example to declare as a threat to peace in Northern Ireland the presence of three republicans in Latin America, while many of them didn't have even a notion beforehand about where it is. They tried to complain about it to the American administration. And now they are trying very hard – by what the Loyalists do - to provoke the IRA into reciprocal armed operations.

Our women, children and old men couldn't be protected from gangsters, – you will see how the army and police behave themselves (also they consist generally of representatives of the local Protestant communities), -went on Debbie - Except for ourselves we have no confidence in anybody. But it is necessary to be extremely vigilant and careful, not to give the enemies of the people any chance to provoke us into rash actions. It is clear to all of us who exactly is hiding behind the backs of the Loyalist thugs. David Trimble and Co. On one of those days he came here; he did not come to us although we invited him; he came only to the Loyalists in Cluan Place, he looked for proofs of longstanding "republican attacks" - and in the end showed to the press ... a golf ball (which we got thrown at us every day from the tennis club in Protestant Dundonald!), almost declaring that it is part of an explosive belonging to "IRA criminals". Just for his political ambitions and thirst for disorder among communities, we and our children had been compelled to be subject to such inhuman treatment during the whole summer. Come to us – and you will see everything yourself!

...And Debbie is already here, - a fair-haired, pretty woman with the strong-willed tired face, waiting for me in the car near Belfast City Hall. As she said, the population of Short Strand hopes that the worst is over: Wednesday night of the last week was the most dreadful of their whole life.

– Today David Trimble got what he wanted, as he sees it, for his own party: it will again (Again? To tell the truth, we have lost count of this for a long time!) discuss the "impossibility of staying in government together with Shinn Fein/IRA because of continuing republican violence in Belfast". Therefore now it is possible to call off the Loyalist crowds. We hope for a certain respite. But it can be only a respite. A couple of days ago the British army entered our district – in this way the police try to prove to the government that it "hasn't enough resources". If it is really set up for our protection why couldn't it have been arranged three months ago? If it is really set up for our protection why do soldiers in our streets offend and intimidate us? If it is really done for our

protection why have the army and police helped Loyalists – especially those on their side of the dividing lines, so-called "peace walls" where platforms were made, allowing them to get to the very top and comfortably shoot us from there ?

Five minutes later we drove down the main road: Protestant Albertbridge Road ahead, Cluan Place comes in sight, surrounded by a cage like for monkeys in a zoo, Cluan Place, with really comfortable stands built on the net-wire, onto which Loyalist "guerillas" clambered up. The wall was decorated by the huge, rather professionally made inscription: "No nationalists and republicans from Short Strand in East Belfast!" ...

We drive into a dead end, surrounded by small cozy brick houses with broken windows in all of them , and find ourselves in a completely different world. Even in another dimension! As if time stopped here.

An indescribable scene opens before me: on the background of wrecked houses, whose windows and doors are closed up by thick wooden boards, and with burn holes on their roofs , children play on the pavement, strewn with fragments and splinters of a huge quantity of objects thrown there. As if nothing has happened they run on the small areas of grass, ride bicycles, play, and in the door of the houses stand their sharp-sighted mothers and grandmothers, watching them in turns (there are no windows in the houses, and people have lived there three months in total darkness!) watching to see whether there are any frightening signs of renewal of the attacks which can begin without hindrance at any time. A true lunar landscape were it not for some birches which survived under bombardment and for the sonorous children's voices! It is difficult to believe that a few minutes' drive from here people live a normal life, drink coffee and beer in the street outside bars in the city centre in this warm evening, walk, can easily go to the doctor, to the post office, to the shops ... While here such an ordinary little tip is "a small adventure in itself".

"How can these people go on living here? Why don't they sit at home the whole day, shivering with fear? How can their children play on the burned grass, when bolts and bottles with an incendiary mix can fall down on them any minute? Why would these people not leave? "- I expect questions from those who would do so themselves. How can it be explained by mere words? For sure during the very first days of the siege of Short Strand people did sit here shivering, in the houses, in the dark, being afraid to move. Calling in police with the hope that they would help to stop the attacks. Despairing that they didn't do anything of the kind.

But it is impossible to remain that way for the three whole months.

At first people left their houses for some days hoping that everything would stop by itself (there were only the heads of families at home ,wives and children went to relatives elsewhere for the night), then they began to take away from the houses only the children – they had a rear entrance when attacks became absolutely intolerable, and then ...

Then Short Strand people understood what was the intention of this provocation , understood that it would not stop. And they got up off their knees, looked around and

said: "How long shall we..." And went on living their lives, in spite of everything and at the same time being ready for everything.

– Today it became a bit quieter. The most awful day was Wednesday last week, when Patricia spent the night with us - Debbie says - but everything can begin again at any moment. And anyway, we don't intend to let the authorities get away with it. We will demand investigation – a tribunal, such as the one going now about Bloody Sunday 1972! However many years pass, we will expose the organizers of these pogroms. Those because of whom our children will not be able to sleep easily for many years to come!

There is also a practical side to this case. Housing in Northern Ireland is divided into private and public – in the majority of poor areas the available housing consists of so-called "council houses» (the houses belonging to local authorities, and distributed between people in order of need). Short Strand was a place safe enough until now, and the majority of its inhabitants own their houses (although they pay a mortgage for them). And it means they don't have any alternative: it is possible to leave a council house by reason of danger to your life and to receive a new house in exchange, but the home owners find themselves in a trap: nobody will buy their houses. According to Debbie's estimation about 80 % of people in Short Strand are home owners.

In their kitchen Debbie and her husband tell me how the last three months have affected their life, and what they had to withstand.

- Excuse me for the untidiness, – Debby begins the conversation.- For many weeks I cannot do our housework, I cannot even cook. I can do nothing. Sometimes it is quiet in the afternoon, but when you just start cooking a bombardment begins. You stop everything and run out onto the street - it seems more dangerous to you , but your nerves cannot bear it at home, it is necessary to be with other people, with neighbors, and from the street what is happening, can be seen better. When everything seems to be finished people come back home, the family sits down at the table, – and then it begins all over again... So I couldn't cook. Now we buy prepared food, and that's all, – and she puts meat in the oven.

One of her daughters shows me what is thrown – one of those bolts with which Loyalists fire at the Catholic children. The weighty piece of the metal is laid on my handpalm, this piece is capable of punching through small children's heads.

-I am already a grandmother, - says Debbie, who is only a bit older than 40. - My small grand-daughter recently wanted to go to a pet-shop. I explained to her that it is impossible, dangerous, because we are Catholics. "And how will they guess we are Catholics?" And then she accused me of it all: "Grandmother, you are to blame! You appeared on the TV, everyone saw you, and now everyone knows we are Catholics!" "Actually we know each other in our area, it is like a small village. And we never had a fence between us and our Protestant neighbors, never!

On the other side of a fence, in Cluan Place, not just windows are broken in houses - they are practically all burned, many doors are broken in by bricks. Obviously nobody lives there.

– Maybe someone of your neighbors-pensioners- stayed there? - I ask.
- Only two – she answered me. - They keep silence. They are afraid. Two Protestant old women, who live three streets away from here, were attacked with a home-made bomb last year. The press accused Republicans at once, although they live in a Protestant area in which no Republican would appear. And the fact actually was that these old women hadn't allowed a mural to be painted on their house - a mural glorifying Loyalists! It was their revenge.

Cluan Place looks even more terrible than Catholic Clandeyboye: neither children, nor grass. So who attacks from here if nobody lives here? A former local resident, a Protestant recently appearing on television (he came back to Belfast when Southern Africa put an end to racism!) told in detail what occurred here, – but, surprisingly he never named those guilty of pogroms on Cluan Place as Republicans or Catholics. He simply preferred to keep silence about those who did it. He would not to tell lies, but to tell the truth, he couldn't. So strong is the fear of "Adair⁴⁴³ boys" from the Shankill. It is they who occupy these houses. By the way, among the things they throw at Catholics there are house utensils owned by their co-religionists ousted by them from here (for example, tiles torn from walls in a bathroom and kitchen!) Would people act like this with their own property? I do not think so.

– And who plays Loyalist marches through a loudspeaker and parades along a wall until five in the morning? Really, pensioners? - Debbie picks up my thoughts. - I for one have never seen such things myself although I have lived all my life in the North.

Take the day before yesterday. That day we were attacked for 15 hours continuously. I called the local priest –you know, afterwards I had very bitter feelings about him! - with the request to call in the police, because for all our numerous calls they didn't send a police car. "I am not in Belfast, so I can't contact them" - he told me.

"Then can you at least call them from where you are now?" - I almost cried while in a on the street behind me there were explosions and the smallest of my children cried.

"No, I cannot. Today I have a day off, " – he explained to me in a completely quiet voice and hung up the phone. The police arrived only after we called in the local office of the Irish government representatives, and they made a fuss about it. And the next day this priest led the British Secretary of State⁴⁴⁴ to our area – without consultation with any of

⁴⁴³ Jonathan Adair, better known as Johnny "Mad Dog" Adair (born 1963 in [Belfast, Northern Ireland](#)) is an [Ulster loyalist](#) and the former leader of the "C Company", 2nd Battalion Shankill Road, [West Belfast Brigade](#) of the "Ulster Freedom Fighters" (UFF). This was a cover name used by the [Ulster Defence Association](#) (UDA), a loyalist [paramilitary](#) organisation. Adair was expelled from the organisation in 2002 following a violent internal power struggle. Since 2003, he, his family and a number of supporters have been forced to leave Northern Ireland by the mainstream UDA

⁴⁴⁴ The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, informally the Northern Ireland Secretary, is the principal [secretary of state](#) in the [government of the United Kingdom](#) with responsibilities for [Northern Ireland](#). The Secretary of State is a [Minister of the Crown](#) who is accountable to the [Parliament of the United Kingdom](#) and is the chief minister in the [Northern Ireland Office](#).

the residents! Why did this man not come here when we were under attack? Why has he come now when it has now become almost quiet?

And we really could not forget that night when all the area between our houses was occupied with police cars and the British army, and as soon as the Loyalists started to throw fireworks to us and God knows what else, all of them- both army and police!- faced our houses and switched searchlights full on – all in silence – for the purpose of better visibility for Loyalists!

Imagine what one would feel in such a house lighted up and fired at from different directions –like a stranded fish! Everything was recorded on video but the television stations refused to show these video recordings.

We prepared them to use in court in a process against the state which some of our residents have begun. I had never seen before how the police and army openly cooperate with Loyalists!

– It became quite natural for us that when we go to shops, to the doctor, to the post office, to any point outside our area, we think up Protestant names to call each other. Our children are afraid to wear their school uniform - because it is obvious which school they attend. How long can we live in this way?

I feel deep respect for our local postmaster, a Protestant: when Loyalists ordered him not to serve Catholics under threat of death, he told them: "In that case I will close the post office altogether !" And he closed it. He lost all his income, his lifetime business, but did not allow them to intimidate him. And other Protestant owners of shops were frightened. You come to them and they avert their eyes and say: "Sorry, but we cannot serve you."

-Old grandmothers go to church, and these people shout at them from a wall: "*What do you have for supper today, Bobby Sands?*" And they laugh loudly. Are they humans or what? – continued her oldest daughter, - Now for some days the army and police come here, every day at the same time. Why, we have to ask, was it impossible to make them come here three months ago? But they go by on patrol in our area, completely armed, take aim at children, offend inhabitants – they are only a tenth of the number on the other side of the walls, and on the other side they drink tea with Loyalists and gossip with them. On our side all of the soldiers put masks on their faces (because many of those soldiers are locals!) and on their side soldiers have their ordinary uniform, with berets, and there are no masks!

Soldiers' armored cars drive up – exactly on time! – and we go outdoors. My new friends introduce me to Fiona, a young mother from Ardoyne. Small, round, dressed like many Catholic women of Belfast, in a tracksuit and with golden earrings and chains on her ears and neck, Fiona talks about herself and her family.

– I moved here from Ardoyne where I lived all my life. Usually everything they intend to do with Catholics in the North, at first has to be tested on the residents of Ardoyne. So I got used to it. I thought that here it would be peaceful, so I moved here because of my girls who attended Holy Cross school, since we couldn't suffer any longer from Loyalist attacks on the way to school and back every day. And here it began even worse. Almost immediately after the beginning of the attacks on our houses instead of arresting

Loyalists the police began searching our houses, although there are so many police video cameras here that we have enough evidence who started all of this. When one of the boys threw only one stone at them, which did not even leave the garden, they started searching the houses. The children were frightened. We had to take them of the house. Loyalists observed it all from the wall and laughed, and sitting on the wall they made video recordings as we took crying children from the house. Then with other women we organized the peace protest near the GP practice which we can't visit any more because we are Catholics. The police rushed at us with batons. They were especially hard on those who were holding cameras. They beat everyone without distinction – both women and children. My breasts were all black and blue. Have you noticed that the police did not let firemen extinguish fires? And they cut off fire appliances we had to place near the houses?

There are fire hoses near almost every house going down to a point from which firemen usually draw the water.

– And what do they say to firemen when they don't let them come to you?
- That there is danger from the residents, can you imagine! That is while our houses are burning. They tell the same things to the first aid workers, stopping them when they come to us on a call. But there are fire and medical workers who could not be stopped. They obey the call of duty to people and they move police cordons aside and go to us.

– And fire engines?
– The police periodically cut the hoses off again and again. The most important thing is not to allow them to provoke our men to fight, because that is exactly the police's aim. Recently the roof of the house of one of our men was set on fire. He ran out and begged the policemen: do something to stop it! Fireworks and stones from the Loyalist side continued to be thrown, and the policemen stood and looked at it, hands folded. They looked at him and said: we cannot do anything because the violence is coming from both sides. "Ah, you can do nothing? Then I will do something!" And he seized a brick and just made a threatening gesture – not towards police, towards the Loyalists; he was arrested and accused of acts of violence. So this is what it is done for. And here they are, honeys.... Right on time! - and Fiona points to the opposite side.

A rank of soldiers in full equipment, in bullet-proof vests, with batons, with full masks so that only the eyes are visible appear between the houses. They are accompanied by a dog – in boots, I notice with surprise. That is because there are so many glass splinters on the ground that they could hurt her paws. The army and police care about animals, not about Catholics. Soldiers walk around the yards with the stride of Rambo. Likely, these boys (many of them are only 17-18 years old) think of themselves as heroes. Their full fighting equipment looks absurd against a background of playing children, women with prams, grandmothers and grandfathers sitting on benches. From whom are they hiding their faces? Why do they hide their faces, if they came here to protect people? And why do they aim their guns at children?

It is absolutely clear by the actions of soldiers, – it is enough to observe them for a half-hour, that their purpose consists of intimidation of local residents and of nothing else. In

pressurizing the intensity and stress to such degree that the nerves of local people would give in. The faces of soldiers are closed here, but open on the Loyalist side of the fence, because many of these soldiers serve in what used to be the UDR⁴⁴⁵ (or in a so-called Irish Regiment) and they are local natives. Overwhelmingly Protestants. In other words, they are relatives and acquaintances of those from whom they apparently urged to protect inhabitants of Short Strand. *"Now when it comes to offering a vacancy or giving an award, / It's natural that for my relatives I should put in a word."*⁴⁴⁶

Another local resident – Sinéad, who only recently became a grandmother for the first time – gives me "a tour of battlegrounds": We walk all through Short Strand, straight through the soldiers, without taking notice of their presence, and she shows me the damage to local houses caused by Loyalist attacks.

It is insulting for these so-called defenders when people ignore them. They don't dare to be rude to a foreigner (maybe she is a journalist?), but still they are eager to be noticed. In one place they advise us «not to slip», in other place a soldier says: "Good evening!" Knowing that local residents have their own tradition - not to greet the occupation forces and to ignore their attempts to get into conversation, I remain silent. Sinéad is silent also. We pass by, and behind our backs we hear the sound of lip smacking. I am prepared not to take notice of it, but Sinéad cannot bear it and turns to a little soldier, who is shorter than she is. Only small malicious eyes are visible under a mask and a bullet-proof vest.

– Your number?

– I don't have any number!

– And who is your officer?

– He is not here.

– Why do you behave like this?

– I didn't do anything. I only said "good evening".

– Stop it; I heard perfectly well what you said. Don't you dare to speak to us in such way! Having shamed the soldier, we leave.

- You see, we are bombed during the whole day, and they send the army for our "protection" for the night. From 6:30 in the evening until one o'clock in the morning.

My attention is attracted by huge boards with cheerful sunflowers drawn on them, standing near every house. Sinéad explains, taking the newborn grandson in her arms: - It is to make things not so gloomy. It is necessary to brighten up this gloomy picture somehow! We close windows and front doors with these boards when attacks begin (in a typical Irish house there is also a back entrance.)

I notice that only neutral colored sunflowers are painted on all of them instead of any purely republican or Catholic symbols.

⁴⁴⁵ The Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) was an infantry regiment of the British Army. It became operational in 1970. The regiment consisted overwhelmingly of part-time volunteers until 1976 when a full-time cadre was added. Recruiting from the local community at a time of intercommunal strife, it was accused of sectarian attitudes and collusion with loyalist paramilitary organisations through most of its term. By the end of 1972 the Catholic membership made up around 3% of the regiment's soldiers. In 1992, the regiment was amalgamated with the [Royal Irish Rangers](#) to form the [Royal Irish Regiment](#).

⁴⁴⁶ A. Griboedov. Woe from Wit (1823)

- Our community is mixed; there are also Protestants among us and those who have «mixed marriages," – says Sinéad. – Isn't that a sign that we are not sectarians, not alone in our own culture and blind to all others?

And her small grandson groans gently and his blue Irish eyes stare naively into the sky without suspecting what drama is going on round him.

If in Clondeboye Drive in some houses there were still unbroken windows, on another side of the area which faces the Loyalist Cluan Place, despite all grids and barriers, no window remained undamaged. There are bombed and burned roofs on many houses. Every time workers are sent here to repair them, loyalists throw rockets at them too and force them to leave.

I come into one of the houses which suffered most from Loyalist attacks. It is a little bit lower than the others and so it became one of the chief targets for Loyalists: because of its low roof one can fire rockets and bombs over it, to an internal yard, to other houses. And because of this its occupants - Denise's family – suffered worse than many others: it is unsafe to leave her house from both sides, the front and the back. Last week, when Debbie was able finally to bring a psychologist to the area, Denise began to cry, remembering all they had to endure this summer. But today she puts up a good show, just chuckles nervously. In the smallest window at the back, from which the protective shield was taken off on the occasion of my visit, appears the black shadow of British soldiers. They practically shoved their noses into her yard.

- Soon, it will be possible to restore our windows, and, - she sighs - we have agreed to put bullet proof glass in all our houses. Of course, it will be many times more expensive, but what can we do? If only they did not interfere when the workers who are doing the repairs! Can you imagine what it means for the children to spend all summer in the dark?

- The last time a bomb fell right in our garden. We immediately called the police. We had to call three or four times. They arrived on the scene only after 40 minutes. And only after that sent for engineers, and still left the bomb unprotected, so that people kept walking along our front garden, until I myself came out into the street and started to warn people about it. It was a miracle that all this summer none of us was killed! It seems the Lord still protects us.

She reminds us about Sean Devenny, who was so beaten by the police that he needed the help of a neurosurgeon. And about the army who shot gigantic plastic bullets at Catholics in the dark notwithstanding that there were women or children there. 17 out of 21 bullets hit their target.

Debbie took me to the house owned by Pat and Patricia where I was going to stay for the night and which was located at one of the hottest points of Short Strand. The windows were tightly boarded up and looked out on to this "monkey house" on which those rascals had clambered a few hours before. It is cozy and warm inside. The first thing which

occurred to me was that if a Russian journalist had come to this house he would have written that it is nonsense about the Catholic ghetto, because these people have very beautiful houses in a very sophisticated style. Similar to how many Russians genuinely resent that «all these colored people» have smart cars in Amsterdam or Paris and suppose that if they have such cars, it means all their problems are solved, and racism in these countries does not exist.

And why indeed should these people have to live worse than others? Times have changed. And at the same time how else can you call living here, but living in the ghetto, because of the existence of these people in such inhumane conditions? Would any of us agree to take their place? I think not.

I'm sitting on a large sofa, with my back to the broken window (remnants of the glass are clearly visible inside!), And, to be honest, I'm squirming. Who knows what's there behind me?

-Just right here, through this window burning fireworks flew into our house - nervously smoking thin, blonde mother of many children says. And she shows me a child's tracksuit burnt in a few places:

- My little girl was playing on the carpet. Thank God, the fire extinguisher was near. An extinguisher is a necessity in every home here.

- Worst of all it's when the weather is good. We are fortunate because this summer was bad. Rain keeps them in their homes at night.

- What does a man do when his house has been bombed? Runs into the street - you were probably already told about this. Through the backdoor. If he or the children are a possible target he has to take the children out under umbrellas wearing cycling helmets. That invariably causes an outbreak of mockery by the loyalists.

To be honest, during my visit I saw enough to reach a final conclusion for myself: a normal, healthy-thinking person can feel for loyalists nothing but disgust. This feeling is comparable only to what one would feel accidentally falling into a cesspool!

Pat, the husband of Patricia, and his brother Joe who was visiting them, outwardly looked like Protestants.

- My grandfather was a local commander of an UDA⁴⁴⁷ group - said Pat - who then fell in love with my grandmother and became a Catholic! And we, their grandchildren, we were already in the ranks of both the INLA⁴⁴⁸ and the IRA... In the past, of course.

⁴⁴⁷ The Ulster Defence Association (UDA) is the largest Loyalist paramilitary and vigilante group in Northern Ireland. It was formed in September 1971 and undertook a campaign of almost twenty-four years during "The Troubles". It used the name Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) when it wished to claim responsibility for attacks—because the two claimed to be separate organisations, the UDA was able to remain legal for over twenty years

⁴⁴⁸ The Irish National Liberation Army (Irish: Arm Saoirse Náisiúnta na hÉireann) or INLA is an Irish republican socialist paramilitary group that was formed on 8 December 1974. Its goal is to remove Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom and create a socialist united Ireland. Sharing a common Marxist ideology with its political wing, the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), it enjoyed its peak of influence in the late 1970s and early 1980s

- Of course! If you were in the IRA today you would not be talking about it to the likes of me, - I pointed out .Pat winked to me.

- That's right! And I was in Long Kesh as well.

-I have a favorite little pub, - Joe told us - And many times I watched the scene: Sammy Wilson, (the ex-mayor of Belfast) who screams out loud that he cannot bear the sight of Catholics , sits at a table with one of our best-known Catholic businessmen who owns a lot of newspapers, and they discuss their business! When it concerns money and the interests of the rich, then all religious or whatever other differences disappear! It is a pity I did not record them on video. For us today, every home here is the last frontier. As Moscow was for you in 1941. If you allow them to burn one row of houses, tomorrow they will get to the second - and what will be the end? So we will not retreat.

We talked and talked. The conversation about Ireland turned to America and its policy of wielding the "big stick" in the world. For these simple urban Irish from a Catholic ghetto, in complete contrast to gushingly enthusiastic writing in the Irish press about the strength of emotional ties of Irish people to the "overseas Paddies," there were no illusions about the US. Not for nothing do the local people neatly nickname some of their overseas cousins "*the real snakes whom St. Patrick drove out of Ireland.*"

Then the door opened and a huge black sheepdog ran in, young and playful. It limped on two legs.

- And this is our Fidel - the owners presented him to me - He limps because he cut himself again with glass lying in the street. We bought him shoes, but the stupid creature ate them. They are not cheap, we cannot buy them every day!

I remembered the army dog that was like a shaved sheep: for sure in this case, it will get new shoes free of charge! And poor Fidel cannot even walk safely beside his own house.

Outside the windows something thundered, whistling and hooting was heard. Hissing of fireworks ready to explode. Smoke filled the room. Patricia opened the back door. The firework did not burn - water was poured on it from a water cannon by two men. They were tall serious men. Unarmed, in dark clothing. One of them turned, looked at me and smiled showing his white teeth. He had a kind, intelligent, calm and resolute face, like Oisin's. He must be one *of them*. I immediately felt I knew him, even knowing nothing about him. I felt secure too, as if behind a stone wall.

-Our *boys* come out on duty for the night. They will see what happens, they will take care of us - and of you too! All night. And every night they'll do the same.

There is only one organization here that can protect this community...

The conversation continued. Joe remembered what he was told by his father, who worked along with Protestants, played cards with them every night and thought they were his friends. Once they invited Catholics who worked with them to a bar, as they thought. Joe's father did not work that day, and it saved him: his Catholic colleagues, after that invitation, were all found with throats cut in the morning.

-Maybe it's because of this story it is so difficult for me to believe them - he told me - I do not hate these people and I am not going to drive them out but I find it hard to trust them. When people are smiling and holding a knife at your back ... I just think we need time. Time heals all wounds. And, of course, the British should not poke their noses in between us and set them against us.

And I thought about their grandfather: if even a loyalist commander is able to fall in love with a Catholic girl and change his lifestyle for her, then this country still has a hope for the future!

Time passed by: – quickly, like sand in an hourglass . I did not notice how the New Year was approaching again. I did not want to celebrate anything more in my life. They say that at midnight on New Year's eve you can make a wish. And I had one single wish: one, and moreover quite unrealizable. Too hard for any Santa-Claus to make true.

I want to be in the Soviet Union!

... It was a cold, foggy evening, I was in a hurry: to change to the Dublin bus in the border town of Newry. Around me scurried a merry crowd of local residents loaded from top to bottom with Christmas shopping bags - just a few days were left before Christmas. And she was standing on the platform crying, and nobody was concerned about her: a young African woman with a little son in her arms, unseasonably dressed, and even without a pram.

At first it seemed to me that she asked the bus station inspector about something and he responded rudely to her, turned and walked away: just to make sure, I quickly went to him and asked him about the time-table of my bus and he was very polite! He was a tall Protestant gentleman, the very essence of *private propriety* and *Christian decency*, almost *lordly* in appearance. It cannot be that the person who has just been so nice to me, was rude to her? And if something was wrong with her, why he did not help or ask whether anyone of us here at the station could help her? Can people just ignore a woman with a little baby who is clearly in some distress? All the more because she was not that kind of woman who was professionally begging at railway stations as many Romanian gypsies do here. And because she didn't ask for help, she was just crying...

This way I tried to calm my conscience but it did not want to be calmed, my heart even started to pound. I could not stand it, I touched her on the shoulder and asked.

- Is there something wrong? Can I help you?

She turned her tear-stained face to me, and choking with tears, indistinctly told me she was going to Belfast from Dublin and at Newry she went for five minutes into the bus station because her child wanted to use the toilet. The bus left without her, taking away all her clothes, baby food and pram. She is due to go to Belfast airport, her plane leaves at eight. She did not even argue with the inspector (but I am a witness: during nearly five years of my life in such situations no coaches in all Ireland went away like that, especially not in Newry where quite a few passengers usually come out for their natural needs!), she just asked him in desperation what to do, how to get back her things, so as not to miss her plane and if he could help her to find a taxi because she does not know the city, and he And she finally burst into tears. The child started to cry, too: he was freezing without a coat.

All around us the people were happy as little elephants⁴⁴⁹, so busy with their shopping, "true Christians": those who in principle do not work on Sundays, condemn ballroom dancing as "debauchery" and keep all their fasts. And nobody's heart moved at the sight of this pair.

I didn't have enough time for thinking: my own bus was going to leave in ten minutes and I could not miss it. It was good that I had my payday this week. I picked up the flustered woman by the arm, exclaiming:

- Let's run to the taxi, quickly! - And I dragged her to the nearest taxi office I knew. - Explain to them your situation, and where you want to go, and I'll be back ... - and I ran in a sprint to the nearest ATM ... Let come what may... I'll cope somehow until my next payday!

When I returned, she was waiting for a taxi, which, according to the man in the tax office, was to come soon, and the tears on her cheeks had begun to dry. I put money in her hand:

- I have to run, otherwise I'll be late for my bus too...

Only then did the African woman realize that I was not actually going with her and that I did not even need to go in the same direction. A renewed burst of tears flowed from her eyes and she silently kissed me on both cheeks. I barely restrained myself from crying: I remembered what it means to be a newcomer in a foreign country, where you have neither relatives, nor friends. How do you feel when you are totally helpless and cannot protect your baby? Are "true Christians" even aware of this feeling?

I helped this woman in distress but not "in the spirit of Christmas." And I wonder why I the Soviet atheist did it and not any of them?

The conscience of the plausible Protestant manager did not even stir: by the time I rushed back to the bus station, he, it appeared, had already completely forgotten about

⁴⁴⁹ Russian expression meaning "being happy in a silly way"

that African mother and her freezing baby and hummed some Christmas hymn to himself. Seeing how I was out of breath, he who did not understand a thing, gave me a pleasant smile .

- Sectarian. Racist - , I said loudly in Russian, smiling back at him. These words in Russian sound not very different from how they would if in English, and he could not pretend that he didn't understand me.

His already long face lengthened even more, and I jumped hurriedly into the Dublin Express. It was quite luxurious: even with TV, on which there was some kind of children program, like our New Year morning party for children, only in the evening. "Highly intellectual" children of "true Christians" cheerfully and recklessly competed for who was louder at burping . On the phone to the studio there lined up a whole queue of entrants wishing to show their "skills" in this "sophisticated" matter. A couple of years more, maybe they will compete for who can fart the loudest?

One time in my childhood I was filled with bitter tears reading Andersen's sad story about a little girl freezing to death in a street on Christmas Eve⁴⁵⁰. I was very angry with Andersen: how can fairy tales be so cruel? I didn't understand that today's reality of this "truly Christian" world is far more brutal than his old fairy tale...

However, I quickly got diverted from unpleasant thoughts about the "high culture" and "humanity" of the "civilized Christian West": we, atheists, have more important things to do and to think about. I worried more if my new friend was in time for her plane. According to my calculations, she should be there on time.

I hoped so much that she would be ! For me this would be my best Christmas gift.

... Well, how could I not want to be in my Soviet Union, being doomed to live in this "*den of vipers*"?

⁴⁵⁰ Hans Christian Andersen, The Little Match Seller Christmas story.

Chapter 18. “An Almost Married Man”

*“Another!... No, another never
in all the world could take my heart!
Decreed in highest court for ever...
heaven's will -- for you I'm set apart”–
(A.S.Pushkin. Eugene Onegin)*

*“One shouldn't lose but three things: composure, hope, honour”
(A proverb)*

...Happy New Year to you, Oisín, my comrade! Surely, my comrade, for you are neither “Mister”, nor “Sir”, nor “Lord”. *Nollaig shona dhuit agus ath bhliain faoi mhaise dhuit*⁴⁵¹! Be happy!

Our lives have been unfolding in parallel to each other in completely different worlds, different dimensions. I was a small girl, who just started to explore this world wondering why her native town is not the capital of our country and the whole universe: here, every year in May the frog choir next to the river would enter a hopeless competition with a lone nightingale; here, among so many good people life goes slowly by, in an orderly way, and it is so great just to be alive!

At the very same time you, in a completely different world, were carried by your parents somewhere farther away from loyalist-unionist pogroms; I, on my part, did not even learn the word “pogrom” (a word borrowed by English from Russian, but this fact does not denude it of its local flavour) until a lot later, at school, in a history lesson.

I couldn't see your life even in the worst nightmare – I've never dreamed of anything scarier than Baba Yaga⁴⁵² and the bluefaced Fantômas⁴⁵³ glimpsed from a French film; you, since your childhood, have been surrounded not only by numerous Fantômases with foreign accents, targetting you and your family with machine guns, but also by the people of the same courage and nobility as my childhood heroes, the Black Tulip and Zorro⁴⁵⁴. For me it all was cinema, but for you it was reality.

You know, I've always wanted to be not the lady being saved but the savior, like them.

⁴⁵¹ Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year (Irish)

⁴⁵² Witch in Russian fairy-tales

⁴⁵³ Villian from the French film of the same name (1964)

⁴⁵⁴ Heroes of romantic French films with Alain Delon

To save others. I think, you have never seen those films, but there were real heroes around you instead, a lot more wonderful exactly because of their realness. We both were raised with the same role-models, the same ideals; the main difference was that your life was full of bitter and severe practice, while I had only theoretical experience.

As a schoolgirl I was never afraid of the future, looking forward to every summer “tomorrow”, with sunrays shining through wooden shutters, reflected by fresh green grass, caught outside by a sea of small “suns”, the dandelions. I was looking forward to winter holidays with their mysterious lights from Christmas trees shining from every window, and every hut in our old town suburb looking like illustrations for a fairy-tale; I was looking forward to sledging in frosty twilight, when it is so easy to get carried away dreaming of the future, which, I knew it for sure, must belong to the people. If not, why live at all? So, it was Patrice Lumumba⁴⁵⁵, Che Guevara and Bobby Sands I dreamed about, and not princes charming. Even though they all lived in that other, cruel, world, I had absolutely no doubt that one day I would find myself there as well, only to help it to become less inhumane... because surely such people as your relatives deserve a better, worthy, really human life.

So, while I was a dreamy teenager eagerly looking forward to the coming day, you never knew what this same next day might have in store. That could be anything: your father’s arrest, your mother’s “accidental” murder with a plastic bullet, your own death for throwing stones at the enemy’s unyielding armored cars.

Your life was defined by where you were born and grew up. In a normal, humane world you could have become anything – a professor, a sea captain, a great worker; but in the ugly world where you happened to find yourself, you could become only someone who fought against it. Today, don’t be ashamed of having no university diplomas, and being no computer expert! You are the Doctor of Liberation Sciences- the most important science in human history.

As a university student, I was, I think, the happiest person in the world – those were years filled with unexpected discoveries, great hopes and meeting new friends. I was studying the Amharic language⁴⁵⁶ and Old Russian Paleography⁴⁵⁷. I participated in a student role-play about the historic trial of Oliver Cromwell, your people’s hangman – while his

⁴⁵⁵ Patrice Émery Lumumba (2 July 1925 – 17 January 1961) was a Congolese independence leader and the first legally elected [Prime Minister](#) of the [Republic of the Congo](#) after he helped win its independence from [Belgium](#) in June 1960. Only twelve weeks later, Lumumba's government was deposed in a coup during the [Congo Crisis](#). He was subsequently imprisoned and executed by firing squad, an act that was committed with the assistance of the government of Belgium, for which the Belgian government officially apologized in 2002.

⁴⁵⁶ State language of Ethiopia

⁴⁵⁷ Palaeography or Palæography, [also spelt](#) paleography is the study of ancient [writing](#). Included in the discipline is the practice of deciphering, reading, and dating historical manuscripts

descendants, today's hangmen, sent you to prison. I couldn't have known it then. I couldn't have known that, as we were laughing our heads off at yet another joke by our friend Lida, who could take even our teachers aback, your enemies were torturing you in prison.

Much time has passed since then. It turned out that, after all, I had not come into the cruel world to change it, just the opposite. It was that world which overwhelmed us like a deadly, ice-cold thunderstorm, and which drowned out our lives. The years which you consider "lost", for me turned into a separate life which made me a different person. Well, who knows, maybe – but for those years, and that tremendous evil which we both are to resist – we could have been different, and our lives would have been different as well. But they are what they are, and you can't simply close your eyes to that.

"When I was younger, I always thought that I'll live to see the day when our life here would at least be as yours", - you told me – "that this would happen very, very soon, you've got to wait just a little more, just a little... Now I'm not so sure, but anyway..."

"...but anyway, we've got to continue what has been started – even if that is only to keep the smoldering flame of freedom alive, and to pass it on to the next generation. We just have no other way out" I replied.

And, marking the glimpse of warmth in your eyes, usually so cold, I understood that I had said exactly the thing which was on your mind.

So, Happy New Year! We have no illusions that it would become the year of unexpected and absolute happiness, the coming of the new and just life for a greater part of humanity. This doesn't come of itself, and there are more and more dark clouds over our planet. But you know that we're not alone in the world, and if we were destined to meet – no matter how and when – there would be more and more of the likes of us. And the longer we can keep our fire of Freedom burning, then from the greater distance it would be seen, and the more people like us would come to join us.

And it is worth living for, isn't it?

It was the second time in my life that I was celebrating the New Year totally on my own. This time, though, I didn't feel so lonely. I was happy thinking of the 7 kisses which my brother-in-arms had given me by then. This could in no way be by chance; besides, number 7 in all fairy-tales is a lucky one.

I was quite aware of the fact that personal relations of any kind would only be a complication for our work: no exchange of phone-numbers, no meeting in the North, and “no” to many other things. Yet, I was ready to wait till the mission finished, however long it might take - even if that meant years. Only to see him, to talk to him, let it be just once in 4-6 weeks... that was quite enough for me to be happy. The rest of the time I spent counting down the time till our next meeting. Seriously! - I lived by that calendar... Only as a child – and maybe as a teenager – can you dream “to the fullest”, completely breaking with the reality and flying away in your dreams; that is exactly why the dreams at that age are so bright and vivid that you start really to believe them. But as you grow older, the ability to dream gradually disappears because of the load of life’s hardships. It gets more and more difficult to dream because by then you must have learned that most of your dreams are never to come true. This thought kills the dreams completely. As a child it simply doesn’t occur to you, because then nothing is impossible. In a capitalist society the range of dreams is limited because there is no scope for believing “we were born to make the fairy-tale a reality”, or “all dreams come true, comrade, only if you really want them to”.

Yet, where we lived they did. Just because we really believed in our dreams. I know an old woman, who, when she was young, wanted to study in the military academy where only men could enrol. She knocked at every door, even went up to Budennyi⁴⁵⁸, and finally succeeded. I also know a man whose parents – both! – were criminals, but he became a professor in the Soviet times. And that wasn’t even a surprise to anyone. I know a man who started at an ordinary collective farm, and grew into the head of the region; an opera singer who used to be a tractor-driver.

And what would one dream of in a capitalist society? To win the lottery? To buy a new car, bigger than the neighbours’? A second house? Plastic surgery? No, better not to dream at all. Better not to think what tomorrow will bring. Better not to think. Fewer people means more space. Principles won’t make you full. This is what it is trying to teach us.

But to jump high is possible only if deep inside you believe that you can fly, and if you forget how to dream, your aspirations will never come true. I would have never found myself in Moscow if I hadn’t learn to dream like that, strongly, in the Soviet way!

Years passed, and it seemed to me that I lost this ability forever. I stopped believing that the good in people exists, or in even the possibility of any dream coming true in this world. Life became as flat as Petrosyan⁴⁵⁹’s jokes, and as grey as a firefighter’s uniform

⁴⁵⁸ Semyon Mikhailovich Budyonny (1883 – 1973) was a [Soviet](#) cavalryman, military commander, politician and a close ally of Soviet leader [Joseph Stalin](#)

⁴⁵⁹ Yevgeny Vaganovich Petrosyan (born 1945) is a [Soviet/Russian](#) comedian of [Armenian](#) and [Jewish](#) descents

trousers. There was neither sense, nor aim, nor meaning.

But Oisín and our common cause worked a miracle. The ability to dream – as a child dreams – returned to me! And the New Year holidays – exactly the time for dreaming – I spent fantasizing.

Yet the holidays were soon over, and I had to go back to work... But the difference was that now, even on a cold black winter morning, waiting for the bus at the bus stop, I was looking at the skies, and the Milky Way, boundless and immense, got me carried away!

...She usually got on the bus at the same bus stop, coming through bushes which in the darkness might be easily taken for a forest. She made me think of an old charade question, “What is the same colour in summer and in winter?”; this tiny, bent old woman, who wore the very same red coat and knitted cap whatever the cold or the heat, somehow resembled Baba Yaga in one of our cartoons.

There was something detached and stern in her face, same as in the face of her southern peer, Aine Ní Chonaill⁴⁶⁰, who used to carry her lonely poster calling against a background of red and green flags for deportation of all foreigners on First of May demonstrations in Dublin. That was the face of a person who devoted all her life to the Idea.

When the bus came to the centre of Belfast, she usually looked around cautiously and, in some guerrilla-like style, left a “religious” leaflet on the seat. I still can’t figure out why she should gaze around like that, really, nobody would get offended with the old woman and take her to the police for that.

But we, as one of my colleagues has put it, live in a “pious” state.

This I have already noticed: in my village Jehovah’s Witnesses, having somehow learned that Russians lived in the house, would every night, in the same clandestine way, put a Russian-language version of their magazine into my mailbox. The magazine called on me, just as Father Fyodor from the book by Ilf and Petrov⁴⁶¹ did, to repent all and start a new life. There was no exact sender’s address on it, just some mailbox somewhere in London, and it was plain impossible to ask them to leave me alone, no matter how hard I tried to catch the moment when the magazine was placed in my mailbox. The “guerillas” acted professionally.

There was a way out, though: the Antilleans, for example, put plates on their windows

⁴⁶⁰ Aine Ní Chonaill is a [spokesperson](#) for Irish anti-immigration group [Immigration Control Platform](#) (ICP).

⁴⁶¹ Reference to satiric novel “12 chairs” (1927)

with “*Nos ta Katoliko, no sigui insisti!*” (which means something like, “We are Catholics, do not disturb us!”). But to do this in Northern Ireland is, mildly speaking, not recommended.

Eventually, after a few months of being inundated with religious literature by these anonymous “guerrillas”, I lost all patience and went on a counter-offensive. I took their next “appeal”, and, instead of throwing it into the fireplace as usual, I sent it back to the given London address, having written on the cover that they were calling on an inappropriate person, that I’m an atheist, and, to prove my point, stamped my signature with a toy stamp “KGB of USSR”. That worked; just in case I put yet another plate on my window, with the inscription in Russian: “*KGB checkpoint. Get your passports ready...*”

For an atheist, it’s a lot harder to resist old women, because they stir up “humane” feelings, such as sympathy and memories of one’s own grandmother (but, for the sake of historical truth, my Grandma was a member of the League of Militant Atheists⁴⁶²!).

Once at a bus stop a nice old woman started a conversation with me about nature; the conversation finished with an offer to sell me a book of religious poetry composed by herself. I didn’t really want to offend her, and I bought her leaflet for 1.50. That definitely pleased her, and then she asked me if I had already discovered God for myself. Having no illusions as to which way the cat would jump, and bearing in mind that an hour-long ride was in store for us, I hurriedly answered that yes, I had. This disarmed her completely. “It means, we are sisters in Christ!” – she exclaimed. So, I got off with a lecture on how we in the USSR were starving and never went to school under the horrible atheistic Communists. She sincerely sympathized with us; and I sympathized with her...

No, I don’t mean to ridicule people’s religious feelings, especially those of the elderly (and those of the young ones too), but I could imagine their faces if I started to distribute leaflets with calls to “break with the opium for the people” and turn atheist! One could get arrested for this here – there is none of the “freedom of religion and anti-religious freedom” which existed in the USSR...

Respect must be mutual, I have a right to my “godless” existence - without being pestered - just as the old women have a right to their, religious one. But for now that is not the point.

⁴⁶² The League of Militant Atheists (also Union of Belligerent Atheists Society of the Godless (Общество безбожников); Union of the Godless (Союз безбожников), was an [antireligious](#) organization of workers and [intelligentsia](#) that developed in [Soviet Russia](#) in 1925–1947. It "consisted of Party members, members of the [Komsomol](#) youth movement, workers and army veterans

...That morning an old “guerrilla” woman sat next to me. There were about 20 minutes left till the city. In 5 minutes she started complaining about the cold weather: this is a common way to strike up a conversation in Northern Ireland. I agreed with her that it was indeed cold outside, while in my heart I automatically got ready for the “Crusader’s attack”. Don’t know why exactly. There was something Crusader-like in her face, ready to massacre the faithless with whatever she could get hold of.

So, I was right. She handed me a small blue folded leaflet.
“Come to us, we’re inviting you!” – there was a smile on her lips, but her eyes remained the same, cold, looking for a non-existent enemy. I cannot hurt old women.

“Thank you!” – I said, and took the leaflet, trying to figure out to which of the numerous local churches I was being invited, and suspected it would be the very extreme...

I was right! I was honored by the Free Presbyterians, the church founded by Ian Paisley⁴⁶³ himself, a racy figure involved not only in the spiritual, but also in the political life of Northern Ireland. Moreover, I was invited to the service PERSONALLY conducted by this noble member of the British and European Parliaments, and the Northern Ireland Assembly! The one who initiated and coordinated Protestant pogroms against Catholics for decades, if not centuries; this fact was officially confirmed and covered in books, but in Ireland you are not allowed to mention it on the radio or television (RTE)...

What was in store for me if I went to the meeting with Big Ian, who is famous for his scandals and even physical fights in the Assembly, and in the US, when he happens to come across the hated Sinn Fein-IRA activists?

Big Ian...as he is called here, to distinguish him from the “small” one, Ian Paisley Junior, a “kid” in his early thirties who hasn’t inherited his father’s charisma, and who himself proclaims that “food” is his main “hobby” (it was actually on the webpage of the Northern Ireland’s Assembly at that time).

The invitation ran like this:

“Jesus’s Tears

“Tears are the universal language of this world. All men and women, regardless of their origin, class, or breed, could speak this common language, understood by everyone. The Eskimos from the North and the Pigmy from around the equator can both speak this flowing language. Everyone can understand the vocabulary of grief.

⁴⁶³ Ian Richard Kyle Paisley, Baron Bannside, [PC](#) (born 1926) is a controversial Unionist [politician](#) and former [church minister](#) from [Northern Ireland](#).

“... The tears over the sins of the city. The cause of all problems of our city and the whole world is the ages-old problem of sin. Yes, it really is, and the deadliest of all the mortal sins is not drinking, lust, cursing, stealing, working on Sunday, lies, immoral behaviour, but turning away from the Son of God, and abandoning Him.”

Then Dr. Paisley invites us to “shed tears for the salvation of the mankind”.

So, what exactly is he going to save it from? From the American bombs, from starvation? Would that prevent discrimination against one race by another, or the robbing of those who create all the material wealth of the world by a few “chosen” ones? Of course not. Judging by his speeches, he is going to save the world from... Catholicism. “From Rome to Christ!” is the call to us the web-page of one of Paisley’s diehard supporters, Ivan Foster.

Ian Paisley is the head of Democratic Unionists, the leading Protestant political party in Northern Ireland; notably, long before George W. Bush and 11/9 one of the members of this party, commenting on the problem of political refugees arriving in Northern Ireland from other countries, stated that it would be quite normal to locate them in prisons: ‘One country’s freedom fighter is another’s terrorist!’ . This historical remark came at the very first meeting of the Assembly dedicated to this issue.⁴⁶⁴

Sinn Fein Assembly member Mary Nelis told me of this incident. She also gave the “Paisleyites” her personal assessment of the issue, but the Irish state radio-station RTE censored her words: “Big Ian” and his party are very influential....

Ask someone else how one can preach love for one’s neighbour, while exuding at the same time an intense hatred for people of a different faith. I don’t know the answer. I think, that old woman on the bus doesn’t know it either. I think, she sincerely believes that her idol is a real Christian and a role-model. She simply has never given it much thought, never noticed his other side, just like those who prospered in Germany under Hitler.

I almost had to bury my face in the leaflet as I read it, in order not to burst out laughing, because I respected the woman’s feelings, as she happened to be my “neighbour” on the bus. If she found out that she had handed it to a communist, an atheist, and a Sinn Fein “sympathizer” (as they put it in Holland), I wouldn’t have escaped the wrath of the righteous...

Ian Paisley-senior, unlike his son, is a bright, charismatic personality, which makes him still more dangerous. In other countries the likes of him are put on trial, for incitement of national and religious hatred; in Northern Ireland he is considered a “national hero” by

⁴⁶⁴ This incident is recorded in the documents of the Northern Ireland Assembly from February 2002, according to Mary Nelis

almost half of the population. The Father of the nation, who would protect their “freedom and privileges”, their “natural right” to be the “ruling nation”. *Rule Britannia!*

I have very nice friends among the clergy, even though I myself am an atheist. I know a Dutch pastor and his wife who adopted three children suffering from Down’s syndrome... But, looking at Big Ian, how could one avoid remembering Marx’s saying, “*religion is opium of the people*”?

“Christ’s tears” is a good, strong figure of speech. God has created a man – such as Ian Paisley – and burst into tears... For what else could He do?

... That morning I was told that they were sending me to the course which all our managers had to take. I tried to resist it as long as could, but sometimes such things turn out to be unavoidable. So I, with teeth clenched, booked in to the “time and stress management” course, which, as usual, turned out to be a kingdom of false smiles where everybody had the desire to present himself/herself as overwhelmingly “successful”, American-style.

I’ve got a lot more important things to do than wasting my time on trifles; that day my presence at work would have been a lot more productive. One, however, does not discuss orders. I took a deep breath, and got ready to pretend to be interested in what was, in fact, sickening to me. Not to protest when you hear them obviously blundering; to smile, and to be ready to share your “experience of success as a businesswoman” with dear “colleagues”. Though, of course, that doesn’t really interest them, just as they do not interest me. However, we cannot show this; this is an American-style intercompany “training” where you simply cannot be yourself, even though everybody else here is dying to show that this is exactly what they are. That’s a lot worse than our 1980s Soviet party meetings.

So, the subject was the “time and stress management”. Our tutor was a typical “business-expert” called Diana: thin as a rail, naturally (“put a cat in water, take it out and look how thin it is”, as a *Mimino*⁴⁶⁵ character put it); surely, wearing her best costume (stiff upper lip, that is), false smile and sporting the usual set of flat jokes, all of which are not exclusive to her, but are a part of general corporate culture here. (At our firm, for example, the funniest thing to do would be to give each of us a specimen jar with small chocolates inside and a hand-made sticker that read “Our exclusive Viagra” with the firm’s logo in the corner... Very funny, indeed!) To compensate for scantiness of the

⁴⁶⁵ *Mimino* ([Russian](#): МИМИНО) is a 1977 comedy film by [Soviet](#) Georgian director [Georgiy Daneliy](#) produced by [Mosfilm](#) and [Gruziya-film](#), starring [Vakhtang Kikabidze](#) and [Frunzik Mkrtchyan](#). The [Soviet era](#) comedy won the 1977 Golden Prize at the Moscow International Film Festival. I

idea, she was armed with plenty of “audio-visual” means.

I took a deep breath again, and got ready for the torture. I hate taking part in role-plays and other business people’s “fun”, and usually, if I cannot completely block it out with my “obstructionism”, I at least end up expressing my utter sarcasm.

The time-management part was more or less clear; most of what Diana presented I had already learned at the primary school in the USSR. Things took a more interesting turn when we passed on to stress.

According to the glossy hand-out, stress shows when pressure turns out to be greater than your ability to manage it. Stress was also considered one of most serious health problems in the 21st century.

“Every fifth worker feels stressed at work; thus, in Britain it is 5 million people.”
“The estimated cost of stress for the British employers is 11 billion pounds in 2001, or 438 pounds per employee annually.”

Well, then this is why you started talking about it, dears!

Naturally, it is up to the drowning people to save themselves, and that’s why they teach us rather than our employers to save ourselves from stress.

...The next to join the conversation is Willy, a rough husky man, who is responsible for security at “Harland and Wolff” shipyard where the infamous Titanic was assembled. Surely, he is a Protestant, because Catholics still cannot be employed at the shipyard (except in some extreme cases where it would be absolutely impossible to do without them). Good for them, though: that’s the conclusion one can reach, having listened to his story.

- “Stress, you say?” – remarks he maliciously, rubbing his oil-stained hands with calloused black nails. –“ It depends on the person. It doesn’t work on me, for example. “I work every night, from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., and now today I just slept for an hour and came to you here. And I’m really all right; but other fellows at our shipyard have it tough... Because of job cuts, well-trained certified specialists, welders, for example, are being fired. Instead of them they employ unqualified contract workers through agencies; their pay per hour is 6.40 pounds⁴⁶⁶ less than that those who were fired were earning. Those contract workers, unlike the staff, are themselves responsible for their own safety. The owner’s only responsibility is to lecture them on it once, and that’s it. Contract workers are to provide themselves with boots and special protective clothing, which costs 140 pounds! Every month 20 pounds are withheld from the salary for these items.No worker will be let to the building site before he had equipped himself with all the

⁴⁶⁶ Minimum wages in the UK at the time of writing of this book were £4.20 for those who were older than 22 years and £3.60 for those who were younger, thus £6.40 was a substantial amount.

necessary means of protection, all at his own expense... We give out only the helmet and eye-glasses for free, and if you lose or damage them, you've got to pay for the replacement.

Contract workers are specially given tasks they are not qualified to do. It is very dangerous, but if something bad happens to such a worker, the employer would not be responsible; yet, the contract worker cannot refuse to perform the task, because then he would immediately be sacked. That's why he comes up to me and says, 'Can you certify that it is against the safety standards?' Very often it is, and I am able to help him.

That's why the administration of the shipyard dislikes me, because I don't let them entirely evade their responsibilities.

They even threatened me a few times: 'Withdraw your report, or we'll make things very hard for you.' But they know that I, on my part, can make things very hard for them, and that it's better not to mess around with me! I'm an independent inspector, and, luckily, I don't work for them.

Contract workers are brought to us from England. There are many blacks among them – those are the first to get sacked, and locals are spared. Sometimes the employers even organize raids against these "aliens", and those, who, for example, do not wear gloves at work (which you have to buy yourself!) are fired immediately. Locals, on the other hand, get away with it.

Soon they'll sack everybody; the contracts will finish, and that's it. In the end, there will be 7 workers and... 15 managers left at the shipyard. That's how things are with them.

And do you know why the Titanic sank? The rush! They couldn't finish it on time, and for every shift past the due date the shipyard had to pay a penalty of 25.000 pounds; and if they worked double-shift, the penalty was 36.000 pounds, even if the order was finished a mere hour into the second shift.

When the owner came to take a look at his ship, he was shown something completely different, just a ship which was ready on time, they only changed the signboard... The Titanic, according to the advertisement, was to be the fastest ship ever, that's why they raced it at 24 knots instead of the planned maximum of 16, and at the actual moment of the catastrophe they were running it at 29 knots!"

We keep silent as we digested this information, and I at once remembered our perestroika-time intelligentsia's illusions about everything being ideal in the West - humane, effective and free of bureaucracy. Well, I wouldn't say so...

Diana, noting that the session was taking a wrong turn, smiled crookedly and miserably. “Obviously, not all is well at your place”, - she said, forcing out the words. – “But we are here today to talk of something different”...

But about what? Is it the so-called “*Pareto principle*”, according to which everything goes by the rule of “80:20”? In terms of time management it means that “you achieve 80% of your results using 20% of your capacity”, and “spend 80% of your time for 20% of your agenda”. But Diana, seemingly casually, remarks that Pareto discovered this “natural order of things” when it occurred to him that in society profit is distributed like that: 80% goes to 20% of the population, and 20% goes to the 80% of the population. So, the natural order of things, huh?

Stress, according to her, is the natural reaction of the body, going back to pre-historic times, when a primeval man came face to face with a wild primeval bear. He had only two ways out: to run or to fight. In either case, if he managed to survive, he would perform a wild dance of happiness (Diana jumps awkwardly around the table radiating false agitation), and in such a way he could neutralize the excess of adrenalin which, under stress, had been produced in his body. Now we have a lot more stressful situations than the primeval man, because he wouldn’t bump into a wild bear every day, would he? (What makes her so sure, I wonder?) We, on the other hand, cannot get rid of our adrenalin because we don’t move around much... So, we suffer.

That’s a natural situation, and has been since the pre-historic times. One has to eat the right food (less salt, sugar, fat), move more, breathe deeper, sleep better and express one’s aggression at the right time (for example, taking kickboxing lessons at health centres – yes, that would mean paying a few hundred pounds, but we are “successful managers”, and this much we can afford!). What has the speed-up system to do with it? What have the profits of-greedy employers to do with it? Nothing.

I sit studying a chart, the so-called “*test of Holmes and Reich*”, created in 1968. All the stress situations listed there are given points. If you got more than 300 points the previous year, then your chance of becoming seriously ill because of stress is about 80%. The most stressful situation, according to Holmes, is a “spouse’s death” (100 points) – why not a child’s, or a parent? Maybe because in this society it is the husband who, traditionally, gives you material support, unlike one’s “useless” blood relatives? Sure, it’s a great source of stress to suddenly find yourself without your source of income and having to live on a meager widow’s pension!

Then comes divorce (73 points), imprisonment (63 points) and losing one’s job (47 points). Among other stresses of Western life are the obtaining of a “new mortgage loan

for over 80.000 pounds” (31 points), “loan contract preparation” (30 points), “vacation” (!! (13 points) and “Christmas” (!! – to be sure, one has to think of how to get enough money to buy presents that will impress all the neighbours, relatives and colleagues! – 12 points, one point less than “minor law breaking”.

What would the chart be like for those from other countries, of whose expense this greedy, dumb Western world lives?

How many points can one give for the suffering of those people who cannot feed their children? For begging in the street? For shuttling between countries to scrape a living selling off some second-best clothes? For job cuts, for being thrown outside like an old rag, and for not getting a new job as a result of being considered too old at 35? For being forced to sell yourself? For becoming homeless? For being unable to pay for medicine and education? For remembering – and this thought burns out your brain every second! – that a different life, without all this suffering and humiliation is possible, and that we in the Soviet Union used to have that different life?

The Holmes test does not include the worst of all stresses which can occur – the death of one’s country; the death of one’s way of life; the mockery at one’s system of values. Consequences of this stress are not limited to one year as are the vacation or “Xmas” of our Western colleagues; they leave scars in one’s soul forever. Not everyone is able to heal this spiritual wound, and the proof of that is the obvious insanity of our present-day Russian society.

...I wake up every night because of deep-rooted, primordial, subconscious nightmares. I still remember Tamara Makarova⁴⁶⁷’s words that in the Soviet times she woke up feeling happy, looking forward to the new day. Since then I have never had this feeling, no matter how “successful” my “business” was here. People who live here don’t seem to know this feeling, and I’m really sorry for them because of it.

I wake up in the middle of the night and remember at once how far down we have been thrown, into what medieval darkness we have fallen, compared to the life we used to lead.

How to survive this stress, how to overcome it, without falling ill, or bending under the weight of the endless nightmare surrounding us? And in my thoughts I firmly shake Oisin’s hand, for he is the one who has survived, more than once, the Holmes’s chart “stress number 3”, because his conscience does not allow him to put up with this

⁴⁶⁷ Tamara Makarova (13 August 1907 – 18 January 1997) was a Soviet actress. She appeared in 31 films between 1927 and 1984. She was married to the Soviet [film director Sergei Gerasimov](#)

doghouse which all kinds of Diana's present to us as the only "civilized", and "natural" way of life.

This is the only thing that helps me to overcome my stress. This is why Oisín is so dear to me, this is why I need him so much. But will he understand this?

... St. Valentine's Day was approaching, the day which I had been looking forward to, and, at the same time, had been afraid of.

Actually, I don't care much about it as a holiday. It is not "ours". Actually, this is not a holiday at all now, this is yet another "moneysqueezer", the first in the calendar after "Xmas". It has nothing to do with love, at least, in its present-day form, when people cannot find good words for their loved ones and buy cards with the texts already printed. For me it's the same sacrilege as keeping the photos of loved ones in one's wallet, next to money. Well, it looks like a person from the capitalist world thinks it the place for all that is dearest, and such combination doesn't seem unnatural to him.

I remember once, around that day, Lida, biting her tongue in her zeal, was writing in changed handwriting an anonymous love-letter to our student, Valerik. He was strict, and ignored women, including Lida herself, and she swore to "expose" him.

- Girls, you'll see, deep in his heart there dwells real Shakespearean passion!

"Valera! When I see you, my blood freezes," – Lida wrote, inviting him for a date at 8 pm next to the Book House at Kalininskiy Avenue. And then we girls specially went there by trolleybus to see our naïve victim freezing at the doorsteps of the bookshop in February cold in his thin-soled boots waiting for a mysterious stranger madly in love with him to step out of the darkness.

Watching him, Anechka Bobrova quoted her favourite book, Karlsson-on-the-Roof: "Has anybody ever told you that you are a handsome, thoroughly clever, perfectly plump man in his prime?"

"No, nobody has..."

"Nobody, then? So where did this silly thought come from?"

I never wanted to mail anyone stuffed teddy bears with a heart in their paws, or devils (why devils, by the way? Wasn't Cupid an angel somehow??). In Northern Ireland there is a very stupid habit: to give Christmas cards to each of your colleagues separately. It means that for this "Xmas" I needed no less than 20 of them, and it was perfectly obvious that at least 19 would at once be sent to trash. What a waste of paper! Wouldn't it be better to use it for a good book instead? Yes, but who would read it here?

...I was going to Dublin by bus, the “valentine” literally burning me through the pocket. I have not only written it myself – in Irish, with Fionnuala’s help, never telling her why I needed such a text – but also printed out the funny picture which I found.

“You will always be my friend, you know too much” – these words, in our situation, had not only a double but a triple sense, and I hoped that Oisín would both appreciate my humor and also feel how dear he was to me.

I was feeling hot and cold; looking around, I found an old newspaper on the seat, and automatically picked it up to read. Have you ever noticed that in the underground you automatically try to read over other passengers’ shoulders, even though you know that it is not quite polite, as if you’re “shoulder-surfing”? The same feeling makes you pick up a newspaper, or a magazine which someone left on a bus, or on a train. But soon I wished I’d never picked it up...

On the fourth page there was an article about the “World Press Photo” contest, with the last year’s winning photo.

The photo showed a dead Afghan boy, the body being washed and wrapped in a sheet by the relatives, preparing it for the burial. A year-old boy who died in the Afghan refugee camp in Pakistan. The Danish photographer made 10.000 Euros out of this human tragedy. Nobody protested against the fact that Western journalists make reputations and fortunes out of children’s dead bodies. Who cares, this photo exhibition is “the most prestigious in the world”! Last year there were 49,235 photos by 4,171 photographers from 123 countries! The prizes (financial, of course) in 9 denominations were shared between such “vultures” from 19 countries.

Most of the photos were “taken in New York” in relation to 9/11, at the time or shortly after. The winner of the “hard news” nomination was a photo taken by a French photographer showing Taliban troops attacking Northern Alliance soldiers. In the “series news” category, the winner was a series by Robert Clark, an American photographer, who frame by frame recorded the motion of the plane that crashed into the second Twin Tower. It seemed he had enough time to comfortably make so many!

Surely, not all the photos at the exhibition spoke of human tragedies; but those were the ones which usually turned out to be the winners, attracting the crowds’ insane interest – the more blood, grief, suffering there is, the more it is “successful”.

I remember the first World Press Photo exhibition in Moscow during our “catastroika⁴⁶⁸” years, which turned out to be my first encounter with the Western mentality (maybe it would have been more correct to say “Capitalist”, but for us then the West was the symbol of capitalism anyway). I was shocked by the plain cruelty and bloodiness of most of the photos, and, even more by carelessness and callousness of those who took them. This is exactly that highly-praised “neutral” approach to life which is being imposed on our journalists as “impartial” (thus, “objective”).

There was also a series of photos taken by some Western photographer in Haiti: a crowd lynching a guy suspected of having connections with secret intelligence. Dreaming of getting his 30.000 (or how much was it then?) guildens, the photographer captured, with a steady hand, shot by shot, the scene of how the poor guy – whatever he has done wrong! – is being literally torn to pieces.

I – as a Soviet person! – could not take it in, what soulless monster the man could be to have done nothing to interfere and do something, even if that meant a threat to his own life. A human being is killed before your very eyes; all right, you cannot do anything, but at least you could try to call the police! But then he would have lost the chance of a lifetime to win such a prize! I would have never been able to act like that.

Photographers participating in the World Press Photo exhibition for me are journalistic vultures, looking for a place with dead bodies (the more the better) to feast; this is called “art”... “professionalism”...

What if one day a rapist were to attack that photographer’s wife, or a pedophile were to get his child? Would he make photos of that too, in order to get the cherished “prestigious” prize? Or is it only “second-best” people – according to the exhibition makers’ assessment – from the Second and Third World countries who are a fair game, a useful and easy means of making money?

Once in Dublin – remember? - two men started a fight as my mum, Soviet to the marrow, was passing by. People were escaping from the site, just in case; yet, my mum, who knows no English at all, came between them shouting, “Are you guys crazy? Stop it now!” in Russian. They stopped, surprised, no casualties. But what if my mum was a fame-hungry photographer with a camera? There could have been one more photo at World Press, and one human being less in this world...

I always remember Bruno Jasiński⁴⁶⁹’s wonderful statement that one should be afraid neither of friends (their worst offense could be betrayal), nor of foes (at worst, they’d just

⁴⁶⁸ Alexandr Zinoviev’s term for perestroika . Alexandr Zinoviev (1922-2006) was a prominent Russian logician and philosopher.

⁴⁶⁹ Bruno Jasiński (born Wiktor Zysman, 1901-1938) was a [Polish poet](#) and leader of the Polish [futurist](#) movement. His most famous in the USSR novel is “Man changes his skin”.

kill) – but of the careless, because it's with their silent consent the worst evil in the world is being committed. I think, he had it twice as right when I see the “works” of those journalistic vultures who are presented to us as “heroes”.

If only seeing this heinousness happening could change things for the better! These very things they have captured... If only someone would give a thought to what was going on... But the sole purpose of making such exhibitions as the World Press Photo is to exploit people's tragedies and grief to make a fortune. The more there is war, suffering, grief, injustice, hunger and crime in the world, the more there is joy for the likes of that winner.

Does such psychology deserve to be considered human? Does the life, in which this is considered a norm, deserve us, normal humans? And it goes without saying that after observing this “art” my nerves were getting frayed again...

By the time I had got to the place where Oisín and I were to meet (this time it was in the southern Dublin suburbs, in a luxurious park with ponds and swans), it started to seem to me that I had been followed.

Our dear old Tom was right saying, “if you think you are paranoid it doesn't mean that you are not followed”; I was, on the other hand, surprised how openly it was done. An unmarked white van parked just in front of me, and didn't go anywhere, just like in a film. It stood there for quite a while, and wouldn't leave, even though it could hardly have any business there. Nobody came out either.

I was sitting on a bench, thinking feverishly what to do. If I'm really being followed, then, I shouldn't meet Oisín, I must leave immediately. And if not? Yet, if I am, but they do it so openly, then probably they want to see if I start getting nervous or not. If I get nervous, it means I've got something to hide. But anyhow, why can't it be that Oisín and I are meeting for some private business, especially on such a day?

I sat thinking what to do, and the van was still there; I felt more and more awkward sitting in its full sight, almost as if I were facing the barrel of the gun on a tank – the trooper sees you, but you don't see him. I've always been afraid of tanks, ever since my childhood, when I saw one in our street; it was moving along, then slowed down and its turret started to turn.

My heart was beating wildly as I eventually rose from the bench and changed my position, mainly because I didn't want the “troopers” to see me, but also so as to be able to see the “tank” perfectly well myself. Let's see what they are up to, and won't there be anybody else.

The “tank” was still standing there. There was still almost an hour left before our meeting, and I decided to leave the park to check whether anybody would follow me. If not, I would return in an hour. So I went to the nearest shopping-centre. I walked around for about 40 minutes and bought a couple of trinkets, just in case. There weren’t many people there, and I would have immediately noticed if something suspicious were going on.

Nothing. At least, not as insolently as that “tank”. I’m not a professional, of course, and I have little experience, but I decided to be as cautious as possible, and to tell Oisín about my concerns. “If someone follows us, kissing each other would be just the thing!” I joked to myself sadly. Yet, I felt terribly sick at heart, and not out of concern for myself...

When the time came for the meeting with Oisín, and he duly appeared in the distance, I felt as if I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from jumping from the bench, rushing towards him and giving him a big hug. But still, I managed not to do it.

- Something happened? – Oisín asked, looking at me.

I told him all about my concerns. He, however, didn’t look worried at all when he heard of it. He just nodded silently. Am I really paranoid, or it all just my imagination?

It turned out that Oisín was thinking about something else, namely, the most important of all practical issues, which we haven’t solved yet.

- Oisín, I told you at once, this is not something I’m competent enough to do. You’ve watched too many films about James Bond, so you think now that I’m also some sort of a “super-girl”, or something, but the fact remains, I’m an average human being. You have a lot more connections, experience and expertise in dealing with such issues than anyone I know. You solve this issue, and I, on my part, will take up whatever I’m good enough to do. All right?

Seems to be so. I thought to myself, I’ve got to discuss it with Dermot. It seemed as if Oisín kept thinking of me as someone I actually wasn’t, someone a lot more important. Would Dermot point this out to him?.. I didn’t want to give them false hopes.

Eventually, Oisín, as usual, reached out to kiss me – with his eyes closed, a faint smile on his lips. He looked so happy that my heart nearly burst. Oh my God... what if something happens to him? Then I would...

“I’ve got something for you”, - said I, without looking up, as his lips touched mine. – “I know it’s against the rules, but you take a look when you’re on the train, then tear it up into tiny pieces and throw it away...”

And I squeezed the envelope with the valentine into his hand. I felt very awkward at that point, because I was wasting time busying myself with such trifles when it’s all about serious things; but the more time passed, the more difficult it became for me to pretend he was only a friend and a comrade-in-arms.

Eyebrows raised, he took the envelope and put it into his pocket without asking what it was.

“Thank you. Soon a war will start... in Iraq”, - Oisín said gloomily.

And it indeed soon did break out, showing how useless and impotent global opinion was, with nobody taking it into consideration, despite mass protests that nobody paid attention to... same as referendums which, in a “democratic society”, are carried out again if the people didn’t vote as they had been supposed to⁴⁷⁰.

...Yugoslavia. Afghanistan. *Déjà-vu*⁴⁷¹...

I sat in the bus crying silently, shedding angry and bitter tears. They were streaming down my cheeks, like the river Shimna⁴⁷² streams down from the heather-covered purple mountains of Mourne⁴⁷³, tears hot because of the blood of children in the far-away Iraq, looking up to the sky with their eyes wide-open, in pain and suffering...

When an imperialist, impudent war starts, I turn into a different person. Wars are waged by those who, without a second thought, electrocute the poor for stealing something to survive, when they themselves are the truly global thieves, and yet at the same time they expect everybody to hail and glorify them... All my senses become acute, and I work like a horse, day and night, without stopping even for a second; it still seems that final victory depends on one’s attempts to change the state of things, no matter how historically distant, or how seemingly futile they one’s efforts are. The victory of justice and humanity over filth, impudence, hypocrisy and Evil, will be the final triumph, and, I have

⁴⁷⁰ As a rule, in Ireland the government holds a new referendum on the same issue for the second time if it is not satisfied with the way people have voted the first time.

⁴⁷¹ *Déjà vu*, from French, literally "already seen", is the phenomenon of having the strong sensation that an event or experience currently being experienced has been experienced in the past.

⁴⁷² The Shimna River is a river in [County Down, Northern Ireland](#). It is a spate river that rises on the slopes of Ott Mountain, in the [Mourne Mountains](#), and enters the [Irish Sea](#) at [Newcastle](#), on Dundrum Bay

⁴⁷³ The Mourne Mountains [/](#), also called the Mournes or Mountains of Mourne, are a [granite mountain range](#) in [County Down](#) in the south-east of [Northern Ireland](#). It includes the highest mountains in Northern Ireland and the [province](#) of [Ulster](#). The highest of these is [Slieve Donard](#) at 850 metres (2,790 ft). The Mournes is an [area of outstanding natural beauty](#) and has been proposed as the first [national park](#) in Northern Ireland

no doubt even as I write this, it is bound to happen. Not by itself though: there has to be a spark to start the flame.

I was passing through a small Northern Irish town called Draperstown. I have never been so far into the back of beyond, to a place like this, fenced off from the rest of the world, with mountains and forests, and smelling musty even in April. When there wasn't far to go before reaching the town, I noticed two billboards. One proclaimed, "We want nothing but equal rights" and the second, "*Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.-J.Kennedy*"

Behind me there were two decent Irish "grannies" permed and bespectacled – having some, as I could see, untypical for their not very intellectual life-style, political small-talk.

"Oh, the Americans shouldn't have left Iraq then, in 1991; they should have gone on to Baghdad and got Saddam overthrown! And now, how many fellows they'll lose there!" – said one sympathetically.

"I don't like that Bush at all. But America has always been so good to us, did so much for our country... It's our duty to help them now", - echoed the other.

"Which means, that if America has been good to you, as you think, it can now kill people in other countries?" – I burst out.

The grannies - in their typical Irish manner – pretended not to have heard me, or that it wasn't them I had been talking to.

News started on the bus radio: "Today in Baghdad, according to the Iraqi side, bombing claimed the lives of 15 people..." – an anchor was reading out. The grannies kept silent.

"An American helicopter was hit by the Iraqis, 6 soldiers are missing. Presumably, they are dead," – the bulletin went on. On hearing that, the grannies simultaneously expressed their sympathy:

"Poor things! Can you imagine, Roisin, what their mothers must be going through now?"

"Great. Perfect. Well-done, Iraqis, keep up the good work!" – I said loudly.

The grannies went silent, shocked by my comment, but they didn't object out loud. In Ireland everything is traditionally done stealthily, not aloud, and when you openly express the opinion which goes against the "official point of view", people feel at a loss, and are afraid of you.

I sat before the grannies, with my back to them, so they couldn't see the hot angry tears I have mentioned at the beginning.

My companions, judging by everything - their looks, accents, names, and even their destinations - belonged to the oppressed and discriminated Catholic minority, those who had planted the above-mentioned billboards along the road. Nevertheless, they treated us (and I fully associate myself with the people of Iraq, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia and other economically "non-white" countries!), "this world's blacks", in exactly the same racist way the local Protestants-Unionists treated them. Yet, they couldn't even notice their own racism, but it was there, deep inside, in their very core.

Maybe one should expect it from those who live, generally speaking, like any Western European country, at the expense of the rest of the world; those who can afford to lie around the whole day doing nothing, and yet, do not starve because of the dole, supplemented by a bit of moonlighting, when and if desired! Yet, it was very painful for me to see it and understand that even the people most discriminated against here are absolutely indifferent to some “blackies” – and not themselves! - being oppressed, murdered and robbed.

It is the time to analyze and rethink our lives.

The Irish grannies have also made their choice. They have easily, with a single stroke, marred their glorious past, having taken the side of the colonizers, the spiritual and material heirs of those who for centuries have been torturing their own people, and who, like leeches that are almost full, nevertheless keep an eye on other prey, while still, little by little, sucking their blood.

Grannies, you don't know how lucky you are that there is no oil in Ireland!

To squeeze the slave out of oneself – this is the most difficult task in a human's life. This is what Anton Chekhov thought. Squeezing out the slave also happens when a former bondsmen's descendants realize that the “gentleman” was not being “kind” when he let the peasants cut the forest which he hadn't planted. It also involves understanding that “America” hasn't done anything “kind” for Ireland, that it was built on many peoples' sweat and blood, including the Irish, those, who were “squeezed” out of their native land politically and economically, just as the immigrants from Eastern Europe are being today, for example; ignored even by our most progressive local leftist parties, the workers, ready to work like horses for a song.

So, does it mean that, after several generations, people of Moldavian or Ukrainian descent will have to thank Ireland for exploiting their parents and grandparents? And forgive Ireland everything, including joining the aggressor - thereby going against its present-day official status of “neutrality”, as is happening now?

“There is only one positive thing about this war”, - Dermot said to me when we met.

“Which is?” – I said sarcastically, but he wasn't joking.

“The more the Iraqis are going to suffer – and resist, of course – the more armed struggle for freedom will be accepted around the world. Under certain circumstances it is – unfortunately - the only possible way-out; after the 9/11 people have been conditioned into believing that it is almost a taboo, or something, but actually it's a totally legal form of freedom-fighting – which, by the way, is recognized by some of the UNO documents! – and sometimes you simply can't do otherwise. Soon people will understand this. The Americans are themselves pushing the world into this.”

“Dermot, and our friend and I...”

“Yes, I know... Oh, if only He knew...” - Dermot meant the Leader, –“we would have been given quite a piece of his mind, I tell you.”

- Sure, he just “didn’t know anything”, as usual... What nice and easy life he does have!

Lately our relations have worsened – actually, it was my attitude to him that worsened, but Dermot didn’t know anything about it. And it wasn’t even because of Oisín, but because of the fact that Dermot has started to share his – not very sane – sexual fantasies with me. For now only verbally, though, because he had no courage to try to put them into practice. I suspected, however, that it was only a question of time and felt less and less comfortable with him, even though we had truly fascinating political discussions.

... A week passed since Oisín and I met, and once, in the evening, my phone beeped: somebody texted. It was Dermot. One of his intimate fantasies, of course, I thought.

- You like somebody else? – the phone screen flashed the letters. I was stunned.
- What do you mean? – I texted. I knew quite well what he meant, but what I couldn’t understand was how he found out. And of course, I wasn’t going to surrender and admit anything, even if he tortured me; the reason wasn’t even Dermot himself, but that it was my sacred secret which nobody would ever touch with dirty hands. I wasn’t going to tell Oisín anything either, just to give a hint. Yet, Dermot, with his too material outlook, would have never understood what Oisín meant to me. He could have thought anything, that Oisín was younger, or more good looking, - but Dermot would have never understood that nothing would have changed my attitude to him, even if Oisín looked like Quasimodo. Oisín was for me much more than just a friend, he was my comrade, my brother-in-arms, the one who shared my views, as well as dangers and difficulties. All my dreams came true in this one man alone.

Dermot, on the other hand, didn’t want to put himself at risk any more, and once even made a bad break saying, “I could have become a schoolmaster by now ... I’ll retire soon, but yet, I have nothing... others of my age...”

So, here’s the revolution, and here’s the reason why their leadership chose that very policy – they are not so young anymore, they want to enjoy themselves to the full while there is still time.

Dermot was only 49; he liked to call himself an “old man” so much... Can you imagine Lenin regretting that he hadn’t become a lawyer in Russia under the Tsar?

Oisín wasn’t like this. He didn’t regret not having had a successful career, didn’t try to make up for it, and wasn’t afraid of what the Americans might have thought of him. Nor did he imagine himself doing something dirty with me, and even if he did – which is difficult to imagine – he never said a word. Dermot, on the contrary, expected me to listen to his ravings at all hours, and because of this I felt disgusted, more and more so every minute, the tide of hatred towards him rising inside me with the speed of a

tsunami.

...Instead of texting, Dermot called me.

“You like someone else?” – he repeated the question.

“Who? What makes you think so?” – I thought I sounded terribly unnatural, but there was nothing I could do.

“Our friend”.

“What??” – I made it as high-pitched as I could, and then, with indignation: - “Who told you such a silly thing?”

“He did”.

“What a dog!” – this time my indignation was absolutely sincere. – “Is he delirious, or something?”

“Which means, no?”

“Of course, not! What has he told you?”

And Dermot, obviously relieved, related to me the following:

“He asked me for advice. Said, it seems to me she has laid her eyes on me. What shall I do, he said.”

“And what did you advise him?” – said I ironically, but my heart stopped in horror.

“I said, it probably just seemed that way to you. At first I asked him, though, why he thought so, but he wouldn’t tell me. And now I’m asking you, why might he think like that?”

Aaalll right... And this comes from a married man who is not going to divorce his wife (and, actually, thank God for that!), and thinks that I will do for the things his wife doesn’t let him do – this man makes a scene! How very nice of him...

“No idea. We are good friends”, - at this moment I almost felt the taste of Oisín’s warm lips on mine, and shook my head violently, trying to break the spell. – Sometimes some men – remember that MLA⁴⁷⁴ of yours? – misinterpret my friendliness.

If only Oisín interpreted it, in some way! If only he was thinking of me! But he is, I think, if he even decided to ask the *Lame Crutch* for advice...

At the thought that Oisín was thinking about me, I flushed, feeling the blood rush into my head.

“All right, I believe you... You see you’re the sense of my life, all that I live for. If only I wasn’t married... Next time we meet, let’s go to a hotel bar... but you don’t put on any underwear, please, and I...”

So, this is exactly what he means by “the sense of my life”? This is “all” he lives for? I almost forced myself not to smash the phone against the wall.

At that moment I almost hated Oisín. Is he really that foolish to still have doubts about my feelings? And could he think of nobody – or, rather, nobody else - to ask for advice?

⁴⁷⁴ Member of the Local Assembly (in Northern Ireland)

Why didn't he ask me, in the first place, if he was so curious about my feelings to him? And, what if something does happen between us, wouldn't he run to Dermot again to break the fantastic news?

So, I decided to give him a piece of my mind at the next meeting.

Early the next morning, I was, as usual, at my office desk; every morning I would arrive before everybody else and unlock the front door. In this way I still had half an hour for myself before everyone else came.

So, I sat reading a Dutch newspaper on the screen when suddenly I heard the inner doorbell ring just behind my back. It was very strange because all my colleagues had personal codes allowing them to enter. I turned. Two police officers, a man and a woman, were at the doorstep flashing their torches. I felt giddy. What would the police be doing at our office that early? But not to open the door would be stupid, so I did open it.

“Good morning”, - I said, giving them a questioning look.

“Good morning. Is everything all right?”

“Yes, it is. What happened?”

“Looks as if someone has pressed your secret alarm button”.

“Oh really? I didn't even know we had one, so it wasn't me who pressed it. Yet, I've been working here for two years. Could you please show me where it is?” – and I flashed a charming smile at them.

“Can we take a look around the office?”

“Sure, please.”

“Be my guest”, I was about to add, but cut myself short just in time: there was something in my bag they must not see; something I was to hand over to Oisín at our next meeting. I returned to my desk and continued reading, but the words were falling flat. I felt almost as Professor Pleischner⁴⁷⁵ who finally noticed the flower at the window; yet, I didn't even have the option of committing suicide by jumping out of the window – it wasn't too high. The absurdity of the situation almost made me laugh, even though, in fact, I'd have to get scared; it's just that after what happened to Lisa I cannot get really scared.

The officers checked the entire office, flashing their torches at every corner.

“There is nobody there...”

“But I told you.”

“But who pressed the button then?”

“By God, I don't know. And I don't know even where it is. If you wish, I could tell my boss to call you when he comes. Maybe he knows what the matter is”.

“Yes, please.”

“I will.”

⁴⁷⁵ Hero of the Soviet film “17 Moments of Spring”, **Professor Pleischner** is a member of the German Resistance during the WWII.

And so, they left; I still had 5 minutes to wipe the cold sweat streaming down my spine before everybody came.

In five minutes exactly Hans entered the office, precise as a Swiss watch, and I told him what had happened. Then, an hour later, in the midst of the working day, Hans suddenly called me on the internal phone and invited me for lunch. He hasn't done anything like that before, in the two years that I've been here.

Hans was quite content with himself; more than that, he was proud of himself. And why shouldn't he be? He had every reason: still in his early thirties, he's got the position of manager at one of the branches of a well-known international company while in his native country one man in every five is unemployed!

Hans went home once a year, for Christmas, to eat the goose his mother fried, to treat himself to the sausages of a kind which, in far-away Ireland where he worked, were literally non-existent (there were many other non-existent things in Ireland, but you just couldn't help that, could you?); to enjoy time at home and to appear before his acquaintances and former schoolmates driving his new canary-yellow sport car. In his native town, Halle, with its snow-covered ugly blocks of flats built back in socialist times, his ex-wife lived, together with their 11-year-old son. He preferred not to see them, but his conscience was clear: he regularly paid the alimony, good money, really, especially compared to the meager dole received by his former friends, now unemployed; what could they give to their ex-wives – also unemployed, by the way? So, Briggita must be happy, and little Heinrich too. Last year Hans brought him a shiny new laptop. Actually, in Halle there are only a couple of adults who own laptops - in his neighborhood at least...

Yes, Hans had a lot of things to be proud of; a GDR boy, who did his military service in the GDR army where he got tempered and learned to give orders to those who were physically stronger and older than himself. After the army, the former sub-lieutenant Koch took up a computer business and went to Hamburg (no job opportunities at home). Very soon his abilities, and, most importantly, his fast acquisition of the values and principles that were dictated by the new system, something not everyone could as yet digest, drew his bosses' attention.

Take Helmut, for example, his former classmate, working for years as an engineer at a chemical plant. He, like thousands of other workers, was fired when the plant closed down. Helmut drank schnapps for three months, and then tried to pull himself together, but all he turned out good enough for was to leave for Berlin and, after quite a while, get a job as a sales-assistant at a consumer electronics shop. This is where they bumped into each other last Christmas, as Hans dropped in looking for presents for his relatives. Helmut, now a lot thinner and yellow-cheeked, was obviously uncomfortable.

“I didn't want to leave Halle, not at all. I had to leave Mum alone, she's got cancer, and

there is nobody to take care of her. But if I were at home on the dole, I'd have no money to pay for her private treatment, and yet, this is her last hope. I took a loan from the bank for that specially, so now I'm working to pay it back", - he told Hans.

"But why? You'd have to think of the life insurance. Take me, for example: I've taken care of everything: the insurance, the pension..." - and Hans shook his head disapprovingly.

"Taken care of everything, you say? Easier said than done! Where does the money come from to pay for it all? You don't know what it is, when the plant is closed down, and everybody is given the sack at the same time!" - Helmut turned to other customers, letting Hans know that the talk was over. Hans shrugged and went outside, into the crisp, frosty air, to the street decorated for Christmas.

"Just envious. Commies, losers, what would you do with them?" - he thought. "Can't they see all the benefits of the new life: the effective economy, the opportunity to travel abroad?" But he still felt somewhat uneasy...

Back in Belfast Hans's first very important task was awaiting; his mission was to create a new regional call centre for his company from scratch, literally, and become its CEO. He tried very hard to warrant the trust his English manager put in him. He would stay around the clock at the new office, personally supervising the installation of equipment and mounting of furniture, and he managed the recruitment himself.

Among the candidates there happened to be one quite strange character: a Russian woman. Sure, you come across them everywhere now, and in Germany you hear them speak Russian in the streets, but here, in Northern Ireland, Hans so far hasn't run into anyone from Eastern Europe. They probably haven't come that far yet. Her resumé made him curious as well, because it stated that she was a fluent speaker of Dutch, a language that was necessary for the position she was applying for. But where did she learn the language?

It was all cleared up at the interview. Yevgenia had got married and spent many years in Holland with her husband, and then left the country. She preferred not to go into details. During the interview something made him confess that he wasn't "simply" from Germany, but was born in GDR, which made them, in a way, almost like blood brothers.

He didn't know why he told her that. Usually Hans didn't talk much about his past. Not that it made him feel really self-conscious; it's just his interlocutors would then start looking down on him in a biased way, and start to make unfunny and sickening jokes about the Stasi and the Berlin Wall. He, on the other hand, thought himself to be quite their equal - and was quite right about that - and found the comments and the jokes quite distressing. "So you just jumped over the Wall?" - his Western colleagues would ask him, and before he could utter a word, would burst out laughing.

It was quite different with Yevgenia. She looked up at him with her big serious green eyes and asked, happily and sincerely: "Oh, really? So, how's Adi?"

Hans was shocked; the unexpected question took him aback: “Which Adi?” (can it be that she means Hitler? – the thought flashed through his mind...)

“What do you mean which? Remember, you had a programme for children, «Do It with Us, Do It Better Than US⁴⁷⁶...”? There was a host in a brown wig there, you know, athletic, and a girl as well. I think her name was Tina. When I was small, I watched the programme on TV, they showed it in the USSR too. I just loved him when I was like, 5, or 7. So, where is he now? Alive?”

Hans, bewildered and confused, was forced to admit that he didn’t know where Adi was, and what happened to him.

“And Dean Reed⁴⁷⁷? We had so little information about it all.”

At that point Hans felt overwhelmed by his childhood memories; he clearly saw his old school, the guys wearing the blue scarves of the Pioneers.- , the First of May demonstrations, and he even heard in his mind a song in Russian which he had learned in the school choir and still somehow remembered: “We are together forever, together forever, the GDR and the USSR!”

To shake off these recollections, Hans blinked. This hadn’t happened to him for quite a long time. He hated to give way to feelings and emotions, especially in business, as they only harmed the whole thing. In a second, he regained his self-control.

“I have no idea of what happened to Dean Reed, “ – he said amiably, smiling, as if nothing had happened. “I think he was a gay, and committed suicide because of that.” “I don’t think so!” – she objected ardently, and seemed to have remembered at that point why they met, after all. “Though, of course, it has nothing to do with the interview.”

He liked to see her composed again, and back to business in a trice. It was a useful business quality. At home he gave thought again to whether he should offer her the job. Two things convinced him: first was her CV (it was very difficult to find a person with all the necessary skills and certificates, and yet, she had them all); second was something he had no heart to admit even to himself: it would be nice to have someone around who understood where he was coming from (Hans started noticing his new ability even to think in English, but it was all right, as there were things which it was easier for him to express in English now, rather than in his native language). Yes, someone with a similar background. It somehow made him feel safe, even though he had already become so successful that there was nothing for him to be really afraid of, or to be protected from.

...The new call centre started to function fully in March. Everything went like

⁴⁷⁶ Mach mit, Machs Nach, Machs besser: popular GDR youth TV program that was shown in the USSR

⁴⁷⁷ Dean Reed (September 22, 1938 – June 13, 1986) was an [American](#) communist actor, singer and songwriter, director, and social activist who lived a great part of his adult life in [South America](#) and then in the [German Democratic Republic](#)

clockwork, and they celebrated the opening with a glass of champagne. Yevgenia was appointed the head of the department, and managed quite well. Actually, he had nothing against her. It's just Paul, his Irish deputy, was constantly bending his ear about how he didn't like her restraint, and the fact that she never joined her colleagues for parties where alcohol was served; he, strictly speaking, was not responsible for other departments, but he simply loved to gossip behind other people's backs. Hans, however, never took him seriously.

In Ireland, Hans led a lonely life. He had no close friends there (his subordinates didn't count!), and there was no place to meet women except work, because he had neither time nor energy for other alternatives. There were not so many women at the office, and yet he tried, awkwardly, to start a romance with almost ever one of those who more or less matched him in age. Yevgenia was out of the question: it was clear at once that she wouldn't tolerate that. Besides, Paul the All-Knowing told him that she had a disabled child. Why the extra-responsibility and care?

Hans, however, didn't think that he was somehow abusing his position in relation to those other girls: he never insisted on anything if rejected, and never concealed his intentions. Sometimes, though, there were some, well, complications, and because of that two girls even quit the job.

Surely it had been because they wanted to; he had nothing to do with all that. And surely, he was very much hurt when one of the girls, Olga, the only girl he had really once been in love with, threw at him as she left: "Mollycuddle! It's nothing for them to twist you round their little fingers, especially Paul! Because of your spinelessness this office will soon turn into a wasps' nest! And you don't even notice!"

It simply couldn't be true. Hans thought that everyone in the office respected him precisely because of his administrative style. Humane "remnants of socialism" sometimes flashed through him, and one could still talk to him heart-to-heart; besides, he treated his subordinates in a good, humane way, which was yet another reason for him to feel proud of himself. He thought that exactly these qualities helped him to make everyone in the office feel at home, so that the people came to work with pleasure.

... Yevgenia was always the first to come to the office and unlock it, even though she lived farther than everybody else (or, maybe just because of this?). Once, when he had insomnia, he also came to the office early (after about six months in the job, he started to take the liberty of coming to work as late as 11 am, or noon, because everything was running smoothly anyway, and his manager was in the far-away England, and didn't really need to know). He found her listening to Dean Read mp3s:

*"Love your brother, but hate your enemies!
I used to think that peace and love were just the same
Then I learned that life was not only a game,*

*Each man must fight, and fight again.
 Never, never, never let your life just flow away,
 Let your life have value, every day,
 Always, always, always give your life for the dream,
 Don't forget young man at time life's not just as it seems,
 I dreamt of love and peace,
 Without the cries of hate,
 Then I saw that good people died,
 As if it was their fate,
 To fight for freedom is just and right
 Against aggression is just and right
 Against aggression one must fight
 Until the silence comes again -
 That peaceful silence, that fruitful silence.
 Now that I've seen the light -
 We all as one shall fight -
 We shall win our victory,
 Our dreams people shall see.
 Never, never, never let you life just flow away,
 Let your life have value, every day.
 Always, always, always give your life for the dream,
 Don't forget young man at time life's not just as it seems,
 ... I used to think that peace and love were just the same
 Then I learned that life was not only a game,
 Each man must fight, and fight again,"* - the familiar voice was ringing passionately through the loudspeakers.

“Where did you get this?” – he was genuinely surprised, looking at the plastic disc box: the cover said, it was records from “cowboys and Indians” films, by East German company DEFA.

“I have the films as well, and in German. Gojko Mitić⁴⁷⁸ was my childhood hero. It's so good to have been raised with the real films about Indians, where the whole truth is shown! You wouldn't have any misconceptions about that as you grow up. By the way, I could lend you the cassette, if you liked the films of course...” – Yevgenia replied with a question, in absolute sincerity, as she usually talked to everyone.

“Chingachgook the Great Serpent”, - he remembered suddenly. Then opened his mouth and said decisively: “No, thank you. I never liked them. So thanks for your offer, but I wouldn't be much interested.”

And he rushed to his office, averting his gaze so that she wouldn't see the scenes of brave

⁴⁷⁸ Gojko Mitić - (born June 13, 1940 in [Leskovac](#), [Morava Banovina](#), [Kingdom of Yugoslavia](#)) is a [Serbian](#) director, actor, stuntman, and author. He lives in [Berlin](#). He is known for a numerous series of [Red Westerns](#) from the [GDR DEFA Studios](#), featuring [Native Americans](#) as the heroes, rather than white settlers.

Chingachgook and Osceola riding their horses reflected in his eyes. At least, this is what it made Hans feel like. He shut the door, turned on the computer and, trying to find some antidote to Dean Reed's simple, but strong voice, he played the latest hard rock hits with the volume fully turned on.

...Paul would always go on holiday the same season, and took his family to the same Spanish resort. Nice and convenient. He always knew what was awaiting him there: in the morning it would be a pint of cold beer under an umbrella next to the café, while Valerie and his daughter were splashing around in the sea; in the afternoon, a siesta after a great rich steak with potatoes for lunch (you've got to digest it all well, don't you?); in the evening, a discotheque and beer again, and this time not just one pint... He would leave Valerie to take care of the girl, and had fun almost till the morning, as there were far too many things and people to look at, there, at the discotheque... With much pleasure did he remember the way those young English girls behaved, just broken free of their parents' supervision. Valerie didn't have to see all that; but if she dared object, he'd remind her who paid for the trip! He, after all, has been working like a horse for the whole year, and managed to go almost without drinking to have the right just once to relax the way he wanted to! He'd always booked the tickets and the hotel well in advance, something like 6 months ahead; yet, this year those damned Bin Laden terrorists could have spoiled all the fun, because just as Paul was on his way to the travel agency, he heard America was going to bomb Afghanistan, and he worried about the outcome..

"I hope by May they'll have this damned Afghanistan bombed to the ground!" – he shared his concern with Yevgenia, but her demeanour immediately changed. "Paul, you have a child. They also have children there," – was all she said. Children? He hasn't given it much thought... Well, yes, he saw those children once, in a newspaper, nothing but disgusting little blackies in rags. Does he really have to think of such trifles, when the very memory of Costa del Sol would bring back the taste of cool fizzy beer? When so many tasks have not been yet accomplished in his life?

Paul was 26, and full of ambition. He had already managed, with the help of hardly noticeable (as he thought) intrigues, to get rid of the head of his department, Harry, the worthless dreamer, who didn't even resist him, having understood that Paul had people and connections in the London head office. Instead, Harry just left the place and went to Europe. There were still a few people, though, standing in Paul's way to the top. At first he wanted to appear irreplaceable at his job; for example, he thought out new working rules and procedures, and taught them nobody. Paul was also taking numerous trips to London to report on the situation in the call-centre to Mr. Bennett, the boss, behind Hans's back. Sure, Mr. Bennett trusted him a lot more than some German!

The next step to the top was... well, let's not disclose all his plans at once. Hans was the final obstacle that Paul was saving for last. At first he had to get rid of those who didn't agree with his views and methods of promoting himself. After that talk, he felt that Yevgenia detested him. He also remembered the occasion

when he had to ask Mr. Bennett - during his last visit to Belfast - to officially pronounce him second only to Hans at the call-centre. But what was there to do, if he, for example, tried to get involved in the work of two other departments, and asked those strange guys to stop talking in that foreign language of theirs (they said, it was their working language with customers, but he wanted to be sure that they weren't actually discussing him in a language he didn't understand!). Yevgenia eyed him with the same disgust as she might have responded to the sight of a worm, and told him openly: "Paul, sorry, but you're not our boss. If Hans addresses me with the same regulation, I'll explain to him why I don't think it acceptable."

Hans then told Paul that Yevgenia had asked him to let he know if he, Hans, decided to leave his position and assured him that would be the preferred candidate to be his replacement. Hans naively trusted Paul to the utmost; he refused to see what was by now quite obvious to most of his subordinates, namely, that Paul was going to snatch his position. However, all of them, except Yevgenia, kept silent.

Paul was their own, but Hans was an alien. Paul understood them when, for example, Andrew, born in a Loyalist ghetto, would make humourless and tactless jokes about "those dirty Pakis" from his desk (Ayesha, the part-time secretary, would force a smile and felt like disappearing under the table); another subject was girls with big tits and what he wanted to do with them, and another, for that matter, was paddies, (there was only one Catholic brave enough to try to shut him up, but they quickly got rid of him).

For Paul, there was nothing extraordinary or reprehensible about Andrew's jokes, just healthy male humour! This is what he told Hans when officially called in for a boss-subordinate talk about the fact that Yevgenia had threatened to give up everything and leave if Andrew didn't stop making his "racial-sexist", quote, "statements".

"But what does it have to do with her? At least, "big tits" is certainly not about her!" – Paul objected indignantly.

"He was commenting something or other from a newspaper, something about those East Europeans flooding the place, and she said, she comes here to work, not to listen to racist ravings," –said Hans, embarrassed and obviously uncomfortable. He was very much aware that he lived in THEIR city, among THEM, and was obliged to play by THEIR rules – "Good boy!" - Paul thought.

"But maybe she disliked what Andrew said about Saddam Hussain?" – he asked.
"Er, well, maybe... Anything is possible... Don't mind her, please. I'll talk to her," – Hans muttered. "You just ask Andrew to behave himself, for at least a couple of days, ok?"

Since then Paul has grown suspicious of Yevgenia; tried to spy on what she was doing at work and which sites she visited on the internet. Our people are not like that! – he

thought. Our girls don't get offended when we discuss "tits": take Kim, for example, she is all out and ready for one of us to pinch her side! And that strange phrase about the Afghan children! He was sorry he didn't pay much attention to her expression as they all, having almost completely stopped the work, watched the 9/11 report live from the US. Now it seemed a good idea to install a hidden camera in the office...

And then she went to Cuba for a vacation! Cuba, for God's sake! As if there are no other, normal, countries!

"Are you not afraid?" – Hans asked her.

"No, I'm not. What is there to be afraid of?" – Yevgenia said with a smile.

"Yes, you have to be really careful with that one!" – Paul thought.

After she came back, everybody made jokes about her, asking, if the Irish Republican Leader was "all right", having gone to Cuba so shortly after her.

"He's just fine," – she would say with a calm smile, in a neutral voice, and it was impossible to figure out what political views she held. But it was all clear to Paul: only a leftist extremist could be hurt by remarks about Afghanistan and Iraq. This was definitely to be mentioned in the next talk with Mr. Bennett as he started clearing his way to the top. And those questions of hers, as to why there was no trade-union at the office! There were no faults in her work to pick at, but Paul decided to take advantage of an opportunity which arose with the arrival of a new woman in the life of that jerk, Hans. Her name was Ulrika, and she was appointed the head of the department of Scandinavian countries.

It was funny to watch Hans flush, and read exactly what his eyes were saying as he returned time after time to Ulrika's desk throughout the working day! Paul could very well understand what she was doing to him to cause that look... Yes, she was a real professional! He was no match for her!

Then Hans probably saw his subordinates' ambiguous smiles, and, instead of visiting Ulrika at her desk every half an hour, he started to call her to his office. Their everyday meetings lasted for hours. From time to time one could hear her laugh ringing from behind the closed door, and this would make Paul mentally grind his teeth. Ulrika was literally a living stereotype of a Swedish woman, so Paul was surprised that Hans fell for her so easily. He must have been very lonely. This long-haired blonde, tanned, tenacious, clever and ambitious person, so like Paul in this respect, was definitely not going to be forever content with her position, and this at first made him scared. She had better computer skills than Paul, and she was constantly asking how things ran in his department, as if trying to learn something "new". But Paul, who was a bird of her same feather – unlike that jerk Hans – understood at once that she had her eyes on his position!

Well, we'll see who's going to win... But first he'd use her to get rid of Yevgenia. And then... he might use the sweet couple's - Hans and Ulrika's - romance against them...

... Hans rubbed his hands and winced, as if from a toothache. He, with his short experience of capitalism, had never so far had to announce prospective redundancies to anyone. So far everything had been great about his company, its presence at the local market was growing aggressively, to the envy of its competitors. Unfortunately, the marketing department's work was not coordinated with that of the service department, and the more computers were sold at lower prices, and through special offers – which enraged competitors – the more would later be brought back for repair. And to cope with this growing demand the company had to hire more and more personnel, but it didn't want to spend the money on that, so there was a lack of people in that department.

When the number of angry customers' calls increased astronomically, Hans was about to yield to panic. But soon he figured out what to do: the most important thing for the reports was not to miss the calls of those patient enough to stay on the line for more than a minute. He made it absolutely clear to his employees that they should not tell customers that they would have to wait for no less than a month for their computers to be fixed, instead, he ordered to them to say it would be only a short delay of a few days. When the very same customers called again, after about 10 days, and this time in rage, he told his people to say, that there had been some misunderstanding, and that their computers would be fixed as soon as possible...

He sincerely believed that he was not the one to blame, because he, after all, was responsible only for the "hot line", and not for the service department which, by the way, was overseas. His task was to provide good call response statistics, and to make sure that his people were polite with the customers.

Actually, the latter were becoming more and more difficult and his agents started to get more and more stressed: surely, it was next to impossible calmly to answer up to 100-120 calls a day, with each and every caller shouting at you and blaming it all on you – personally!

Staff turnover started to rise at the call-centre, and on a scale that would have been unimaginable even under socialism. Very few stayed in their jobs. Of the original team, there remained only he, Paul and Yevgenia. Unlike Paul, who preferred to spend his office hours making nice diagrams for the reports and not only spying on his guys' phone conversations, but also rummaging through their desk drawers (as they were asked to hand the extra-copies of the keys to the bosses), Yevgenia was herself on the phone all day long, trying to help her team. Her department, which consisted of only three people, took as many calls as Paul's, where there were eleven of them. Hans was very grateful to her for that, because her reports needed practically no "massaging", something he had to do with other people's, as they struggled with the tasks assigned to them. It was hard indeed, but they managed.

Yevgenia, who had some family problems, which she preferred not to share, turned peaky and black; Hans was very much surprised when Paul, during their lunch together, broadly hinted at how much the company could be saving at the expense of her salary.

“But she carries such a workload! She works like a horse!” – Hans exclaimed.

“Exactly. And you know, Hans, what one has to do with deadbeat horses... If something happens to her at work, the company would be bankrupted by her insurance payout alone! She is on the phone all day long, it is true. So why wouldn't she work full-time on the phones? Then somebody else would write the reports instead of her. Me, for example. My long-time offer was to merge our three departments into one. Just think how much money the company could save if we turned the heads of department into subordinates!”

Hans thought about this. Actually, he trusted completely, believing he could always rely on him... especially, at the hardest moments. Take, for example, last week, when he was down with a terrible hangover after a night with Ulrika, and literally couldn't get out of bed. He had overslept, and, what's worse, hadn't even been able warn anyone that he was not coming in; yet, at 1 pm Yevgenia was due to participate in a phone conference with the regional directorship. First, she waited for him, then she tried to call him, but he was in no condition even to hear the phone ringing.

Thank God, Paul was there to take the lead! Even without asking Hans what had happened, he made up some nice and true-to-life excuse for the regional chiefs, that Hans had been urgently called to the local investment bureau. Their company was entitled not only to major tax privileges, but also to various subsidies in return investing, and creating job vacancies in that “conflict zone”, so he was believed.

Paul didn't say a word to anyone about Hans's disgrace, and so, since that time Hans had started to put absolute trust in him. Yevgenia didn't say a word either, but when the next day he entered the office, she gave him such a sad and despising look, that his heart fell. He was a small boy again, the Pioneer- being scolded at a meeting of the detachment's board. . He didn't like the feeling at all! Hans didn't like, and didn't want to be reminded of, his past, of this boring-to-death world of exponentially “righteous” unmercenaries, and the moral code of the builders of communism-. He became thoughtful...

Yes, it would indeed be easier for him if she weren't around. Nobody to remind him of it all.

In the evening he shared Paul's ideas with Ulrika. Her blue eyes flashed like two bright bulbs in the dim light of the night lamp.

“Honey, that would be wonderful! You know, I've been terribly annoyed with her working style, she's, like, too soft, too humane. Our company is neither church, nor charity. I've been telling you for quite a while already that it's time to get rid of some of the people in the office, but she goes out of her way to defend them. Besides, I think, I've already learned a lot, and I could easily take up her responsibilities...”

Hans was speechless. He didn't expect such a response. Ulrika, before he gathered his

wits, slid under the blanket.

“So, dear? Can I expect the promotion? I think, I really deserve it...”

That was, then, the current state of things and balance of power. Yevgenia, the pure heart, didn't suspect anything. She was focused on her work to such an extent that she couldn't spare any time or energy on thinking about office politics.

Hans, surely, didn't tell Paul whom he was going to appoint as head of the new department that would result from the merger from the two that already existed. Let everyone be for himself, after all... Paul had already become his official deputy even before Hans could suggest to their boss that he should be appointed. What's more, he is on friendly terms with everyone in head office. Enough for now!

But how to tell her of his plans? Hans couldn't help feeling guilty. No matter how hard he tried to make himself believe the points his fellow managers were making, the cursed socialist worm of remorse continued to eat into him.

That day he made every effort to pull himself together and decided to first do something pleasant for her. Just the day before they together completed the regular staff appraisal exercise, he praised her achievements over the past 12 months and said that he would raise her salary; and then, today, he invited her for lunch.

She stared at him with wide open eyes, having no clue what on earth was the matter with him. Then she probably thought that it was her hard work that was making him feel sorry for her. (She still got up at 5 every morning to be the first to arrive at the office and unlock it, while the three of them – Paul (at home), himself and Ulrika - were still enjoying their beauty sleep.) Hans only then understood what folly he was getting himself into: after such a great appraisal, his promise to increase her salary and all that, it would be ten times more difficult to just tell her at lunch, out of the blue, that very soon the company would probably not need her services anymore!

Hans was very annoyed with himself, but there was nothing he could do about it. Wearing an artificial smile, he led Yevgenia outside and brought her to the nearest Chinese restaurant... She too felt quite uncomfortable.

At lunch, he couldn't stop himself from drinking a glass of beer, just that much, to raise his spirits. Then, in order to show her his “humane” side, he started beating around the bush; after all, such decisions were not made at his level, and he wasn't actually a monster.

Hans was telling Yevgenia about his childhood, the youthful years spent in the GDR, and she, listening to him, felt herself getting younger as he spoke. It was obvious that for her the memories of that era were the best. In his heart, though, Hans shuddered, remembering working at a state farm, and black Mozambican children in the bed next to his in the pioneer camp...

“So, what’s your plan? Are you going to stay here forever?” – he asked with forced cheerfulness. In this way, he was actually hinting that it was time to “escape” somewhere else; the hint was lost on her, though.

“But where would I go?” – she smiled sadly. “Do you know any better place? Here I at least have a job...”

It might have been the moment he had been waiting for, but his not-fully-capitalist nature left him dumb; after he regained his power of speech, though, he started saying something quite different from what he had intended.

“What about Cuba?” – he broke out.

“Cuba? Cuba is wonderful, but do they need me? Would they want yet another mouth to feed? The people have enough problems without me,” – said Yevgenia, her brows raised. “Well, maybe not now, but when there will be no Fidel,” – he heard himself saying. “I’ve always thought it is a country of great opportunities!”

She looked at him as one looks at a person who first tries to make people trust him, but then, even before succeeding with this, delivers a punch them right in solar plexus.

“Sure, Hans,” – she said calmly with a sardonic smile. “Same as, for example, Haiti!”

“But why?..” – the beer started working on him. “I think Cubans are too clever for that.”

“But were we, Russians, stupid? Or the Bulgarians? Or the Ukrainians? You have a point, though. Exactly, just too stupid... That was the thing,” – and she fell silent, staring blankly.

In the end, he told her nothing, and then scolded himself the more for being that spineless. He, a former “commie”, who had grown up without the slightest idea of what business was, had been entrusted with such a responsible job, and this is what came of it!.. He couldn’t even sack a worker he doesn’t need! Yet, he couldn’t confess this to anyone...

Instead of what he was going to say, he told her, quite unexpectedly - even for himself:

“Get ready, you’re going to Holland on business trip...”

And then was astounded to see horror on her face, which lasted but a second – a split second.

“Yes, sure, all right...” – she said nonchalantly. – “When am I to go?”

I wonder, Hans thought, what skeletons were in her cupboard over there.

* * *

Outside, it is a regular house. Old, big, with a shady garden behind it, located in a quiet, respectable street, in a Dutch University town. But inside, there is a whole ocean of human suffering. You could already see the crests of the waves when passing by this mysterious house; if you looked carefully at the windows, you could see the white noses of children, pressed against the glass. Then, as soon as your gaze is noticed, someone pulls them back from the window. It is their mothers who do it; their own sad faces, red from tears and sleepless nights, rarely show up in the windows.

No men are allowed inside, even the best of them, and with the best intentions. There are no signboards on the walls, there are bars, protecting the windows of the lowest floor, and the top of the fence around the garden is covered with barbed wire. There is a canal behind the garden, and the sad, teary inhabitants of the house secretly, from behind the curtains, watch the local rowing team training. Missing their freedom, they are as if imprisoned.

In Russia, we have just a few of such institutions so far, and not because we have no such problems; it's just because we prefer to solve them with the help of our friends and family, but not the state. This is a shelter for women who ran away from their abusive husbands; usually, they escape with children, because children are more often than not the only reason which makes them take this crucial step. This is the institution, so widely advertised in capitalist Russia as "solution to all women's family problems". This is a husband-proof- shelter⁴⁷⁹.

It is pouring with rain. I'm standing at the other side of the street, looking at this house in silence. I cannot cry – the Dutch weather does it for me. This building has been haunting me for years in recurring nightmares, and I was afraid –more than anything - of finding myself in that town, even in that country, and seeing it again. But, here I am, having pulled myself together... Actually, it is only because I had been sent on a business trip; on the other hand, my destination had not been this town, and I wasn't supposed to be there. It's just maybe, only now, after I have stood face-to-face with the husband-shelter, that those terrible nightmares will end. This house is the last place where my daughter was sane and healthy...

After Hans said that he was sending me on a business trip to Holland, I was about immediately to give in my notice. I'm far from showing off. Just mentioning the country caused me an upsurge of panic . Moreover, Sonny still lived there. It wasn't he, though, of whom I was most afraid . No, after all, what's done is done; it was my memories ...

Eventually, though, I pulled myself together. Otherwise, I'd never have had enough courage to do it. Though, as I was changing planes in London Heathrow, something

⁴⁷⁹ Women's refuge

strange suddenly happened to me. Something I've never experienced either before, or after: it suddenly hurt me to breathe. The pain was so overwhelming that it felt as if my chest was literally exploding, making it impossible either to breathe in, or out. They even called me an ambulance, but the doctors didn't find anything amiss. How strange! Can moral pain really hurt – physically - that much?

“Wouldn't it be better for you to return to Belfast?” – the doctors asked, all at once. – “Or we could keep you in hospital overnight, just in case...”

It hurt me even to speak, but then I got really angry with myself: so many people have problems a lot worse than mine, and yet I was going down so easily!

“No, no, I'm all right. I'll rest a little and continue my trip”, - I said to them. They just shrugged – “the decision is yours. Here you might as well jump out of the window – it's all your decision, and nobody's business”.

Then, only after the plane landed, did the pain finally cease. I never found out what it was.

In Holland I was met by Geert-Jan, a manager, that very curly like ram sexist who, when visiting us in Belfast, had expected me, out of all the people in the office, to serve him coffee. Well, serving coffee was not a problem, it was only a symptom. Even Olga noticed that he didn't take working women seriously. Discussing business with us, he addressed himself only to the men, even to that idler John, who knew ten times less than Olga. It is, by the way, very typical of the Dutch; that's why their cries and complaints about Muslims refusing to give women a handshake always seem ridiculous to me. Once I visited a mosque in Belfast, for a radio interview; yet, there, a Pakistani imam, without shaking my hand, treated me with more respect than Geert-Jan, who was shaking, and shaking, and shaking it for about ten minutes! Why, to the Europeans, is the form more important than the content? And what else would one say about the country, which was so exactly described by Salah Edin in one of his songs:

*“Het land waar mensen leven in een andere demensie...
...Het land dat problemen zoekt maar toch wil vermijden...
...Het land dat houd van winnen maar opgeeft bij verliezen...
...Het land waar de vrouw word verkocht achter het raam”⁴⁸⁰*

Just like his country, Geert-Jan was a “*hopeloos geval*”⁴⁸¹. And, listening to him, I felt more and more satisfied that I didn't live among the likes of him. He took me from one

⁴⁸⁰ A country where people live in another dimension, a country that is looking for troubles and yet, want to avoid them, a country that loves winning, but gives up when it's losing, a country where women are being sold from behind the windows (Dutch)

⁴⁸¹ Hopeless case (Dutch)

office to another, from one computer repair centre to another, never ceasing to speak nonsense. By the end of the day, I nearly stopped listening to him. I had to spend the night at Den Bosch, and go to Belgium in the morning. In the evening, I was going to meet Harold in Den Bosch, the place being not too far from Tilburg.

I asked Harold not to tell either Sonny, or any other their relatives, that I was in Holland. I knew he wouldn't let me down.

And so, he came. He had changed hardly at all over the past 6 years, just gained some weight. We were both happy to meet. We didn't talk about Sonny at all. Instead, he was telling me about his life and work in the Antilles, and I told him about my life in Ireland. Then, in a haze, we went to visit an Antillean musician, whom I adored – Harold turned out to be his good friend! No, unfortunately, it wasn't Bobby, but he performed real Antillean music, and the three of us spent the night speaking Papiamentu and singing songs...

“Our Zhenya knows Antillean songs!” – Harold boasted to his friend.

“Well, I do, but I can't sing!” – I protested. They, however, handed me a glass of my favourite “*ponche crema*⁴⁸²”, which totally unnermed all my resistance.

- *Den kaya grandi mi a topa bu*
Mi n'sa dikon pero mes ora m's kompronde
Ku tin kos ku mi no sa dib o
*B'a mira mi b'a spanta...*⁴⁸³

The musician was very surprised that I spoke his native language. I was even more surprised, as I thought that, lacking practice, I had almost forgotten it! But no, I was wrong, as it all came out smoothly, bouncing back to me; my memory exploded with the words I didn't expect myself even to know, let alone to remember!

“You have a nice accent!” – the musician praised me.

It made me feel once again, how dear the Antilleans were to me as a people. It doesn't matter what happened between me and Sonny. They were, and will always be, my relatives.

In the morning Geert-Jan took me to Belgium, where the “party”, that is, the visit, continued; it was all just the same, except that the people were more hospitable and gallant.

That weekend, instead of going home, I decided to spend facing my demons...

⁴⁸² Ponche crema is a [Venezuelan cream](#)-based [liqueur](#). Recipes vary depending on the region, but main ingredients typically include [milk](#), [eggs](#), [sugar](#), [rum](#), and other minor ingredients such as [vanilla](#), [nutmeg](#), [cinnamon](#), and lemon rind. Ponche crema is a beverage traditionally served in Venezuela and neighboring [Trinidad and Tobago](#) during Christmas time.

⁴⁸³ Bo Mentira (Curaçao folk song)

I started by visiting Rotterdam, went there to see what was left of our old house. I knew that there was no house any more, but Nieuwe Westen and Nieuwe Binneweg⁴⁸⁴ were just the same, and, moving along, I was slowly getting sick and giddy. On the one hand, there were still flashes of happy memories, the Antillean Carnival, for example, but, on the other hand, I felt that this was not enough. Too few good things had happened there to wipe out all the bad things.

There was a new block of flats instead of our old house; it wasn't tall, but looked quite modern. The people who lived in it, of course, couldn't even imagine the dramas which had taken place there... So I stood looking at the house for 5 minutes, then turned and started walking to the railway station. I felt a little easier because I saw with my own eyes that the old house did not exist anymore. One demon fewer in my life, at least ...

Then I pulled myself together and made myself go to the place where, at that time, not a drama but a real tragedy happened, , - the husband-shelter.

... I had been very happy to have been let in. I had been in the seventh heaven of happiness. It wasn't their responsibility to do this. I informed my solicitor where we were, and why it happened. "Hold on! I'm coming to you on Monday, " – she said to me.

There was a never-ending labyrinth of small rooms, corners and turns. There were rumours that once upon a time a nun had lived there, and her ghost still haunted the place, walking in the corridor: women have grown very superstitious because of their condition.

The room given to Lisa and me was dim even in daytime because of the giant tree growing just next to the window. In the late afternoon, as we came to the husband-shelter for the first time, it was even a little scary there. Well, maybe it was just because I was scared all the way there, in the taxi that transported us; I was afraid that Sonny would suddenly appear on the road from behind a corner, and cut off our way. But he was in a different town at that time, totally sure that I would bring Lisa to him, shedding the tears of repentance, and then would never show up again. Sonny, probably, was even looking forward to that scene. He decided that my spirit was totally broken, and that I wouldn't have the heart to act against the temporary decision of the Dutch court. He didn't know me too well...

I understood at once, that in this country the court took sides with the one who is more decisive, it wouldn't want to go against the flow, it would just make the status quo legal, that's it. I now had to just hold on – and Lisa would remain with me. "*Just hold on a day,*

⁴⁸⁴ Distict and street in Rotterdam

*and survive a night*⁴⁸⁵ ...” – I told myself silently, and then the cursed moneybags would be left high and dry...

There was a bunk bed in the room, which was more “Spartan” than in a Dutch prison. But I couldn’t care less anyway. I put Lisa on the lower level (she was so tired that didn’t even ask where we were). Unlike her, I couldn’t sleep at all, and I therefore went down to the common area where there was a TV, kitchen, etc.

Everybody was fast asleep except a small and very unhappy woman, a French woman called Colette. She was curled up in an armchair, trying to watch TV. Her big brown eyes were sad, like those of a street dog. Princess Diana and Dodi al Fayed on a yacht were on TV. At that time they just become a “hot item”.

“It’s great to see at least someone happy”, - she said sadly, and not even to me, but somewhere into the space. She spoke Dutch with a strong accent, and in almost the same quiet, almost cooing, voice as my student friend from Morocco, Fatima. As it turned out, Colette spoke Arabic better than Dutch, even though she had spent many years in Holland.

Colette was a charwoman, who cleaned toilets in Schipol airport. She was married to a Moroccan, they had 2 daughters, but here she was alone, without them. This is why she couldn’t sleep, and was begging everyone for sedatives. I didn’t know she would be better off without them, and shared a couple of my own pills: she really looked that unhappy.

I will never forget her. She told me awful things about her husband – something she didn’t dare to tell even the social workers – and that is why they never found out how she ended up popping almost whole packs of pills every day. He brought her to that state. I was watching her, listening to her – and saw what I would become if I gave up and didn’t leave Sonny. Her very look and stories made me even more determined to break up with him.

I never found out why exactly she couldn’t take her daughters with her. She was on the watch for them every day after school. The elder, as I understood, was offended that she had left home alone, and that was why she didn’t want to go with her later; Colette, managed, however, to “steal” the younger one, and brought her to the husband-shelter a few days after we had arrived there. Her daughter was one year older than Lisa, and was almost an exact copy of Colette.

⁴⁸⁵ From Arkady Gaidar’s “Malchish Kibalchish”

God, how really happy Colette was when she brought the child! What plans she made! She didn't leave the girl for a second – stroking and stroking her head and hair, hugging... The girl was also beside herself with happiness. Then suddenly they asked Colette to bring the girl back, and leave her with her father.

It was such a heartbreaking scene that it should be shown to those who think that fathers tear the children from their mothers “out of love” – as if! -, to all, who still try to somehow advocate this barbarity, which contradicts nature and the life itself. Colette's life has since lost all meaning, and she fell on her pills with redoubled urgency. It hurts me even to think what her daughter was going through...

On Sunday I had to call Sonny and tell him that I wasn't going to give him Lisa. My lawyer insisted on it and was quite right, otherwise he'd have rushed to the police. Yet, I was so terrified of talking to him that instead I called his friend Wensley, if you still remember him. Wensley at that time was in a relationship with a voluptuous Dutch blonde, who got jealous the moment she picked up the phone:

“So, who is it?” – she said with quite a hostile voice. A blonde is a blonde everywhere!

I got angry:

“Sonny's wife!” – I snapped, and she asked me no more questions.

I informed Wensley that I was keeping Lisa, and asked him to tell Sonny.

“I don't want him to look for us, we're at a safe place, and my solicitor knows the situation”.

Then I spent another sleepless night worrying about Sonny and his feelings. I didn't want to hurt him the way he hurt me, not at all, but he simply left me no choice.

On Monday – the first working day – I was instructed on how to behave in that house. I agree that there must be rules; but in effect, this institution was not very different from prison. The beaten women were treated as dependent creatures, unable to survive on their own without the guiding and directing force of the social workers.

Ethnically, they were almost as varied as the inhabitants of this house. I, for example, was the responsibility of a Brazilian called Consuela. I looked at her, I hearing again and again in my mind the same tune: “I'm Charley's aunt from Brazil, where the nuts come from...”

The people in the house were from all continents, except Australia. There was only one Dutch person among them, a young girl, almost a teenager, a single mother.

And in no other place have I seen so much grief per square metre as in this house. There was enough material for several seasons of soap operas, and I wonder why they haven't yet made a series about such a place. There are series about hospitals and prisons... What are the script-writers busy with, there, in the West? So much human suffering – and yet, nobody is making money from it! A shame, isn't it?

Lisa still couldn't understand why we weren't going home, and I couldn't explain it to her. I just made a solemn oath never to tell her anything bad about her father, and I didn't. Biting my lips, I'd tell her that we would see Daddy soon. Still better than saying that some anaconda had gobbled him up!

Lisa had a hard time getting along with the pert and peppy children of our inmates. When they wanted to go on the see-saw, where Lisa had been sitting, she would immediately leave the place – sometimes to those younger than herself! – and run to me:

“Mummy, beat them up for me!”

I was afraid to leave the husband-shelter, even to go shopping. Now and then, though, I had to go out somewhere, because we cooked for ourselves, and Petra would usually drive me to shops. She was so big and strong that I felt more reassured next to her. I never took Lisa with me because outside of the shelter the police could have taken her away and given to Sonny – had he figured out where we were! Thank God Lisa was still too young to go to school! I left Lisa with Colette who took to her and gave vent to all her unspent motherly feelings with her.

I used to gallop through the shop hiding my face, and each time I felt that Sonny was out there, just behind the corner, following me.

I now had so much spare time, with nothing really to do... In time, I found out that there was a small library in the husband-shelter! And this is how it happened: bored till death, I asked my social worker:

“Do you have anything to read here?”

“What?! To read?”

She gave me such a happy-surprised look, as if I had fallen to Earth from the Moon. In a week, I finished reading all that they had and started over again.

My only connection with the outside world was the mobile phone. Sonny, thank God, didn't have my number. My family called me from home; everybody was shocked to

learn where Lisa and I were, but happy that at least we were together. When my Mum called, Lisa kept asking her happily:

“Granny, please, buy me some ice-cream! I’ll soon come to see you!”

My heart sank as I heard those words. When would that “soon” be, and would it ever be? For me, the husband-shelter turned into a trench where I had to wait till the shelling was over, but how much time this would take was still unclear. I had to breathe in deeply – and call on all the patience I had.

Petra called, and the lawyer called. Then once Katarina called and said that Princess Diana had died. I was taken aback, and not because I was her fan, but because just a couple days ago I saw her on TV, so full of life, and so happy!

“Died? What do you mean? How?”

“Just like that... There was a car crash...”

A few days later, we, all the inhabitants of the husband-shelter, gathered round the TV to watch her funeral.

“Mummy, what is it? Why so many flowers?”

“Princess Diana died”, - I decided not to hide it from her, but Lisa said to me, her voice sure and serious:

“Princesses don’t die”.

I still remember those words of hers.

...That fatal night I was telling Lisa the story of Little Red Riding Hood. In Russian, surely. It was a more or less a new fairy-tale for her and she liked it very much. There were no signs of what was to come.

Before falling asleep Lisa asked me once again – just as she asked me every night:

“Mummy, a lion won’t come?”

“No, he won’t, Lisochka, sleep well”.

“Mummy, but who will come?”

“A kitty will come”.

She smiled happily and fell asleep.

Then at half past two I woke up from her whisper:

“Mummy, a grey wolf is coming...”

I opened my eyes with some effort and tried to soothe her by telling that a wolf was not coming either. But Lisa wouldn’t calm down, and kept on saying something strange. I

climbed down from the top bunk, came up to her and touched her forehead. It was hot, but not too much, maybe about 38 degrees. Then she suddenly jumped out of bed, ran to the sink and vomited.

Just a few days before there had been a flu epidemic in the husband-shelter, with vomiting and diarrhea, which almost everybody caught, and that is why I was absolutely sure that Lisa had had a setback. I gave her an anti-fever pill and decided to take her to the doctor in the morning if the fever still persisted. There was only four and a half hours to go until 8 when the doctor started work.

About 20 minutes later I touched Lisa's forehead again – the pill should have started working – and then drew back my hand in terror. Lisa's head was on fire, with a temperature this time that could not have been less than 40. Before I could gather my wits and decide where to run and what to do, Lisa looked at me, terrified, and said:

“Oh, Mummy!”

Those were her last words. Lisa fell on the bed. Convulsions set in. I had never seen convulsions in my life before, even though I had read about them; that small children may have them because of a high temperature, and that it might be dangerous if it didn't stop by itself. But Lisa wasn't that small... I tried to lightly slap her cheeks:

“Lisa, what is it, do you hear me?”

But she wouldn't reply, and foam appeared on her lips. It was an awful sight. I put her on her side.

“Lie here, Lisochka, don't be afraid of anything, I'm calling the doctor!”

And I galloped downstairs to wake up the concierge.

...I still scold myself for not calling the ambulance at once! Because of fear, I could not think. I told the concierge what was going on, and she ran to call the doctor: in Holland, you don't immediately disturb the ambulance, and I had heard of some cases when people called it but were then told that they shouldn't have done it, and were sent back to their family doctors. There were also cases when it all had a very sad end. But I somehow trusted the concierge, thinking she would know what to do in such cases... Though I shouldn't have trusted anyone except my own inner voice!

That doctor lived only 15 minutes away on foot from the husband-shelter. I later checked

that specially. Yet, he came by car, no less than half an hour later. By that time I had been sitting downstairs with Lisa, gasping, turning blue. I felt totally helpless: watching this happen to your child, and being unable to do anything – this I won't want even for my worst enemy!

Then he came - finally! Standing at the door, he looked at the child, dying before our very eyes, and asked coldly, without even opening his case:

“Do you have an insurance policy?”

“We do, but it's not here. I didn't know I would be here. I know the name of our insurance company, you can ask them. I will then give you the number”.

“Do you know how much a night visit costs, Mevrouw? More than a hundred guildens... Who is going to pay?”

Now even the Dutch concierge couldn't contain herself anymore. With tears in her eyes, she exclaimed:

“I, I will pay you! Only don't stand there still, do something! Don't you see, the girl is very sick!”

He opened his case with a conceited look and gave Lisa some injection.

“We've got to wait”, - he said, “in about ten minutes she'll come round”.

It seemed to me the whole eternity passed, yet Lisa didn't get any better. She was still foaming at the mouth, and now her eyes were rolling under. Her small body was shaking violently, as if she were a puppet on a strings.

“Look, now she's getting better”, - the doctor said, absolutely calmly.

I looked once again at Lisa - convulsing, gasping, foaming at the mouth – and, without even turning towards that quack, I cried to the concierge:

“Call the ambulance! Quick!”

... All of this was really getting too much for me: that story with the school and the showdown with Mr. Frost, yet another departure of my mother with Lisa to Russia- with an unknown date of their return to me, that morning police's visit to our office and my conversation with Hans, with his idiotic ideas about the future of Cuba, nasty little tricks of Paul, and now, as the last drop, this damned business trip that managed to raise all the dirty Dutch slime from the depths of my soul...

I wanted to disperse my demons, but instead, more and more of the new ones appeared. And there was only one person on Earth who could help me to get rid of them forever ...

... I wasn't this nervous since my entrance examination to university, when I was 17. I did not have a clear scheme in my mind what I wanted and what I expected from this conversation: I had not thought about it in terms of "*and they began to live happily ever after.*" It was just that my feelings for Oisín had reached their climax, and it became impossible to keep silent about them any longer. As in a Serbian tale, where a barber can't keep a secret and finally digs a hole in the ground, entrusting that hole that "the king Trojan has donkey ears".

A little bit more, and my "donkey ears" will be visible to any Tom, Dick and Harry, without any words. It is better to trust them to whom they were intended.

I waited for a long time. I wasn't sure for a long time if he was also not indifferent towards me. I didn't count on anything, remembering his and my position and taking into consideration our work together. But whose heart would not waver when a person you deeply care for, gently kisses you on the lips at each parting, for nearly a year, simultaneously blushing like Signor Tomato⁴⁸⁶? In the end, I wasn't made of stone. The spark that flared up during our first meeting back in Donegal, by this time had kindled to such a flame that even the sky-high Northern Irish bonfires, fanned here ritually at nights before the Orangemen's Day and Halloween, seemed only a child's play with matches against it. The last time, Oisín had said that we needed to "change the meeting's place" again and asked me to pick a new location for the next meeting. And I chose it: the most romantic, the most beautiful spot in Ireland, that struck my imagination already during my first visit to this country. Back then I wanted to share my admiration of it with Sonny, but Sonny was interested only in Dublin shops. And I felt as if somebody has stepped on my throat. Now I decided to show this place to Oisín. One look around here, I thought, would be enough to sense what I was feeling towards him. It was the beach of Killiney Bay.

The gray-green Irish Sea broke its waves with enormous noise here on the beach. When the sun peeped through low clouds, the water became aquamarine, like the stones of silica, which I sometimes had found on the railway tracks near my home in Russia. Here also a train ran, along the coast, on a narrow track, which further reminded me of home. And I felt at home here, despite the fact that there are neither sea nor mountains in Central Russia anywhere in sight.

The railroad was sandwiched between the sea and the mountains, which were hiding the houses of Irish millionaires piled there like mushrooms in a pine forest. But I did not care about millionaires and their villas with pools. There was only one man in my heart, - an unemployed carpenter, a native of Belfast's Lenadoon. My *Doctor of Liberation*

⁴⁸⁶ Hero of Il romanzo di Cipollino ("The Adventures of the Little Onion", 1951) by Gianni Rodari (23 October 1920 - 14 April 1980) was an [Italian](#) writer and journalist, most famous for his books for children. He won the [Hans Christian Andersen Award](#) in 1970 and is considered by many to be Italy's most important twentieth-century children's author.

*Sciences, mo cara mor*⁴⁸⁷, Oisín Rafferty. What do I know about him really, I said to myself? That he is "a terrorist." That he was good at repairing old furniture. That he liked pizza, rock music and to watch "Sopranos." That was all. *Punt uit*⁴⁸⁸, full stop. Is it enough to love someone, not to mention, to love someone that much?

But I could not help myself. I loved everything about Oisín, to bits. His gait. His smile. His leisurely manner of speaking. Even the way he greedily licked his lips while saying the words "plastic explosives". And from each his light smile, from each his look at me, from each word he said, my heart overflowed with sweet, bottomless yearning...

I was 36 years old, he was 40. And I never had feelings like that in my life. Neither at 19 nor at 23, nor even at 30. It felt so complete, so overwhelming. If there ever was such thing as to meet your soul mate, this was exactly it. With all my due respect to his lack of interest in liberation sciences girlfriend, he could never be for her what he was for me. Nor could anyone take his place in my life, no Sonny, no Bobby, or Dermot, or even their Leader. Of all the billions of men on all continents, Oisín was the only one for me. He was my needle, which I was incredibly lucky to find in a haystack. And no woman in the world could ever be to him what I could have become. I knew that for sure. As sure as the fact that the sun rises in the East. By the way, in Northern Ireland, not everybody knows even such elementary thing as this. Recently, there was a program on TV, in which a question was asked to two grown-up girls, age of about 20, who have long graduated from school: "Where does the sun rise: in the east or in the west?" And they seriously did not know the answer! I wouldn't be able to believe this if I had not seen this with my own eyes. Remember, I told you that in Ireland every 4th person is functionally illiterate? But the real problem is that the majority of people here are literate only functionally. And it is an overwhelming majority. They consider themselves to be educated and do not even suspect that there can be any other sort of literacy than the one they have. They know how to read the instructions and they can act in life to the extent necessary for successful functioning in the position that they hold - but only strictly "*from here to there*". They are not able to think independently and to draw conclusions: they were never taught at school how to do this. They don't feel the urge to go in their spare time to the library, in order to develop intellectually. Despite all their diplomas, if compared with the Soviet people, they belong to the human class that my mum so adamantly defines as "unicellular" (with unicellular brains).

Dermot was definitely not unicellular. I often turned to him for advice on most matters and respected his opinion. Intellectually, I could not say anything bad about him. I did not have that confidence about Oisín. Yes, it was obvious that he had successfully operated within the frames of his life's calling: in the area of *revolutionary practice*. At the same time, I realized that I could hardly keep a discussion with him about the land policy of the Ethiopian Derg⁴⁸⁹. But that didn't put me off. Just imagine how much he knew in other areas - so I still could learn a lot from him!

⁴⁸⁷ My big friend (Irish)

⁴⁸⁸ Full stop (Dutch)

⁴⁸⁹ The Derg, which means "committee" or "council" in [Ge'ez](#), is the short name of the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army that ruled [Ethiopia](#) between 1974 to

When I was in my 6th grade, I really scared one of our guests of honor at the school - a female delegate of the latest party congress, by my asking her from the audience a question about her impressions from the speech of *Alda Graca do Espiritu Santu*, the Congress's guest from Sao Tome and Principe. But I wasn't going to do anything like this with Oisin. It was not his fault that he did not receive proper education here. In fact, there is no one here who did. Yes, it is virtually no one! The main thing, though, is whether a man is craving for knowledge, has thirst for it. Most important is, if he is able to think, and the accumulated amount of knowledge is something that can be acquired. And I believed that together he and I could move mountains!

It was cold on the beach. Despite all the beauty around me. I really wanted to have a swim in order to cool my head, but only the most desperate souls dared to do it here, even during the summer. But my head was cooled quickly without any swimming: twenty minutes of sitting on the sand, and my teeth began to chatter. And I began to envy Muslim women with their covered heads: they do not have to suffer the thoughts that their head is going to look like a rooster's underside because of wind ... So I sat there and chattered with my teeth. It was almost deserted around me. Only sporadically someone was walking his dog or jogging.

I had lost all sense of time, when finally behind me I heard his unhurried steps. I had learned to hear their sound even with my eyes closed.

- Hello! - Oisin said, holding out his hand and smiling as if nothing had happened - as if he didn't tell Dermot something that he should not have told him.
- Hello! -I felt as if the whole Sahara Desert stretched itself throughout my mouth.
- You wanted to see me? - That was because we usually met at the weekends, but this time it was on Monday. - Did something happen?
"It did,"- I wanted to say. - "And already a long time ago. I love you." But instead I said:
- Nothing happened. I just came back from a business trip and decided to take advantage of the fact that I'm in Dublin ... Did I disturb any of your plans?
- No, everything is OK. It's just that I will soon start working and then we will not be able to meet in the middle of the week ...
He looked so proud when he told me that he had found work, I said to myself. For a former political prisoner it was not easy to get a job, even as a carpenter. Dear, poor - and such wonderful! - Oisin! ...
-I just wanted to talk to you -I said, slightly moving toward him, literally by a millimeter. Oisin did not twitch. - Because we usually never have time to talk.
- My pleasure, - he said - And what about?

1987, taking power following the ousting of [Haile Selassie I](#). The committee was formally renamed the Provisional Military Administrative Council later in 1974, but was still popularly known as the Derg.

No, he's incorrigible! "*And it's all about him and 5 minutes about the weather*"⁴⁹⁰ - flashed through my head.

- Well, not about the weather, of course ... I just wanted to share with you ... You're in a hurry?

- Not really, - and he sat down beside me.

And I started telling Oisín about when I was 14 years old and was sitting on the roof of my house, in the company of a hermit crab spider, surrounded by flowering lilacs, and wanted to rescue Bobby Sands. I described to him how my path of life has led me to them - and I hoped that he would understand himself, without me saying it, how much he meant to me.

*"Guelder rose, I dare not
My ardent love declare.
Pray, my sweet beloved,
Guess it by my air."*⁴⁹¹

After all, I still remained a Soviet woman. We are not accustomed to declare love ourselves, not to mention literally pressing men to the wall, the way tank-like Irish women do.

- Can I tell you what I dream about, just don't laugh at me? And do not think I'm just a hopeless dreamer and fantasist.

- Go ahead, - said Oisín - I won't laugh.

- More than anything, I would like to join your ranks. In accordance with all the rules - I said, knowing instantly how really naive and dreamy it should have sounded to him, - If it was only possible! ...

- First, we must finish the job that we're doing - said Oisín seriously - and then we'll see. I cannot promise you anything, it does not depend on me, but nothing is impossible in the world. Look, we were born and grew up in different corners of the globe. And yet, we still met.

At these words my heart was pounding like a drum in the song "Night Flight to Venus". Faster and faster and faster

- Well, what about our job? - Oisín continued - Any news?

And this brought me back down to Earth I composed myself.

- News isn't bad. What we spoke about the last time, is done. Also there are some rumors among the people, that one terrible Russian woman cunningly laid her eyes on one of your best volunteers ... and shamelessly keeps him at gunpoint.

Oisín flushed to the roots of his hair.

-I...

⁴⁹⁰ "And it's all about him" - popular novel by Vil Lipatov (1927-1979); "and it's all about him and 5 minutes about the weather" - Soviet joke about "Vremya" TV news bulletin most of which in the 1970s was dedicated to the activities of Leonid Brezhnev.

⁴⁹¹ Famous Soviet song from the film «Kuban Cossacks» (1947)

– You, you, my dear, -suddenly the spirit of Lida Basina woke up in me, - *Sniper at work*. If you're really so worried about how I feel about you, why don't you ask me yourself? It would have been better than discussing it with a comrade who is not directly involved into our mission.

Oisín blushed and remained silent as a fish.

-I had to undergo a real interrogation because of you, *Comrade Mauser*⁴⁹². Good thing I was brought up on books about our young Pioneer heroes⁴⁹³.

The blush never left his face.

– I'm sorry ... maybe I should not have .. Oh, how embarrassing...! ...

– Good that you understand it at least now.

I was waiting and waiting for Oisín to ask me what I feel for him, but he did not ask. And I felt something breaking inside of me.

– Oisín, you know, I'm tired. So tired of being for you like some exotic animal in a zoo which everybody runs to see with such interest and about which then you all forget just as quickly, in your Irish way. I want to be treated just like a normal human being, you know? Without any excesses.

I recalled the former Republican Mayor of a city, who, when he was introduced to me and asked if he had not met me before, gallantly replied: "No, if I saw a woman like you before, I'd definitely remember it!" I remembered all of my "trophies" - without firing a shot! - a string of "cute old men", and I wanted to scream out loud. Why do I need their attention, and what the hell do I need them all for, when here he is - the only one I care about ...

– If you still have not realized it... Did you think that Dermot would help you to understand? -I said so softly that Oisín hardly could hear me.

He looked up at me with his blue eyes as if he did not believe his ears. Now he did not have his typical ironic smile. Instead, I saw a mistrust that right there, before my eyes was replaced by a complete surprise. He finally understood. I saw it on his face. Understood, but was still afraid to fully believe it.

"*You're a good man, but you are not an eagle*⁴⁹⁴," -I thought with the words from a Soviet movie.

So we stood there, both red, embarrassed and we did not look at each other. I still had the feeling that a miracle was just about to happen. That the thunder will strike from the sky and the ground will open out. This miracle was somewhere quite near. It wandered near us on tiptoes and it looked silently at us over our

⁴⁹² Silence, you speakers!

Comrade Mauser,

you

have the floor. (Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Left March*, 1918)

⁴⁹³ Soviet children - heroes of the resistance during WWII

⁴⁹⁴ Catch phrase from the Soviet film "A Simple Story" (1960)

shoulders. I saw its glimpses in Oisín's eyes, when he dared look up at me for a second. His embarrassment started to come over me too. And a cold salty wind blew through us to our bones...

Suddenly, I felt that invisible weightless miracle that had arisen between us, start to evaporate, melting, flowing away through our fingers – not clear why and not clear where to. Oisín fidgeted, hesitated, he seemed to have shrunk, to look smaller. Feeling that he was just about to leave, I stepped towards him and not knowing myself how I dared, I put my hands on his shoulders.

His eyes became wide with horror. It seemed that he even stopped breathing.

- What are you...why ... I am an almost married man ...- he murmured.

My heart snapped - in the same way as happened to me only once before: when I have realized that my grandmother had read in my diary what happened between Tadesse and I. Since then, as you know, I did not write diaries.

- That would not make any difference for me, - I said barely hearable, with sorrow. And I said even more softly: - Can you not just make a woman happy?

It was the cry of my soul. Of course, he did not understand why I said this. He probably thought that I was such a "libertine"! And it was only because I loved him so much that I never hoped for anything more than romance. I just had no right to burden him with my problems. And what kind of wife could I be, if rice burns on my stove while I am thinking that Honduras is on fire? I even forget to wipe dust off my cupboards. Do you understand that, you idiot?

I looked at my feet and I felt tears beginning to boil over in my eyes. They were just about to begin dripping on my shoes. That was the last thing I needed! I slowly picked the right words to answer suitably so as not to show him my weakness

- Have I ever asked you anything about your personal life? – I said slowly

- No...- he was surprised.- But I...I cannot like this... You do not know how hard it was for me to build up anything.... And just when finally something materialises ...

So, he's got his titmouse in his hand. And I was supposed to be a crane in the sky⁴⁹⁵. Well, thank you for the compliment....

*"A wedge of cranes is fading in the distance
So far away I can no longer see
When I run out of days of my existence
I hope those cranes will find a gap for me
That I may soar above my pain and anguish
And join their ranks as many years ago*

⁴⁹⁵ Russian proverb - "Better a titmouse in your hand than a crane in the sky"

*Recalling all their names in my new language
And names of those whom I have left below. ...*⁴⁹⁶

- You see...for you it's just for...and I am...and I already have there.....

Who said to him that for me it was "just for"? Is THAT what you call "just for"?
While I would just die from happiness, if only... I did not even dare to dream about
such things!

- I ...I have to go?...he asked gingerly as if I would ask him to stay then he would
stay!

- Sure, go, otherwise you will miss the train, - I answered. And my face
flamed.

And he turned away and he almost ran from me! And Killiney Bay forever dimmed in
my eyes ... Since then I could never visit it again. I simply physically couldn't.

This kind of love happens only once in a million light years!
But he does not need it ... does not need it at all ...

Then why, damn, why did he kiss me for nearly a year, for almost 12 months in a row?
Is that not cruel? I would have kept my feelings to myself, admiring him from a
distance, and would have been perfectly happy that I could just talk to him, if it wasn't
for his damned kisses! And now the genie is out of the bottle, with such force
that the whole bottle has blown to smithereens, and he has nowhere else to go to ...
What will happen now with the genie of my feelings that became homeless when it broke
free ? Will it die a slow death, like a snail without a shell?

I had every reason to cry. But I could not do even that.

In this state, I could not return home. Especially because there was no one waiting for
me there, except for four blank walls. Even the very idea of travelling somewhere in
the same direction with Oisin filled me with horror. Not seeing anything in front
of me, I somehow managed to get into the first the best hotel and booked a room
for the night. I had with me a bottle of red wine that I had bought on the way .
"Tomorrow morning I have to get to work ... but it's OK ..." - I thought as
if in a delirium, - "I will take the first bus in the morning ... I will be a little late, but
they'll survive it for once, I have never come late to work for two years"

... *"What do you need him for? ... Because all you want, is to get married ... no matter to
whom ... Find yourself somebody else ... somebody like yourself ... But for me without him
the sun does not shine. The flowers do not have fragrance ... I cannot believe in the*

⁴⁹⁶ The song "Cranes", music by Yan Frenkel, lyrics by Rasul Gamzatov, translation into English by Boris Anisimov:

bright future of humanity and in justice. You just don't want to be alone, right? But I'm ready, and I even want to be alone - if I can't be with him ... "

I wake up from my own silent scream - and suddenly feel like falling into some deep pit and I fall asleep again, by anxious, heavy sleep interrupted every half an hour. I dream of that same room where I am sleeping ... same wardrobe in the wall ... in the mirror that reflects us on the bed, on those white sheets where happens all that will never come true. ...That was not destined to be.

I should just drink less.

... When I finally woke up in the morning, all my pillow was wet with tears. But tears were gone: apparently, they all ran out during the night. Completely wrecked, I came down , settled my bill and walked to the DART⁴⁹⁷ station: to catch the first Belfast bus

"Rainy Season" began all over again on the bus. For all three hours of the road bitter tears ran non-stop over my cheeks. I couldn't stop them with any force, even if I wanted to. I closed my eyes and gave them full liberty. It was all like in a second-rate Bollywood melodrama. And for that I hated myself even more. Lord, why, oh why did I have to tell him?

I had to go to work straight off the bus, with a report about my business trip. All colors around me faded, life seemed to have lost its purpose. And I began to live just out of inertia, only "because I had to" ...

⁴⁹⁷ The DART (Dublin Area Rapid Transit) is the rail line running along the coast of Dublin, from Malahide and Howth southwards as far as Greystones, Co Wicklow.

Chapter 19. The Change of Fate

*“-Gedevan, you are still young... Live, please!
-Uncle Vova, violinist is no longer required...”
 (“Kin-Dza -Dza”, Soviet film)*

One often commits folly out of grief. And even more when in despair. I wandered the dunes in the evenings after work, inhaling the salty sea flavour. I did not want to go home. There was such beauty around and there was nobody to share it with. After all, if you remember, my emotional mother had taken Lisa away to Russia again. If I ever in my life was close to suicide, it was just in those spring days.

Weekends became really unbearable. Dermot, who did not know even half of what happened to me, promised that we'd meet the next Friday. Well, better a small fish than an empty dish ... But on Friday night, when I was already picking up my things for the travel, he called me with an apology and said that on this weekend he had to go canvassing for the upcoming elections. As if he had not known that before! Even though I was trying to control myself that moment I burst out. I tried to explain to Dermot how important it was for me not to stay alone just that time, but he only brushed me aside. Of course, for a person dedicated to politics that will always rank first but still there is also a concept of friendship, besides politics. The more so that he had taken time off for his American mother-in-law even during the election campaign. Did Dermot really think they would lose the elections if he won't pop into a certain number of houses exactly on that day and not a day later? Especially when there was still plenty of time before the election.

- We know each other not just a day. I have never asked you for meetings, Dermot. But now I really need to you see. Very much,- I said at last, awaiting the answer with foreboding .

- I understand everything, LFC, I am happy that you want to see me. But I can't now, understand me. As soon as I can – I will!! These elections will have a decisive significance to our strategy and if we end up with the advantage over SDLP in our district, then ...

Oh, yeah! Ireland will be at once shocked by a revolution ... I took the phone away from my ear, letting him talk away. In five minutes I pressed it back to my ear. Dermot was still going on with his keynote speech. I caught myself thinking that he was just using me to practice his political eloquence. This thought set me laughing. But my mood was just too serious. It's high time to change something in life, and to change drastically.

Maybe I'm selfish and am thinking only about myself?

But even looking at the situation from different points of view, I was always imagining that American mother-in-law, whose coming somehow did not disturb the election campaign, unlike mine... Combined with the fact that it was Dermot himself who had called me himself only three days ago offering a meeting this weekend, that meant quite a lot.

Well, my situation was natural for a mistress of a married man. It was I who accepted that role once. The question was, if I wanted to remain any longer in this position?

Even if there was no Oisín in this world. And it was unimportant that he had turned me down; nobody would occupy his place in my heart. Most certainly, this did not enhance my feelings for Dermot (if I ever had any at all).

That day I said to myself that everything was over between Dermot and me. I wouldn't announce it to him dramatically though. I wouldn't make any graceless scenes. Instead I'd just disappear from his life forever. And what's more, I'll disappear when he anticipates it least of all. Neither explaining the reasons, nor clarifying the relationship. By doing that I'd give him a feeling of being in my shoes now. After all, it is time to think about myself too; at least a little bit. Otherwise I'll lose my self-control sooner or later.

...Since I did not want to go home after work, I went instead to an Internet café and I browsed a lot through the Web searching for any indirect information about Oisín. I just did not dare to look for direct information any more... Quite soon I came across a real thesaurus of data about his relatives: his numerous nephews and nieces, mainly in their cheeky teens. They were literally infesting such sites, like Bebo and Facebook. It was amazing to observe the difference between these young people, making their first steps in life, and their parents. It was striking to see how such parents, so faithful to their struggle and so ideologically sound (all Oisín's brothers were also participants in the anti-colonial struggle) could have brought up such shallow and narrow-minded children. Like an apple-tree which was always giving a good harvest, but this year its entire blossoms had suddenly faded from barren branches.

Well, maybe in nature something can go badly by chance, but not in human life.

That was the over-riding thought: that while their fathers were either imprisoned or hunting British soldiers in the streets of Belfast; while their mothers were carrying the prison parcels to them and banging with the lids of the rubbish bins against the pavement⁴⁹⁸ to alarm fighters about the battle to come, there was nobody to educate the kids.

To be honest, it was a very sad picture. Compared with them even Ian Paisley Junior, with his "food" as the main hobby in his life, was looking like a genius.

There were these almost childish idiots at the pictures, boozy and blind to the world, hugging other in groups, or just asleep side by side on sofas. However, my attention was attracted by one of Oisín's young nephews named Pat (apparently in honour of his grandfather). I focused my attention on him because of his visual likeness to Oisín, since I couldn't have been interested in the personality of such a disgusting human specimen.

⁴⁹⁸ This was really common for Belfast women. There is even a song, titled "Lid of me granny's bin", dedicated to it.

Pat was a striking representative of the generation of Belfast teenagers described above. Like Oisin, he had blue eyes like and black brows coming together at the bridge. Looking at him, one could easily imagine how my hero had looked in his long past youth, when there was no Internet and teenagers didn't have to fool around. At least, not that much... I was reading all the stupidities that Pat had left on his page: these were far from being "naïve and lovely". Instead some of them were so ugly that my hair just stood on end. His existence on our planet was so meaningless that his semi-literate pearls made me exclaim: why do two-legged things like that live in our world, why does the planet have to bear them?

Among other of Pat's stupidities I noticed what he was dreaming of:

"I would like to f... an experienced mature woman, preferably a foreigner..."

At first I laughed since no decent foreign woman would even approach him at a gunshot (get within a mile of him)! Just out of fear that he may steal her handbag. And there is a shortage of "indecent foreign ladies" here yet: thanks, among others, to the doctor-of-nobody-knows-which-science Ian Paisley (this was the only point of his political program I'd cast a vote for with both hands).

But the hurt caused by Oisin still won't go away. And an idiotic plan of a black revenge rose up in my mind. Even now I can't recall it without shame.

Oh, what if this idiot's dream is allowed to become true... and... I imagined the baby-boy who looked so much like Oisin, and the desire to commit this folly became almost irresistible. It seemed like nature finally had its call: a kind of a biological repeating alarm clock in me.

I closed my eyes and struck the keyboard with my fingers.

"Hi, gorgeous! So, how about a mature independent woman of exotic origin?..."

The nephew Pat did not require too much: after a week of volcanic epistolary "romance" we agreed to meet in the "Crown" pub in Belfast. From the very beginning it was clear to me what such a meeting would end up with... I did not give him my real name, having a hope in my heart that this rendezvous would be the first and last one.

Britain...a country whose ex-premier has an annual income of more than half a million pounds, but doesn't want to pay for a £ 25 train ticket or for a TV license costing about £ 100, while the over-weight former vice-premier, suffering, as he claims, from bulimia, buys himself food for £ 6000 per year at the state's expense. But a father of a big family has to pay a £ 200 fine because the lid of his rubbish bin (emptied only by-weekly here) appeared to be a few centimeters open.

A country where a mother whose 10 year old son complained to the police that she gave him a spank for using foul language, has lost her job and even custody of all her other children for a while. And at the same time "a sweet couple" that has some "big shots" as friends, apparently, can leave their babies alone in a hotel room in foreign country just to have a good time at a party. Even though it led to the disappearance of a child, this couple is being publicized as an example of parental love and care. Moreover, they are

sponsored by local millionaires and drop in to the European Parliament to give lectures there.

An upside-down country where good is labeled evil and evil is claimed to be good. A country where the aggression against another independent state is called “liberation” and cut-throat invaders are called “our brave heroes”. Sometimes it gives me a feeling that a pandemic of some madness – no matter, bovine, or “democratic” – has already afflicted almost all the population here. That pandemic has now already reached this rough land... However dummies like Pat do not understand it, staying joyful and enthusiastic about “progress”.

When I am working, I have no time for walking in Belfast. And when I am not working I do not go there to have a walk. Thus when the following Saturday I went to Belfast to meet Pat I was really shocked by the changes that had occurred there lately.

Old Belfast was hard-faced but nevertheless, it was a place where “a terrible beauty is born”, as described by the Irish poet⁴⁹⁹... In spite of all the lifeless skeletons of buildings which were near the city centre. While the new Belfast spreads the smell of dead flesh in another way. It's the glamorous decay of consumerism. Once a city of proud people who struggled for freedom so bravely, it somehow, quickly and imperceptibly, turned into a city of those fascinated by masturbation. That new Belfast, absolutely alien to me, was like the ground in April: the snow had thawed off and a lot of excrements accumulated during the winter appeared visible everywhere.

Excrements of both sexes and all ages were wandering the stores and bars to enjoy the process of consumption: at long last they were finally included in the global civilization of shopping malls! I walked along the street, and the natives were hustling around me - overjoyed that they were finally allowed to buy all those useless, but fashionable knick-knacks and gadgets and to enjoy “equal rights” with the British. At the pinnacle of their bliss, they were trying on cocktail dresses, Nike sport shoes, ranks of constables or appointments as chairmen of various commissions and committees set up to supposedly curb poverty and discrimination. The benefit from these commissions was as lavish as milk from a buck would be: these institutions were established only in order to calm the conscience of the most sensitive citizens. Those who found it unbearable to think that they were parasites on backs of the rest of the Earth's population (while the cheerful poorly educated majority here didn't even understand that!). They were receiving a good salary, and that helped them to view themselves entirely as noble fighters for human rights somewhere in distant Darfur or Tibet. Now we have finally accomplished it!

The city has been so disfigured by glamorous new buildings, that it was now hard to recognize it. Somehow this was supposed to make us happy. It was even a kind of «*mauvais ton*⁵⁰⁰”: not to be happy about it, a bit the same like not being at the height of bliss with “freedom and democracy” a la Yeltsin in Russia. I could still hear in my mind

⁴⁹⁹ William Butler Yeats, Easter, 1916.

⁵⁰⁰ Bad taste (French)

the resentful Dutch claim «*Maar Moskou floreert*^{501!}», in response to my frank story of life today in “liberated Russia”.

«*Maar er wordt flink geïnvesteerd !*»⁵⁰² – that’s what the Dutch would likely to yell as response to my description of Belfast. Belfast that was suffering from orgiastic hooliganism at night, and there was no way to curb it. It turned into a place where young women died of drinking, where children became alcoholics and drug addicts, where old people were afraid to open the door *Ach pot toch op met jullie investeringen!*⁵⁰³

“*IRA sell-outs,*” - graffiti were bleeding quietly on the walls of the Falls Road. And the “revolutionaries” were struggling for new American investments with a stubbornness that would be worthy of a better cause.

“Look what we have achieved!” –they were claiming proudly to Iraqis and to other freedom fighters, showing off their city raped by corporate skyscrapers. “Behave yourselves, and the British will give you some reward!” They did not want to notice that in order to make them “equal” and “to give them some reward”, the British had to start robbing someone else in another part of the world. They won’t give away something that they already have grabbed for themselves!

Not surprisingly, Oisín wanted to escape from this dead city. He told me once that he wanted to move to Dublin. After all, Oisín was so full of life! ... Such a pure soul.

I felt that just a little bit more, and the traditional reasoning of republicans wouldn’t convince me: they like to claim that “thou shall not criticize their official line” because every criticism will only grist the water to the mill of their enemies, which are for sure our enemies as well! But now, when those enemies lauded them openly and presented them as a role model for the opposition in other countries, it is not only possible but even necessary to criticize those republicans!

I was used to protecting them from the “left” attacks, comparing them to a character in our Soviet play “Drummer Girl”: a drama about an underground fighter, who was pretending to collaborate with the fascists. Another hero was asking her when exactly she had been pretending: when she was with him or when she was with the fascists? But it was no longer possible to justify the performance which was gradually unfolding in front of my eyes in Ireland, by any “pretending for the sake of the struggle.” They took it too far. And furthermore, for how long can they lie to all sides and keep pretending? For how long can they keep telling one thing to the enemy and something different to “their” people, but in reality, as it turns out, to be lying through their teeth to both? Should we remind them about the fate of that boy who was in the habit of crying: “Wolf!” too often? ...

⁵⁰¹ But Moscow is flourishing ! (Dutch)

⁵⁰² “They are getting big investments!” (Dutch)

⁵⁰³ Go to hell with your investments! (Dutch)

This is what I was thinking about on my way to that rendez-vous, although I would have not confessed those thoughts to anyone back then yet. Why? Because in for a penny, in for a pound. Otherwise one isn't worth a brass farthing...

I found Nephew Pat in the pub at once. In real life he looked even more like Oisin. My heart even skipped a beat at the sight of him. But only for a second.

Pat looked at me with obvious excitement. In his handsome, yet unencumbered by any expression of intelligence face an unsophisticated range of human instincts was reflected. It was obvious that he had imagined what would happen in a few hours. He clearly imagined it and was nervous for fear of losing face. I said hello to him - and realized that I needed to drink quite a lot to make his dream come true...

...Our conversation flagged. And well it might: it was obvious from the outset that we had nothing to talk about. Only it didn't bother him, while it did bother me, and very much so.

- Come, I'll order you another drink! - Pat suggested. What else could he suggest? My head was spinning, but he didn't become even a little bit more attractive. I managed to listen to dozens of idiotic stories about how he, his pals and girlfriends had puked from overdrinking in Mallorca. All the physiological details of that would rather be omitted. At the same time, the young man was absolutely convinced that what he had told me was incredibly funny.

I gave a wry smile, but he was sure that made an irresistible impression on me. Most likely, because Pat was already close to his Mallorcan condition.

Once again, I looked at him. He was cute, with his blue eyes and long lashes, young and, perhaps, physically attractive. But I did not feel for him anything but growing disgust.

And when over another pint of beer he said:

- I'll go far in life. You'll see, others will work for me, and I will be riding on a yacht in Mallorca ... you know, such as Eddie Irvine has? I'm not going to live like my old man... or my uncle, - I could no longer listen to him.

- Sorry, Pat, wait a minute... I'll be right back. I need to freshen up.

With these words, I went in the direction of the toilet and asked the barmaid softly:

- May I go out through the back door?

She looked at that drunken *child* and nodded.

... After 10 minutes I was sitting on the bus home. And Nephew Pat was still waiting in the "Crown" I won't be surprised if he is still sitting there.

I just cannot be this way. Because I am Soviética.

... And the sense of loneliness did not pass and did not get any less, no matter how I tried to occupy myself with something useful. And there was no strength left for anything else. For some reason, what had helped me so in my 20s, this time did not work. This just

further convinced me that Oisín really must have been my second half, predestined to me. And it was so annoying that he did not understand what was so obvious to me. "You cannot stick your head on another man's shoulders" - I tried to convince myself. - "Such things as family life need being tried by one to be understood." It was clear that Oisín had no idea what that life was all about. And did not have much experience with women. That he simply succumbed to the first female coming his way - probably the first who paid attention to him after his release from prison.

Let's be frank: I was very sorry that, for example, I hadn't corresponded with him when he had been still behind bars. But I had had no idea of his existence then! And I would not call my feeling jealousy. I had not an ounce of hatred for that fortunate Irish stranger, his "almost wife": I had seen enough over the years, what an average Irish Republican girlfriend was like. And I would not want to be like one for any price. With all my due respect for them.

After nearly performing a foolish act, I was angry at myself and managed to pull myself together: indeed, for that I had to swim twice in the cold Irish Sea. I do not know by what miracle I did not come down with the flu. But it did not matter, the result was important. Having cooled down, I thoroughly considered what to do next. I came to the unequivocal conclusion that I had no right to give vent to my emotions, when Oisín and I had been entrusted with such a responsible mission. No matter how hard it would feel coming again face to face with him, no matter how embarrassing was our final rushed explaining ourselves to each other and our *'half romance, or no romance, but merely its title'*⁵⁰⁴. And I had to do my best never to raise personal topics in my communion with Oisín.

In normal life, if it wasn't for that our mutual mission, of course, after all that, I would have no longer appeared before his eyes. But as things stood... I simply would have ceased to respect myself, if I had let down our comrades. It was even irrelevant, if they really needed those results from us so much or not.

Yet it was, of course, easier said than done. It would have been much easier if I had at least one close congenial friend there - of any age and gender. But I didn't. Fionntán, with whom I had the most affinity of all my close Irish friends, was still awaiting his trial in distant Latin America.

The next day off came. Dermot was still around canvassing, and I did not even think of bothering him any more. Instead, immediately after work on Friday I went to the beach - a secluded beach near the fishing harbour, which is deserted even in the hottest days. It was right under the harbour, so that most people were simply unaware of its existence. I myself had discovered it by accident.

It was May, the mountains were covered with bright yellow flowers of gorse, and looking at them, I wanted to sing a song from my distant Octobrist⁵⁰⁵ childhood:

'Shining down the meadow, bright and radiant sun,
Getting up at sunrise, on the grass I run,
And the ox-eye daisies pick up as I fly.

⁵⁰⁴ Words from a Soviet song

⁵⁰⁵ Young Leninist scout league

‘Let me make a wreath for you!’ – to the sun I cry.
Happy gleaming distance beckons from afar,
Overhead the rainbow, behind the morning star,
Nightingale is singing in the willow-tree,
Happiest and cheeriest in this world is me.⁵⁰⁶

But when I mentally began to sing this unpretentious song, I felt even sadder. And not only and not so much because of Oisín. It was just that in my heart for over 10 years an open wound had been aching: the wound that my country was no more. That wound could not be healed by any doctor, even not by Doctor of Liberation Sciences. This pain still constantly reminds of itself, no matter how deep I try to drive it into the subconscious mind, together with my memories, if only for elementary psychic self-preservation. It aches in any weather. And from that wound infection is spreading further and deeper throughout my being. This post-Soviet gangrene incessantly eats me up on the inside. Analgesics help only for a short time. It never ceases to fester, and I cannot apply a patch to it. This wound will not heal with time. It is chronic.

I had prepared a jacket and decided to spend the night on the shore. Then to sleep all day on Saturday at home and to think about nothing. And then Monday was already near at hand...

After all, who said that I couldn't see it out here till the dawn? At home, we had greeted the dawn – by an ancient tradition, on St. Peter's Day in July. In villages that tradition was stronger than in the cities, but as many farmers had moved to live in urban areas, including our town, not to sleep on that night had become commonplace. Some young people cut up rough a bit, through panache or to avert sleep - though certainly not on such a scale as in Northern Ireland; for example, some slightly moved a statue from the pedestal. (In our town this fate befell the war memorial - a real Katyusha⁵⁰⁷.) So the militia did have enough work on that night. But it all went off without death and destruction, and the perpetrators got their 15 days of detention, and calmed down...

In May the days in Northern Ireland are very long. With sun staying in the sky almost until midnight, but the night as such does occur. By the time the town began to fall into dusk, I began to shiver with cold, despite the jacket, but decided not to give up. Somewhere nearby in the gathering lilac gloom I heard the cheerful hubbub of trainees to compete for the title of the local champion of herring gutting. "*We have talents in our town, too!*" - was the slogan of that contest...

And then suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, my mobile phone rang. It was a man to whom I had once been introduced by militant feminist friend from Dublin. He had even once spent the night at our house: when he returned from South Africa and was overtired from the road, but from that time there had been no news of him. Kieran Cassidy. Also a Republican. A plumber. Tall, thin as a rake, wearing glasses. Not handsome in any way, but still very charming.

⁵⁰⁶ Happiest and Cheeriest, music by Yuri Chichkov, lyrics by Konstantin Ibrayev

⁵⁰⁷ Katyusha multiple rocket launchers ([Russian](#): Катюша) are a type of [rocket artillery](#) first built and fielded by the [Soviet Union](#) in [World War II](#). Compared to other artillery, these [multiple rocket launchers](#) deliver a devastating amount of explosives to a target area quickly.

- Can I come to you for the weekend? - he said off the reel, not very tactfully. After two years of silence! At other times I would have been surprised. Perhaps even would have asked something caustic. But under current circumstances... Had I been as happy from any call as from that one! It seemed that he was sent to me by Providence. Instead of spending the night on the beach, I ran home: I knew that Kieran would come tomorrow, and therefore I had to tidy up the house a little and sleep. Without Mother and Lisa, I loosened up and used to clean the house only once a week, usually on Saturdays. But that time, I would be busy on Saturday.

I had no ulterior motive when Kieran had called me. I was just glad that at least for the a couple of hours I would be living human soul.

I was vacuuming the stairs and nearly fell off them with the vacuum cleaner when the doorbell rang. Lord, whoever on Earth it could be – in the midst of my cleaning?

Kieran stood in the doorway. I had not seen him that way yet: in a dazzling white shirt and freshly shaven.

- Oh, - I said, letting go of the vacuum cleaner. - I thought that you are coming tomorrow...

- Why put off until tomorrow what you can do today? – he said a little coyly.

First, we went together to town, to the main street which is called exactly Main Street. I had never gone out in the evening by myself (I would not visit bars, and anything else was non-existent and not expected in it!). I was struck by the abundance of still quite young children in the streets – those aged 7 to 9 years, roaming there without any adult supervision. They wandered through the town in packs, like wolves, and rough-housed within their powers and abilities. The police lazily drove them from one corner to another, while their parents, apparently, generally did not care for their offspring.

- It's too noisy here, - said Kieran. - Let's go to some other village?

The nearby village was the local Republican stronghold. It was really quieter there, and no children lounged in the streets. We went to a local bar, so small that it was difficult to find a place there. Here, the same denizens gathered every weekend, and stared with great curiosity at each new person. But Kieran was not discouraged.

We stayed there a little time and went back to my place.

- Do you care to watch some video? - I suggested hesitantly, because I did not know what else to offer.

- All right! - Kieran responded with enthusiasm and sat beside me on the couch.

Kieran loved war films, he was just very fond of them.

- I do not care who the main character is - Russian, German or American. The main thing is that the character is interesting, that there is the story in the movie, not just...

So he assured me at least.

Kieran's country has had a long history of tragedies and bloodshed. He himself in his younger years also took part in the war - throwing stones and homemade bombs in the

British occupation forces. Those which to this day are still driving about the Irish streets...

-It's great - to organize street riots! - he said. -Better than any sports. Adrenaline knocks you right in the head!

-You should throw a bomb not at the beginning or the end of a convoy, but in the middle of it, - he shared his experience with me. - So that the first car has already passed, and failed to return for help, and the last – has got stuck on the road. I love movies in which there is something comical even in any tragedy. As in real life. For example, I witnessed how in the bar on the Falls Road, two well-known IRA volunteers roared with laughter over “Tom and Jerry” on TV... Imagine, here go two strapping guys who the Brits are deathly afraid of - and they roar with laughter over Tom and Jerry! That's what I call a good story!

For some reason it did not really seem so mightily funny to me. Well, never mind... I hold in my hands a disc with the favorite movie of my childhood - “*The Dawns Here Are Quiet*”⁵⁰⁸... - in English, and look forward to Kieran liking it so much... After all, it has in it precisely everything that he appreciates in films: human history during the war, interesting characters, the laughter and tears. This film is as multi-faceted as life itself! Yes, it means a lot to me. I've already told you how it watched it for the first time when I was five years old⁵⁰⁹. The film then shocked me and my friends so much, that we, the girls of the early 1970's, demanded of our parents in terms of ultimatum that they should buy us toy machine-guns, and then we spent the summer playing the war in thick burdock in the fields behind the kitchen gardens. And no matter how many times I have watched this film since - even now, when I am already long past 30, - each time I still always cry. I cry from the pain of un-lived life. I cry with the growing sense of “*Bastards, you won't murder us all, the victory will still be ours!*” - as the events unfold. Not only in respect of that war, but also in terms of what is happening in the world today. And the final scene - when Vaskov breaks into the German headquarters with a grenade without a fuse and shouts from the screen what is the cry of his soul: “*So, you did not pass? Five girls, there were just five, five girls!...*” Every time I have shed floods of tears, not tears of despair, but tears of determination and confidence in our victory. In the triumph of good over evil. Amazing book, amazing film! Only veterans can speak of the war in this way. Only those who went through it themselves. And I think that's why Kieran should appreciate this film....

Over the years I have found more and more human dashes from different heroines of the Dawn... Many of them at a time. If in my youth I was closer to modest Lisa or to Sonia, permanently immersed in a book; as I got older, I began to understand Rita who had seemed so cold to me before and to Yevgenia's reckless fun – the fun that she needed just to keep her from crying. -“*How could you, Yevgenia?*” - “*But I could. I could!*”...

The actress Irina Shevchuk, who played Rita, said in an interview that viewers on all continents had cried over that film in the Soviet times. Because the tragedy shown there is understandable to everyone, and the values asserted there are common human values, she said. Or are they? And what would the reaction to it not of the peoples of Latin

⁵⁰⁸ *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* - is a 1972 Soviet film based on [Boris Vasilyev's](#) novel of the same name. The film was nominated for an [Oscar](#) in the [Best Foreign Language Film](#) category.

⁵⁰⁹ See part 1 of “Sovietica”

America or Africa, but of the mass Western audience - if this film, of course, happens to be shown in the West?

Now I had an opportunity to see it for myself. To see whether there are or there are not such values as 'universal' ones, or, perhaps, whether there are people and there are mere Homo sapiens... Or else, in fact, to confirm or confute both things...

Kieran conveniently sprawled on the couch and prepared to watch. And I watched his facial expression from time to time. His first disappointment was that the film was black and white:

- Couldn't it be made color, or what?

And no matter how I tried to explain to him that that was the author's intent: to show the contrast of our peaceful reality in color, and the war - in black and white, it never reached him.

Then he began to be openly bored - in the episodes where the girls' memories of their peaceful life before the war were shown. Even though they were in color.

- They show you all sorts of nonsense!

He turned a deaf ear to my tactful remark, that the peaceful life and dreams were shown to us, the audience, to get to know the characters before they would engage in mortal combat with the enemy.

- I want to see some action. And there is no action at all! - he complained. I promised him that the 'action' would be in the second half of the picture. Plenty of it.

But he did not want to wait. As I went to the kitchen to make tea, he wound the disc forward and got on perhaps the most tragic and beautiful scene in the Soviet cinema of the war: the scene of Yevgenia Komelkova's death. The original film had reportedly been lost, and Olga Ostroumova had to re-play that scene. The film director, Rostotsky, did not think she would cope with acting it once again, but she managed! She played it even better. They say the members of the camera crew cried on the floor, watching Yevgenia die once again, forgetting that it was only a movie...

- I have watched through this film. Nonsense... some girl running around with a gun, for some reason singing silly songs (that's about the romance, '*Sweetly he told me...*'), virtually rushing in the way of the bullets. After all, couldn't she hide?

I tell him that if he had not wound forward and watched the whole movie, he would have understood why she did not hide. But it does not make much of an impression on him.

- No, I've seen enough ... - and he rises from his seat - to change the TV channel. - They will now show *Forrest Gump* on BBC... This is really a movie!

I wouldn't be surprised at such a reaction from an average American, whose ideas about real life and the human suffering have developed since childhood on the basis of a mixture of "*Friends*" with the "*Terminator*" and "*Silence of the Lambs*". Or from an average Briton, who is still confident that the British Empire was good for most of mankind, that all the other nations are simply '*not up to our music*,' and that it is they who '*won the war*.' But in front of me was a representative of the oppressed, colonized nation, and that part of it, which actively struggled with his colonizer, besides, familiar, albeit partially, with the role of the Soviet people in World War II - and yet he was not

able to understand the tragic power of that film, which was quite, however, understandable for Costa Ricans and Mozambicans...

What is the secret? The fact that, as the songster of the 'delights' of British colonialism Rudyard Kipling wrote, '*East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet?*' (If we assume that modern South also belongs to 'East', and under 'West' we'll also mean industrialized North.) Or is it that in colonized countries history books are written by their colonizers? But if people do not believe what is written in those books with regard to their own history, why would they believe the stories the same books tell about other nations?

Or is it due to the fact that the current generation, including in my own country, does not know what real war, real patriotism, real altruistic self-sacrifice are?

Even in Ireland, people like the heroine of our "Dawns..." seem to have died out too, along with Bobby Sands and his comrades, and today's generation of 'fighters' build their political careers on those heroes' bones, their memory: by selling portraits of a national hero in the same shop window with the insolent smug-smiling face of one of the dirtiest careerists in modern Irish history, a proclaimed 'rising star' (about the same thing if we sold the portraits of the Young Guard members, heroically perished in the Great Patriotic War, along with portraits of some Irina Khakamada⁵¹⁰)?

The fact is that the war for these people has never been a Holy War, the struggle for life and death, where there is no place for retreat - but only a boyish fun to throw a well-aimed stone and remain uncaught. Uncaught have remained many of their today's 'respectable' politicians, writers, condemning 'violence' and claiming that they have never participated in it... Maybe that is also why they and their young followers have been so afraid to lose sponsors...

Although few people sincerely believe those 'doves of peace' - because there still remain witnesses of the past! - they continue to proclaim their own, and the West's in general, innocence as a incantation. And still get their fees for a weekly column in a newspaper, for the millionth time indignant at the 'horrors of Stalin's Gulag,' but not mentioning or only mildly referring to the horrors of today's Iraq or Guantanamo Bay ('lest someone else should be offended'). An editor of one such 'progressive' newspaper, in response to my proposal to talk about the needs of today's immigrant workers, exposed to almost daily racist attacks in his own country, writes to me coldly: '*This topic does not interest us ...*'

And it isn't up to them to judge on Soviet history. With all its great and tragic pages. As Igor Talkov sang, "*The sun sets in the West to rise again - in the East...*" If only there, of course, by the time will still remain people like Yevgenia, Rita, Lisa, Galya, Sonia, and their foreman Vaskov...

⁵¹⁰ Irina Khakamada - a right wing [Russian](#) politician who ran in the [Russian presidential election, 2004](#).

...I tried not to take offence at Kieran. In other things, after all, he understood me perfectly. When he went into the bathroom for a minute, I decided to scare him - in order to defuse the situation slightly: some tension hung in the air, and I felt uncomfortable. The door to the room opened and I jumped right under Kieran's nose - with a short warlike cry like a child:

- Nom!

Caught unawared, he shuddered. I found him so close that my face was somewhere under his chin. We both laughed, looked again at each other and somehow casually kissed. As if it was taken for granted. The tension suddenly evaporated, and I felt easy as I had not felt for long.

- Shall we go upstairs? - Kieran said softly, when we stopped to catch breath.

- You're quick-witted, Kieran! - I was glad that I did not need to say anything....

...After nine months, my twins were born - Fidel and Che...

When I found out that I was pregnant, oddly enough, I was not just not frightened, but even not surprised. Instead, I was delighted. At the fact that I would have now the opportunity to experience with that child all the things I did not happen to have experienced with Lisa, and at the fact that I could take some time off work (I had been very tired over the years, both physically and emotionally), but most of all - at the fact that *Lisa would no longer be alone when I was old*. Thoughts about what would happen to her when I was gone were the most terrifying thoughts for me. But now... Throughout the pregnancy I was just happy! I had a feeling of warm protection from all evils in the world.

I tried to clear my head: why it had happened, what I felt for Kieran, and whether I should talk to him about it.

Logically, his reaction to my favorite film could discourage me from it, it was clear that we had little in common, but for some reason, I felt with him like a collective farm field, covered with windbreaks. And I was grateful for that feeling. I also liked his sense of humor and the fact that emotionally he was very mature, wise, he knew human nature to the last detail, while all the men, without exception, whom I had met before in my life's journey were in this respect like children, focusing only on their own feelings and experiences and not inclined to even try to understand the feelings and thoughts of others. Kieran was the first man in my life, with whom I could just be myself, and it filled me with a pleasant surprise.

God forbid, I did not want to 'lasso' him, to set cap at him. Why? Whatever should I do with him in that capacity? And so I did not say anything to him for a long time. But when I did, Kieran responded as if it were a perfectly natural thing, as if he had almost expected it.

I was slowly bracing up to share my joyous news with Hans, having no idea that my workplace was going to be made redundant. And it turned out that not only mine: my twins had hardly yet seen the light, when our office, which had opened with such fanfare just a couple of years before, trumpeting that the firm was certain to create hundreds of jobs in Belfast over the next three years, went to pot. After only eight months, those of

my colleagues who had secretly gloated when I was cut, found themselves in a very similar situation...

This phenomenon is quite typical of the economic model of the 'Celtic Tiger', which the Irish North is so hard trying to copy. One of the largest U.S. firms in Dublin - the one to which Sonny used to go for his business trips and which had been located there for many years - one fine day packed up, thrown out their 800 employees, sold off their old computers and furniture - and vanished over the horizon. What would happen to the Irish, when all these 'investors' pulled back like birds of passage? Will they sit on the rocks, raising sheep and growing potatoes? They have now almost forgotten how to do it...

When I realized that I was being made redundant (and I knew it as soon as Hans started on the subject of such things might just happen, so that we needed to prepare arguments to avoid it - but very soon he announced that 'good news' to all our employees, one by one! Now, he wouldn't have begun it, unless it had already been decided. Why on Earth do they all take us for idiots?), I immediately went to my GP. Why suffer, fray your nerves, get humiliated, try to mollify someone in order to be left at work, even though demoted, trying to prove something, and most importantly - to donate your work to 'some other uncle', who had already decided for himself to consign you to the scrap heap? Let's better our Swedish beauty toil away not only for herself, but for me as well, once she had coveted it so much. She will have to get used to it anyway.

I did not answer the phone, just sent them a certificate from the doctor. And in the meantime tried to settle the matters that I usually never had had time for. For example, to take up the driving test.

There was no economic crisis in the offing, the firm's profits grew like mushrooms after sun shower, I had just successfully passed the certification and my salary had been raised - and then this happens ... Is it any good to try your best to perform your duties? I was very upset, I was sorry for having wasted the last few years of time and effort on that work; I had put life into that work, forgetting what kind of society I was now functioning in. To put your heart into work for the sake of some unknown shareholders, for some Mr. Bennett with his deluxe tanning cream - is at least naive.

That year in my life was filled with turmoil more than enough. The absurd talk with Oisín that ended all my hopes and dreams, the even more absurd situation in which I got pregnant, the unexpected lay-off - at the worst possible moment, because who would have taken me to a new position in my "interesting condition", the fear of financial survival... As six years before, the ongoing trials like continuous waves suddenly stormed my lonely fortress, and it remained to be seen which of them exactly would be my 'tenth wave.'

To top it all, it turned out that Sonny with his parents wished to come to us in Ireland for Lisa's tenth birthday. And Lisa was still with my mother in Russia...

To convince Mum of something when she has already decided to do or not to do it, is an almost hopeless task. All of your most compelling arguments are palmed off with a charming smile. And if the smile does not help, she begins to yell at you.

No matter how I tried to explain to her that Sonny should definitely see Lisa: he had not seen her for six years and had never seen what state she was now in, that he was also a human being and also loved and missed her, even though he was to blame for stirring the whole mess the outcome of which was Lisa's illness - my mother just waved it off:

- Phooey!... He'll get over it!

This is despite the fact that he was her favorite son-in-law, and his pictures are still hanging in her apartment on the wall in plain view, and that it was I whose nature was impossible, and Sonny was almost an angel in the flesh, who deserved to be pitied.

But it turned out that I pitied him much more than she did. The point was that the mother did not want to interrupt their stay at home and to return to Ireland in the summer. Of course, before this rationale all the other things faded... Big deal, some paternal feelings!

And maternal, too, for that matter.

I was angry. Enough of her twisting me round her little finger. If only I had not listened to her opinion that I "would be better off in the Netherlands" at the time and had not returned to Sonny, Lisa would have stayed healthy ...

- I myself will come after her, and you stay at home with the grannies, - I said. - You'll have a little bit of rest from her, too. Grandmas are easier to deal with than Lisa.

- And how are you going to work?

I did not want to tell her about something brewing at my work. And even less so about my pregnancy. That really could have led to such a hue and cry!

- I'll take a holiday. - I said. - I've bought a ticket already...

Meeting Sonny was more terrifying for me than *going to places of military glory* in Holland. For some reason, unknown to me, I continued to fear him: no, not at a distance, but when confronted with him face to face. Perhaps because he perversely refused to understand me, and we talked as if about entirely different things.

There, in the '*husband-proof shelter*', I once begged the social workers for something to read, which, by the way, amazed them a lot, because none of their inmates ever did it, and they brought me, among other books, one, which discussed why so many women were attracted to such macho individuals as Sonny. According to that book, those women tended to leave their home as soon as possible because of parental control and when they met some 'rough macho' and saw how he 'drove everyone around in the tail and mane', as they say in Russia, they were captivated and thought, 'This man will protect me against the world!' - not realizing that after a while it would be exactly themselves who would be driven in the tail and mane...

There is a certain grain of truth in this: I was at first attracted to Sonny because I felt with him as safe as houses, or, as the Russian idiom goes, 'behind the stone wall.' I did not imagine that the 'stone wall' metaphor would be true not only in the positive sense, but in the negative sense as well!

But as to the cause that prompts women to connect their lives with this type, I doubt the conclusions of the author. All my life I have been sure that I had a great relationship with my mother, and I had no reason whatsoever to run away from the parental home. And only six years after my divorce, I first began to suspect that there was a certain element of truth in this too... My mother was a strong personality that, even without knowing it,

could make just anybody toe the line. And I, naturally, wanted to make my own choices in life, even if I was wrong sometimes. But, being a person not very confident by nature, breaking away from her control, I instead came under the wing of a new 'protector.' And that was something I ought not to have done...

Many a thought slipped through my mind the night before his arrival. But the brightest of all for some reason was the memory of how I had lost my wedding ring - in the toilet at the Victoria Bus Station in London, when I and Sonny returned to Holland from Dublin. Any oriental people will tell you that there was some deep symbolism there. Our marriage was doomed from the start. But does it relieve us of responsibility for all the pain that we had done to each other over the years? And most of all - for what happened to Lisa? ...

Kieran offered to be next to me on that day: for moral support. It was noble of him, but knowing Sonny, I was sure that he had better not. Let *the sleeping dog* lie...

I did not have to meet Sonny at the airport: he took a taxi and drove his parents to our town, wind in the hair. It's something at least. And so far, so good.

When they appeared in the doorway of our house, I confess, I had a queer feeling in the pit of my stomach, through the above-mentioned fear. But it was only for a moment. When I saw him the last time: in a Dutch court during our divorce, when Lisa was already sick and stayed in our house in Russia with my mother, and I specifically came back to Holland for the hearing (it was I who had filed for divorce, not Sonny, by the way) - my first thought at the sight of him was, 'Look, how handsome he is!'. I even told that to my solicitor. I probably still loved him then. She just laughed, apparently not sharing my enthusiasm. After the trial, after listening to Sonny's brief, angry remarks through the teeth, she made her verdict:

- He'd just married a wrong person. He needed something simpler. Some hairdresser, for example. And as for you having taken away the girl... Well, excuse me, when a man marries a foreigner, it is one of the factors that must be considered. That one day this could happen. You are not obliged to live all your life now where he wants you to - just because of his wish.

And now, after six years, I expected from myself any kind of reaction, even that it would wake in me something from my past feelings for my ex-spouse - but just not what actually happened. I looked at Sonny: he had not changed, only slightly gained weight - and suddenly I felt a rush of warm feelings of kinship, as if in front of me was my long-missing brother.

I beamed and went over to him. A minute later we talked to each other as relatives who had long not seen each other. We hastened to share news accumulated over six years of separation, recalling our common acquaintances and friends... His parents looked at us with surprise.

They liked it in our town. Except for the weather: even the height of the Irish summer, it, of course, seemed cold to Antilleans. And they asked me quite seriously if they were not

going to be attacked by someone on the street because they were Catholics. I assured them that they were *on the right side of the barricades*.

- Why haven't you brought your wife along with you? – I asked frankly, in a burst of hospitality. Sonny, who had just bragged to me how his wife cooked delicious Chinese dishes, turned gloomy:

- My wife does not like you.

I laughed.

- Sonny, why, your wife does not know me at all! She knows only what you've told her! He had not even thought about his own words, when he said it.

They stayed with us for four days instead of the intended five: on the last day they decided to go to Belfast instead, to do some shopping there. Well, that was the right thing to do, of course... The irony was that they had come specifically to spend time with Lisa, but quickly got bored with her, so that were anxious to slip away! Louisa had not even finished the Antillean hairstyle, which she had undertaken to arrange for Lisa – having done only half of her head. This confirmed to me the correctness of my choice when I had fought for Lisa and had not wished to leave her to them. Whatever would she have grown up into with the people, who were essentially only interested in how she was dressed and wore her hair? No one knows what is worse: physical or emotional disability. I tried to imagine how I would have behaved, if Lisa had lived with her father and his relatives in Holland, and I came to see her. Yes, I would not have left her even for a moment, all the five days! And to hell with shops!

After Sonny and his parents left, he kept phoning me from time to time. During those conversations Lisa was inquired after but little (I would say insultingly little!). He talked mostly of himself and what ailed him (he had long been suffering from sciatica), what was new on the job, etc. Then he suddenly said he soon wanted to return with his family to Curaçao. I was glad for them. And then he suddenly said:

- If you wish, I'll help you find a job there. Move in to us with Lisa...

I opened my mouth in silent amazement. Did he still not leave the idea he once voiced to me during the divorce: 'We will be divorced, but may I still sometimes call on you?' Perhaps because of that I had gone to another country...

No, Sonny, by the words a black joke, '*dead means dead!*'

That was too much for me. So I decided to tell him the truth:

-Thanks, of course, Sonny, but I cannot now just take off like that. I now have other children, and...

He did not let me finish.

- This was to be expected of you, - he snapped, almost like Ippolit to Nadya in the Soviet film *The Irony of Fate, or I Hope You Enjoyed Your Bath*⁵¹¹. - It is so much like you. Although he himself also raised a son in his new family.

⁵¹¹ The Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath! - is a [Soviet comedy-drama](#) directed by [Eldar Ryazanov](#) as a made-for-TV movie (1975). Simultaneously a [screwball comedy](#) and a love story tinged with sadness, the film is traditionally broadcast in Russia and the former Soviet republics and satellite states every [New Year's Day](#)

Sonny hung up the phone and since then ceased all contact with me. He even stopped sending birthday cards for Lisa. However, Señor Arturo and Louisa are still happy to do it every year.

I thought then, Sonny's visit was that highest tenth wave, after which my life was to become a little easier. But I was wrong: the tenth wave of the year was yet to come. And I did not have to wait for long. It hit my shore, already battered by the storms, with the arrival of my mother in Ireland...

...A blunt pain in the chest woke me up. In my sleep, I was panting.

The main thing was, I couldn't even remember the dream I had seen in detail; all that I *could* remember were the words. Sharp and poisonous, like a snake's teeth, they were piercing my consciousness, and I was totally exposed and vulnerable, no matter how hard I tried to bury my head in the pillow and close my ears.

The pain was only getting worse, and there was less and less air with each new insult imprinted in my mind. I remembered the way my Granny used to express this feeling: in my childhood, if I hurt her, she would say that in her heart there appeared a "stone", and so, I tried to do my best to help her get rid of it. I took my toy bucket to bring water, helped my Granny to weed, wash the dishes, and asked her then again and again: "How is the stone now, Granny? Has it become lighter?"

Now, though, nobody would ask me about my "stone" – I had no illusions about it. I was afraid to fall asleep, because each time I drifted away the sharp teeth of poisonous words would sting me again, harder each time, and I could do nothing to escape them, either in the daytime, or even at night...

Strange as it was, the nightmares which gradually were letting go of me that year, returned with Mum's arrival. It seemed one could only welcome this: not all our compatriots living abroad are lucky to have the closest human being on Earth by their side. And this is exactly what Mum used to be for me for all those years. She came to visit me again in October. I decided not to tell her about the changes in my life – and was quite right about it. Yet, something strange was obviously happening to Mum, as I could hardly recognize her.

In my memory I tried to mark the moment when she started to change – and couldn't; probably, when changes started in her life, we all got changed. I remembered what my Mum used to be when I was growing up, how proud I was of her for almost my whole life, and felt bitter...

The head of a big department at a major plant, my Mum was not only a clever and strong woman, but also the most beautiful one in our whole city. I, till the very last moment, thought there existed no such problem my Mum couldn't manage. So, it made it even more difficult for me to understand what was happening to her now.

Mum had recently retired, even though she was still young. In all honesty, I think it was the right thing to do: it would have been too painful for her to watch the plant sold, part by part, unable to somehow influence the situation. It would have meant watching the production stop and the manufactories, fully functional just a little while ago, turn into stores; the new masters of the plant, following the logic of the Grasshopper from La Fontaine's fable, happily said: "That's quite a bit of luck! You don't do anything, and get paid for it!" The new director fully subscribed to this, happily and naively believing that there would be no one to tell him one day: "You worked hard, singing all day? Now you go and dance!"

I remembered one of the heated home discussions between Mum and my "newly-Russian" brother Grisha, looking down in contempt at the "stupid engineers" and "working dogs" who "didn't know how to really make money".

- But for us, you wouldn't even *be* here! You have been feeding - for a second decade already - on what *we* created, but *you* don't create anything *yourselves*! - Mum cut him short, and I totally agreed with her.

Still, I started to notice some strange contradictions in her behavior, and she herself was now less and less recognizable - up to the point that I got to simply fear her.

On the one hand, in her youth Mum liked French perfume, Alain Delon, and was keen on listening to "Voice of America", "Deutsche Welle" and BBC in the evening; she joined the Communist Party, as she once confessed, largely to become the head of the department. On the other hand, today she considered everything Soviet, and even present-day Russian just perfect (even though she would immediately add, that the power in our country belonged to parasites and bastards!); according to her, *all* the people from the West - with no exception! - were real idiots.

Since she came to stay with me, I slowly got to be somewhat ashamed of going out with her; Mum talked to herself, and in the shops she mocked total strangers who spoke the language different from hers (but the one she refused to learn, stating, there was nothing for her to talk about with those local "morons"), and, to even a greater embarrassment of mine, even imitated the neighbours' dogs.

- Bow-wow-wow! - would loudly say this outwardly respectable, still beautiful woman in her late 50s, passing by the fence in reply to a dog barking from the inside...

Another paradox was, she called the locals "pithecanthropus" and "lazy aborigines", a total opposite to our Russian compatriots, so smart, hard-working and educated; yet, when we came to Russia, Mum would take it out on totally innocent and harmless people in the streets, route-taxis and lines, calling them "cattle" and "descendants of serfdom slaves"...

She was, on the one hand, proud that her generation "had created the industry", despised the "wheeler-dealers" for not creating anything with their own hands, and greatly praised hard-working people; on the other hand, she considered herself a descendant of a count in

seventh generation (even though the above-mentioned behavior of hers could hardly be called “aristocratic”!), which placed her at least one step above all the rest. Mum’s favorite phrase, which she regularly repeated three to four times a day, was: “In 1913 the population of Russia was 85 per cent peasant...”, which by default was a clear indication of the roots of today’s Russian people’s servile character; yet, they still, according to her, occupied a higher evolutionary position, compared to the “primitive” English, or Irish...

Mum made a terrible scene on learning about my relations with Kieran, even though I tried to explain her why it happened. At first, she even encouraged Kieran, because he could fix virtually anything at home, and, according to her, “was rather good-looking, unlike all of them here”; he also was of “revolutionary origin” and worked from dawn till dusk without weekends and days off (also a great contrast to “them all here”).

She, however, could not “forgive” Kieran (even though he did not need her forgiveness, because it was not his fault!) that he had no university diploma. I - in vain - tried to make her see that higher education *itself* did not guarantee the real human qualities, worthy of every respect and making people happy; besides, higher education for someone coming from the suppressed community, born in a working ghetto, was almost as unattainable as for Gorky’s Pavel Vlasov. Such people could only be self-educated, which meant no diplomas. I mentioned the Leader as an example, who, even though finished only high school, still was a person of great knowledge and abilities, but it did not impress her.

- *He*, at least, has achieved something in his life; he’s got two houses and publishes books! And this homeless pithecanthropus of yours...

So, to achieve something in life, according to this fervent supporter of communist ideas, meant to have two houses? This is what I could never understand. Mum’s argument, it seemed to me, was totally deprived of any logic. It was like, if I called a black thing black, she would be calling it white, and vice versa. At first, she rejected the idea of my feeling for Oisín (I did not talk about it at length, but once mentioned it to her):

- Such people are all unstable! Better keep away from them!

Now she “blamed” Kieran for not having served a sentence in British prison as long as Oisín:

- Your Oisín is a *real* revolutionary! But that good-for-nothing jerk of yours did not even serve a *decent* sentence!

A “decent” sentence?!

In several months Mum managed to turn our modest, but more or less happy life into real hell. I remembered that before she came, Kieran and I, no matter how hard things might have been, never got hung up about anything and unwound, joking about the most hopeless situations. Actually, it was this trait of his that attracted me so much. Next to him, you felt easy which was as necessary as oxygen if you lived in Northern Ireland. No matter what problems might come up, Kieran never lost heart.

- Don’t worry yourself about it, love, - he used to say. And then we both made a decision

how to manage the trouble. We were even somewhat competing in mean jokes about the situation, and this exchange made us feel easier. We knew that whatever happened we would, sooner or later, overcome everything if not let ourselves panic, because “nobody would give us the deliverance, either God, or the king, or the hero” accordingly.

Mum, unlike us, panicked at the very thought that something was going not the way it should, and at once, without knowing all the facts, started to blame it on those who happened to be next to her. Before I met Kieran, I used to be like that too, and, even though I never noticed that, it made life a lot harder and much more unpleasant. I tried to explain Mum that much in our life depends on how we approach the problems, and how we consider them, but it had no effect.

Soon I was to lose my job, because of mass staff-redundancy at our company, which should not have surprised anyone familiar with the basics of Marxism and the theory of periodical crises in capitalist economy. The hardest thing, though, was that I would not succeed in getting a new job soon, because some time before I got pregnant. So, have I done this on purpose? Or maybe it was the baby’s fault?

Yet, Mum, a former A-only student at the Marxist-Leninist University, blamed the coming loss of job... on me. And then was nagging me tirelessly every day: “You have achieved nothing in life... I used to have great expectations of you, and invested so much in you, but you...”

Still, when I, almost hysterical, but without showing that, asked her, what exactly I should have achieved and did not, Mum got confused. She started to talk of the academic career I might have made in Russia, but went silent when I pointed out to her what happened with my both institutes since, what they had turned into, and how impossible it would be to work there now – at least, for those who still considered the world from Marxist viewpoint.

I also remarked that an academic career in the sphere of Arts in present-day Russia contradicted her own standard of high achievement, namely, “having two homes” (even though for me it never was a real sign of well-being); and, finally, that it was her who literally drew me away as I returned home after several years spent abroad with a firm intention to stay and work in Russia: “You won’t be able to live here, it would be better for you *THERE*.”

But *THERE* there were not as many vacancies in the academic system as in Russia; besides, in that “apartheid” society they were mostly given to “locals”...

Yet, who said that my life was over? Why did she “cast me off” so surely? I was only in my early thirties, and I finally learned to treat – without panicking - any new trial as a new turn in life, that is, not as the end of the world, but as a new beginning. But Mum’s constantly calling me “worthless” killed me completely, destroying the very faith in myself, which was already very hard to keep in a foreign land. And still, no matter how hard I tried to explain it all to Mum, nothing changed...

- It is really sad, but for Mum, it seems that money is all that matters, - I once told Kieran, sharing my grief. – She, of course, would not admit it openly, and instead, start talking of spiritual values - and the local lack of spirituality. But we are happy, so what kind of problem does she see in our life, but the material one? You know, Mum used to work a lot, but she lived well, too; she is used to spending the money without thinking, and she still wants to live the same way. But life has changed, it's different from what she's used to... Nobody earns that much with hard work anymore. She does not want to see it, closes her eyes to it, and runs to the past in her thoughts. In her imagination, she is still living in it; and, when the reality makes her face the fact that it is the *past*, she cannot bear it and attacks anyone next to her, as if it is their fault.

- It's just that your Mum is used to controlling the people and things around her. But now none of those can be under her control anymore, and it makes her wild, - Kieran replied, calmly and reasonably.

Nothing we did could please her. She did not want to learn the local language, but instead, tried to understand what the people were talking about by studying their faces, and was totally sure that everybody was looking down on her, and saying nasty things about her. In fact, the people were busy with their own lives; as for Mum, in our town they respected her and even admired, even though were a little afraid of her as of an “exotic” creature.

- I am NOT an *immigrant*! – she would start at the evening tea (but in fact, nobody ever tried to convince her that she was one). – I have my own country! And what country! Not just this stupid piece of rock with mohair sheep!

It seemed that humiliating “foreigners” in such a way somehow made her own life a trifle easier and more pleasant, even though I, on my part, could never understand what was there so pleasant. In this country, not everything was just up to my liking, and now I had no illusions about the Irish. But negative emotions alone would not change anything in this world, only wreck your own health which should be preserved for things far more important.

I tried to think of the future, about telling those who don't know it and whose brains were being “washed” since their early childhood of our Soviet reality, the many good and kind things there were, but without idealizing and ignoring our faults and failures. I thought of how to rid the country where I lived now of colonialism, and not with some catchy slogans, but with routine, seemingly unimportant work; and how to raise the children so that they wanted, and could change the world...

During our evening kitchen talks Mum got excited and imagined – in colour, and with great many detail – what she would do to Gorbachev and George Bush, if she could get hold of them. Or what Iraqi guerrillas should do. Yet, what I was doing, she thought to be “a waste of time and effort”:

- Is *that* what you're wasting your abilities on?

Still, she could never tell me what I was supposed to, or should be “wasting” them on...

In my mind, I leafed through some vague pictures from my childhood: Mum and her friends arguing in the kitchen about “socialism not coming true”... How can that be, if the very same people were now lamenting it, and calling for it so eagerly?

...Finally, I understood that I would not fall asleep, and went downstairs to the kitchen. It was after 4 in the morning. Mum was not asleep, and, to my surprise, was sitting in the kitchen with a glass of red wine in her hand. She was quietly singing along with the tape-recorder, punching the air with her small fist at every chorus: “When Comrade Stalin sends us to the battle...”

- Mum, what Comrade Stalin? It’s almost five in the morning, - I muttered, pouring myself some water.

Comrade Stalin, now... Yes, people do change... I remember Mum making a scene last year, when I failed to find the Russian radio, because she was so keen on listening to the New Year address of President Putin: “You don’t understand a thing, this is the *voice of the Motherland!*”

- Have you forgotten what day it is today?

- What?

- It is the Day of Rocket Forces and Artillery! My professional holiday! – and Mum started again:

‘Artillerymen, Stalin gave an order...’

- But you could celebrate it in the daytime, not necessarily at night...

- And what do you understand? Your generation’s created nothing. You only live on what *we* have created! – and Mum hit her chest with the fist. – I’m no match for you! We worked so hard...

- Our grandparents worked still harder than you did. And in the late 1980s, when we were still children and could make no decision about the life of the society, *you* wanted some change! Wasn’t it *you* who listened to the BBC, and admired the West? Weren’t Sakharov, Yeltsin and Afanasyev the heroes of *your* generation? Wasn’t Berezovskiy a man of *your* generation? And don’t you now drink in despair, living in the past, instead of regaining control of yourselves and seeing what we can do to change the future? – I asked, without even raising my voice, and regretting doing so at once, for it was a talk leading nowhere.

- It was *you*, not *us*, who left the country! Well, you... *you* are a Cossack blood, took after your father; they never had any patriotism, like real Russians! For you, everywhere is home, you are like stray dogs of no breed!

I heard it all before many times. In all honesty, my generation and Mum’s were equally guilty of what happened to our country. It’s just that she would never admit it. So, the talk took the usual route, the only difference being that yesterday Mum attacked Jews, not the Cossacks, stating at the same time that there was no such thing as “the Russian people”, and that “we are all Jews, if you really dig deep”. Yet, when there was a report

on TV about local Unionists, many of whom really looked Semitic, Mum said: “So you see where they got to! This is because *our Cossacks* drove them away from the country!”

My heart sank again. A clever, educated woman was sitting before me, the one who used to be strong, but was not so anymore, terribly afraid to confess of it even to the closest soul on Earth; she was, instead, attacking me and everyone else, like a small barking Maltese, not to appear to all the passers-by so really small, while thieves were entering her own house from the back door...

I doubt she really understood why she was acting so; I think, she just broke down, unable to carry the burden of what happened to us in the last decade.

- And do you remember how we used to live? No, you cannot remember it! Your generation missed it out. My generation was the happiest, - saying this, Mum dropped her head on the table, and burst out crying - only to jump up after a split second, and start her usual round of poisonous insult addressed to everyone and everything, namely, me, Kieran, the Irish, the English, the Cossacks, the Jews, our neighbours' cats and dogs, masons, village “cattle”, wheeler-dealers, former co-workers and even the future grandchildren...

You could empathize with another's pain, and want to, and should do so, but it's different with another's disillusionment.

- You cannot eat your cake and have it too... - was all I could say.

It was almost dawn outside. A new day was coming, with its own problems, and it was useless to try to escape from them either into the past, or into the self-pity. All you could do was to roll up your sleeves, and start managing them, one by one, without thinking – even for a second! - how difficult it was, as if stubbing, fighting against the deep roots of centuries-old trees...

...Then, those six years ago, I thought that everything was so bad, that could not be worse. That if ‘*after joy comes trouble in their futility, by the theory of probability*,⁵¹²’ then there must be alternation of joy and trouble. The nightmare cannot last forever. And after each stroke of fate, from the abduction of Lisa (the Dutch court may not consider it such, but for me it was and still is kidnapping!) to the divorce hearing, facing the unknown, being through the millstone of child custody, and the emotional blackmail, which Sonny had subjected me to, before he had put us out of the house and we found ourselves in the ‘husband-proof shelter’ - every time I had expected that that was the last stage of our trials, and the storms would finally abate. But every time it turned out that something still worse came up...

When the ambulance took away Lisa and me that fateful September night, I, too, was confident that it was the worst of all possible things. I was absolutely sure that that was the nadir. That within a couple of days in hospital she would be put on her legs and we would return to our Dutch hell-hole and continue to wait for the hearing. I had no idea

⁵¹² Line from a Soviet 1960s song

that that was only a beginning, and from that moment on, Lisa's and my life would never be the same.

In the car, an oxygen mask was put on Lisa. Her face was calm, and her long curls swept the pillow. When we got to the hospital, we were at once taken to the intensive care unit. Lisa spent two days in the intensive care. I did not leave her for a moment and tried to understand by the connected monitors what was happening to her. No one explained to me anything, although everyone was very polite and attentive. They even let me stay with her in the hospital at night and even got me a vacant little room to sleep. By the evening of the first day I came down there with fatigue as though mown down. And Lisa still did not wake up, even after I had woken up several hours later. Her face was tranquil, and she was breathing deeply. They took various tests, but it was not yet clear what had happened to her.

I wrote off the fact of her sleep on the drugs that she had been given. And on the fact that she had not slept all night! Let her rest, poor thing. They told me that, while I was asleep, she had had another attack similar to the first one, and they had added the dose of her drug. They said it, however, in a curt manner as if they actually did not want to let me know. I had not seen myself how it had happened and did not know whether Lisa had gasped again or not.

On the second day a priest came to us for some reason and asked if I was a believer and if I needed his support. I had already enough of all events and sleepless nights and was drowsy, so I did not even realize what he needed. Then a photographer came to us and for some reason took with his polaroid camera a picture of me together with Lisa, her head in my lap. Lisa's head was covered in wires attached to sensors, she was fed through the nose with saline, and from time to time unconsciously tried to snatch the pipe from her mouth. Only later I was told by a nurse that photographers were usually called to children, of whom the doctors thought that they would not survive.

But I still thought that Lisa was about to wake up and we would leave.... well, not home, of course, but still far away from there.

I did not know then that in fact it was not a sleep, but coma.

On the first day I went out on the street for five minutes, rang Mum on my mobile phone and told her about Lisa's illness.

- I do not know what it is, but I think that we won't stay here for long...

I was very afraid that Sonny would know where we were, and almost immediately explained our situation to the doctors. So at first we stayed at that hospital anonymously. Then a compassionate doctor even made up a scheme that our insurance company would not receive the bill via Sonny's address. Lisa passed off under an assumed - Dutch - surname. Juffrouw⁵¹³ Lisa Vos.

But even so the whole first week I looked at the door with fear whenever it was a little ajar.

Lisa woke up in the evening of the second day. When she awoke, she did not recognize anyone and looked about herself with unseeing eyes, which I attributed to the effect of the drugs. I was relieved by the very fact that she woke up!

After that we moved to a normal ward, where there were two or three children, now I cannot remember. With their parents.

⁵¹³ Miss (Dutch)

It was, perhaps, the worst night of my life. Even worse than the one when Lisa got sick. She screamed and screamed all night and tried to jump out of her bed and escape somewhere. Once she even got stuck between the iron bars of her bed. She was repeating a single word: ‘Mama! Mum! Mum!’ – in some low voice, almost a bass, and clutched at her head all the time. It even shot across my mind that Lisa had psychosis owing to what she had gone through that summer without me.

I had never seen anything like that, and, I think, neither had the nurses, because they were lost not less than mine. At midnight we tried to soothe her, but she still screamed. Finally we moved her into a separate cubicle. Then it turned out that it was even for the better, by the way, because Lisa had contracted an infection. Salmonella. Where and how she had picked it up, we never learned. (In the Soviet Union, by the way, we had numerous sanitary and epidemiological stations that would have knocked seven bells out of the ‘husband-proof shelter’, but here nobody cared a damn!) Oh, and before it was finally determined, Lisa had been twice made the spinal cord puncture and I had to hold her fast during it... I thought I was going to faint from this myself.

The next morning, Lisa calmed down. But still continued not to respond to anything, even to my voice. Judging by her eyes, she saw nothing. Her head involuntarily made repetitive jerking movements from side to side, and one of her feet just as involuntarily twitched up and down all the time. I even wanted to put something heavy on it.

You know how terrible it is: when your child, clever, talented, with an ear for music, speaking three languages, suddenly does not respond to her name, looks at you with unseeing eyes, smiles in a dull and meaningless way?

I looked at Lisa, and her pictures taken before the disease – those on the beach in Katwijk where we celebrated her birthday – were rising in my memory. At those pictures she was happy because her Mum was again with her. She was splashing in the sea waves and eating ice cream. In other pictures, taken at one of my friend’s place where we stopped, when Sonny had driven us out of the house, Lisa was posing for me in different outfits and hats belonging to that lady. She looked like a real actress - just hours before we found ourselves in the husband-proof shelter. Lisa was so pretty in those photos that I remember when I saw them it flashed through my mind, "Ah, how nice our girl is! Let no evil eye to be put on her!". Here is the “evil eye” now...

I had never before seen any people with brain damage and I did not know in detail what had happened to Lisa. But the fact that it had somehow suddenly become impossible to communicate with her – that was the worst thing. In my opinion, it is better to live paralyzed but of sound mind and being able to express thoughts. However, she was unable to walk as well.

A few days later Lisa was taken to another floor where the physicians were working with her for a long time; they attached electrodes to her head trying to cause different reactions.

The next day I was summoned to the doctor. No, not to the compassionate one, but to the young and cold-blooded doctor. He invited me to sit down and straight away told me that Lisa’s brain at some stage of the seizures (the first one? the second one?) had been subjected to hypoxia - oxygen starvation, and that this led to the death of cells in the cortex of her brain.

I was listening to him as in a nightmare. For some reason there always had been two things regarding health that I feared the most, and this was one of them. But I did not abandon hope:

- Doctor, she is so young, her brain is still developing

- No, - he said with that idiotic Dutch straightforwardness - these cells will never recover.

- Do you want to say she will always remain the same as now: blind, dumb, and won't be able to walk?

He nodded silently and stared at me steadily, as if he was exploring my reaction with the aim of writing his Ph.D. thesis about it later: "*The emotions of a mother when fatal news regarding her child's health has been reported to her.*" I hated this doctor - not for what he said, but for how he said it, as well as for his shark-like non-blinking gaze.

I was about to burst into tears, but by force of will stopped them at the very last moment when they were already hanging under my eyelids. I should not give him such pleasure!

- We'll see! - I told him without anger, just with a belief in my rightness. Injustice like that simply can't go on in the world! We will fight back!

And guess what? After what had happened to Lisa, all my fears faded away. It became clear what was really horrible in this life and what wasn't worth a brass farthing. Thus I turned into what they call in English "a reckless one" - from a more or less easily scared girl I used to be. I developed into a person gladly willing to take any risk if it was really necessary.

And I also realized that life was so short that we shouldn't put off anything until tomorrow, but have to strive to achieve what we need to do!

Hans woke up late at night because his phone had sounded. There was an SMS message. He jumped up in bed and looked at his watch. 4:00 am! Who does not sleep at this time? And then he remembered everything that happened before ...

Well, that's right: the message was from Yevgenia. "Do not use against me what I've told you about. Please" - he read it and felt her despair.

A few days before yesterday's conversation, she shared with him that she would soon go on maternity leave. Hans became panic-stricken and began to mumble something like, "So you probably would like to have a year's rest?" - At which she was surprised, looked at him as if at some zany, saying: "I can't afford it. I have to take into account my financial situation ..." The paid leave, both before and after in the UK was only about 20 weeks altogether in such cases ...

Naturally, a scared Hans immediately called Mr. Bennett, his boss in England. He had not come across anything like this in his career yet, and wanted to know how things stand with the labor laws in such cases in this country.

At heart Hans hoped that firing her in that situation would be impossible. And there was no other way in a civilized society, he thought. But it turned out that his knowledge of the local legislation was too poor. Mr. Bennett told Hans "to expedite the decision" before Yevgenia would reach the stage where she would be entitled to request paid leave.

Hans's heart sank for a moment, he recollected that the dismissal of a woman in her situation in his home country, as well as in the Soviet Union where she was from, would have been completely impossible. But - "you are here, not there ...", and the point of no return had already been passed ...

So yesterday he finally advised her about the upcoming cutback. He had nothing to blame himself for, since everything had been done correctly. Hans summoned to his office all three of them - Paul, Yevgenia and Ulrika, and although Paul and Ulrika had already known about the decision, they managed to appear indifferent as if they did not suspect anything bad and even as if nothing had been finally decided. Ulrika, however, sat all red as a lobster - and did not look into the Yevgenia's eyes, most of the time avoiding them. Everything was to be done the legal way, so that she wouldn't be able to apply to court against them.

Yet it was not possible to fool her. After the meeting at which Hans had hinted that the position of only one of them was endangered, but they were encouraged to plan (confident of planning?) to preserve it (he did not dare to say more), Yevgenia went to the ladies' room for 10 minutes and came back with red eyes. After he had told all the other agents one by one that "possible changes were suggested" she went up to him and firmly said: "Everything is already decided, isn't it, Hans? Had no decision really been made, you would not tell that to the whole office. Do not fool me. I remember how you once dealt with Jack"

Jack was a guy with a disability, whom it was very difficult to dismiss without being accused of discrimination. But he was annoying all Paul's guys so much just by his existence that the pressure on Hans grew stronger and stronger - and at the end he was forced to dismiss Jack, despite all the desperate attempts of Yevgenia to back him up. Hans himself had forgotten the bad smell of that case long ago - he even began to be proud of how he managed to get rid of Jack without breaking any rules. Jack had nothing to complain about, all the formal requirements had been met, and Mr. Bennett himself praised Hans when it turned out that Jack had nothing to go to the court about against the company.).

"You won't fool me - I know which way the wind blows. Be honest with me, tell me the truth, so I will neither hope in vain, nor be puzzled over the reasons for the need to maintain my position (although I have some suggestions for that) - if everything has been decided without me. Tell me openly; be a man. For the sake of our shared past, tell me - and I will draw the appropriate conclusions myself... I don't blame you, decisions of that kind are always made at a higher level. "

He looked into her eyes which were full of pain, and almost opened his mouth but immediately calmed down. He could not tell her anything: by doing that he would violate the corporate rules and who knows what impact it could make on his own career ... He was entrusted to occupy such an important position and he should always remember that. - Oh, no, what are you talking about, nothing has been decided yet!" - he said in a soft voice, as convincingly as he could.- If this decision had already been made, do you really think I would have any part to play in that? I still have a certain amount of power in this office.

But he saw on her face that he hadn't convinced her.

He said nothing about her night SMS. And on Monday she did not appear in the office due to taking sick leave ...

A month later, Yevgenia's position was cancelled officially.

... Mr. William Bennett shook his head wearily, looking at an e-mail that had just arrived in his mailbox from a European manager of the firm, Luc Van der Bild. Hans was short

of budget again!

Not only Mr. Bennett was seriously concerned about the situation in Belfast call centre. Although Northern Ireland was attractive for investors due to the cheapness of the local staff (they do not have much choice for jobs over there!), although the subsidies and tax deductions were still provided by the British government through inertia (this tradition had started from the Clinton era, when everyone believed that in these wacky wild Irish god-forsaken wilderness a reliable peace had been finally established), yet Mr. Bennett being an experienced manager, felt that the subsidy tap was about to be closed ...And what next? The Belfast agents will keep receiving their 13,000 pounds a year, their local managers including Hans will be making even more, but when you consider how much Hans had recently spent ...

Hans himself reported to him that it was necessary: in order to make sure the staff would have at least an illusion that the management cared for them, they should be allowed to attend various courses to improve their skills and take exams at their employer's expense. Theoretically he was right - but in practice, and they both knew it - to manage their jobs these agents had no need to know more than they had already known. And if they received diplomas as computer engineers they would immediately start looking for highly paid and more interesting work in other companies. So, do we have to pay for that? Of course it is possible to impose limitations: e.g. that an agent should stay on the job for two years after the course taken at the company's expense or to pay back the tuition money . But in practice it would lead to too much effort to get that money off them ... Was it really worth it? The tuition would cost 2000 pounds per agent: while the whole state subsidy for each job placement in this damned land is only 3,500.

William Bennett used to say about his staff as well as about making new job placements: "We have to put bums in the seats." He was a gentleman of indeterminate age, wearing perfect suits and twelve months in the year covered by an artificial tan obtained in a spa, - the one who knows how to talk to people. He had been working for a long time as head of the British branch of the company, and thus he had seen a variety of different things in this world. Getting the news about monthly expenses in Belfast, he winced ... Yes, last year, talking to the bosses of *Invest Northern Ireland*⁵¹⁴, he promised to create forty new jobs for Belfast in a year. But he was getting more and more sceptical about the realism of such a plan. And even the subsidies no longer looked so seductive. Other companies had tried to get as much profit as possible in Belfast: they were obtaining extra funds from the government for being located in the most troubled areas of the city and moreover, in those areas there were the lowest rental prices in industrial estates. This also ensured for them the reputation of being benefactors, offering jobs to the local "*les misérables*"⁵¹⁵. But their company had no need of such publicity: even without it their British sales were rising exponentially the second year in a row. And there are cheaper

⁵¹⁴ Invest Northern Ireland (Invest NI) is [Northern Ireland's regional economic development agency](#). It is an [anon-departmental public body](#) (NDPB) of the [Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment](#) (DETI). According to DETI's website it; "supports business growth and inward investment, promotes innovation, research and development and in-company training, encourages exports and supports local economic development and company start up.

⁵¹⁵ Les Misérables - is an 1862 French novel by author [Victor Hugo](#) that is widely considered one of the greatest novels of the nineteenth century. The title is variously translated from the French as The Miserable, The Wretched, The Poor Ones, The Wretched Poor, or The Victims.

places in the world than Belfast ...

Mr. Bennett opened a glossy brochure from the morning mail about the opportunities open to companies moving their call centres from the UK to India.

"Just think of an Indian agent as educated as his Belfast colleague - often even a more skilful one! - you can pay him just £ 125 per month while he will be working six hours more per week! This is 12% of what is wasted on those Irish guys. Even the Indian accent would perhaps be more pleasant to the British customers than this ugly Belfast pronunciation. " - Mr. Bennett even grimaced while imitating how they speak in Belfast: it was really offensive to his English ears.

"Hindus are responding to calls twice as quickly, and they have hard competition to get hired as an agent!" - he thought with pleasure. "Those ones will never require that we spend money on their professional development. They would be eager just to keep their jobs. Yes, maybe we'll have to pay more to managers, since they will have to be imported: nobody will go to work at the other side of the world for next to nothing. But many managers can be laid off. And we can start to create a model of how it will work already here: in Belfast. "

Hans had already started to lay off the staff there following his instructions. The idea was obligingly offered by Paul (well done, Paul!). "But by the middle of next year, we'll finish with all that mess, and then ..."

Mr. Bennett closed his eyes, dreaming. It is not true that the managers of his caliber do not dream about anything! He dreamed of how he would fly once per season to some warm place like Bombay. And he'll be having a dinner in a good Indian restaurant, instead of shaking in a black taxi through windy and wet Belfast on the way to the airport, reading a sign : "*Tourist shooting season open.* " "How stupid your jokes are, guys!" - he thought almost angrily.

Of course, it's too early to tell Hans yet, it's even doubtful that he should be told anything about it. It is unlikely that there will be a place for him in the new project. Mr. Bennett had disliked that nincompoop. Each time it was possible to cut down the expenses of staff, that German guy with his socialist habits was just rejecting his clear hints which were quite comprehensible to any decent Englishman.

"We need to work on team building. If our guys spent their free time together more often, they would become closer at work too. And I want them to feel at work just like at home, to feel that these positions belong to them, and to take responsibility for them!", Hans was usually saying in such cases, giving Mr. Bennett an estimate of expenses for the next trip to a restaurant or to bowling.

Although grants to Belfast were forthcoming to the bank account of the company, Mr. Bennett signed those estimates frowning. But there should be a limit! In January this Hun brought their whole Belfast gang to England for the weekend - ostensibly to familiarize them with British colleagues and to make their cooperation more personal. It cost the company a lot of money, and who needed to see those Irish folks here! Mr. Bennett was sure that the Hindus would never dare do anything of that kind since they know how to keep their distance (and not just geographically).

In short , Hans wasn't part of his future plans. His young assistant Paul was a completely different case. He had already shown himself at his best. Without him Mr. Bennett would be helpless. In recent months, Paul was regularly calling Mr. Bennett every day, reporting his point of view on what was happening in the Belfast call centre. And the picture was,

to put it mildly, not quite similar to the one Hans was trying to draw for his boss. Mr. Bennett was aware of his affair with Ulrika as well as of her claims. He knew also that the call centre already owed over six months rent for the office, and that nearly a year's bills of many employment agencies which provided consulting and selected personnel, were unpaid. Paul informed him regularly, sending the copies of relevant documents.

Although it's not to be said that Hans was sweeping the troubles under the carpet. When Hans was trying to raise the point about financial matters in conversation, hinting at some financial difficulties in order to ask for extra funds Mr. Bennett looked at him as if the hints were not clear. It was much better to keep stored away all those things he had already known from Paul in order to take this German fool by the throat when he completed his job in the company.

Mr. Bennett had his own well-established opinion about this matter: ones educated under communism can't make good businessmen even if it is their dream. A good example is all that sad mess like in Latin America, which is happening in the Eastern European countries today, when they have been finally given an opportunity to show what they can do. Hans is the same way: he has already demonstrated his poor abilities ... No, if anyone should get the offer to move to India at the expense of the company and to become a boss of the new project there, it will be Paul! You can really trust that kind of person.

Mr. Bennett closed his eyes wearily, inhaling the smoke of an expensive cigar. And reached for the phone:

"Hans? Is that you? How are you doing, mate? Drop into my office on Monday at two o'clock ... What? No, nothing special. It's just that our business has some new perspectives, and I would like to share them with you ..."

... The last time I saw Oisín is when I was already four months pregnant. It was the beginning of the fall, I was wearing a coat, and he noticed nothing. Well, there was not much to notice yet.

By that time I still had not decided that this meeting should be our last one. After all, we still did not belong to ourselves alone, being engaged in our common struggle, so everything too personal had to be eliminated. I could not afford so simply to be angry because of what had happened at Killiney Bay, and I realized it well. I was doing my best to assure myself that I could continue our work with Oisín as if nothing had happened, and that it was better to remain friends with him, rather than not see him at all anymore. Besides, I encouraged myself that now I was not alone: not only Lisa was with me, but also Kieran, and the soon-to-appear baby (I did not know yet that it would be twins). When I would give birth, there would really be no time for stupidities.

This meeting took place on a river bank. I had never been to this place, just passed it by. And now he had arranged with me to see him there.

The river was rapid though narrow, there was a bridge across it. The bridge held a busy urban highway, but here under the bridge everything was quiet. A narrow track was laid in the bush, where some obese Dubliners, overfed by the "Celtic Tiger" were occasionally jogging along the river attempting to lose weight. Peace and harmony were

reigning there, it was unbelievably beautiful all around. But I had given up paying attention to beauty of places of our secret meetings and looking for some hidden messages in that beauty.

At this time I was nervous before the meeting even more than usual. I was hoping to have the strength to go through with it as if nothing had happened between the two of us.

And at first everything was going on fine. I was sincerely pleased to see Oisín, and did not feel any embarrassment talking to him. We exchanged the latest news of the area we were involved with, and set targets for the future. Then we discussed the current situation in Latin America. There were no signs of a storm, and I was relieved to think that I had complete control of myself.

It was Oisín who messed everything up. We were walking slowly along the narrow path along the river bank when he suddenly for no reason said:

- You seem to have become more beautiful ...

And then he was frightened of his own words, and hurried on:

- I think it's best if you and I will remain friends. Good friends, right?

I wish he did not say it. I wish he did not raise this issue at all. It was like a punch to the solar plexus, delivered to a person trying to collect herself after a knockdown.

- Yes, of course – in a soft voice I said, struggling to give a strained smile like in "McDonald's".

And then it was time to say goodbye: the very time when we usually exchanged a kiss. And I saw how he was reaching out to me, and I felt that I was also reaching up to him with all my being, as if attracted by a huge magnet. Almost physically we made ourselves to shrink back from each other when there was already only a minimal neutral zone remaining between our lips.

I threw my eyes up at Oisín with a silent question. But he shook my hand in a hurry instead of a kiss and retreated quickly.

- See you next time! - I heard already from behind the bushes.

Oisín had long gone, a cold wind was blowing, and I was still sitting on the bank of the river on a bench as if I was stuck to it. I did not find the strength to get up and go back. It may be ridiculous, but I was overwhelmed with the greatest happiness: so huge that it seemed like my heart would not have stood up to it, had it lasted for a little longer.

Happiness from just having a chance to see him and talk to him. It was a gossamer and gentle feeling of happiness, like the rays of a spring sun after thirty degrees below zero. And at the same time it was as dangerous as the most pernicious drug, because I wanted to see him and talk to him again and again and again ...

At that moment I realised that my feelings have not gone away and that they probably never would. Even if Oisín offered me "tender friendship"⁵¹⁶ for the umpteenth time. I had to decide if I could manage that. I hesitated for a long time. But crucial to my choice was a change in the local situation which turned the continuation of mine and

⁵¹⁶ Phrase from "Hello, I'm your aunt!" film

Oisín's joint work into a Sisyphean toil⁵¹⁷. If not that, if I could still have been sure that we were helpful to our common struggle (as well as being sure that someone really needed that!) my business meetings with him could have lasted up to this day.

The next time when I had to go to Dublin again to meet Oisín, I was persuading myself for a long time in the morning that my conscience was clear. No longer had I an opportunity to be useful in this case, but telling him that openly - and to give up any chances to see him again! - was beyond my strength. It was better simply to disappear from his life. Letting him at least miss me a little and think about how he was cruel to me. Though it was likely that to Oisín it would have been a too delicate matter to feel. He would just think I had promised more than I could offer, or that he had scared me away by his rejection ...

Never mind, let him think what he wants! Because I know I have done everything I could for our cause. Who can do more, – please, be my guest!

By that time my belly's shape had already begun to resemble a watermelon ripening in the field. Naturally, I did not want Oisín to see me in this state: an additional reason in favor of the choice I had made irrevocably by that moment.

But I also decided I will stop any contacts with Dermot after this.

That's how a sharp turn took place again in my life.

Soon after that my mother went back to Russia: to take care of Grandma and Little Tamara, both of whom were still alive but becoming weaker.

Oisín had disappeared from my life.

And I was back not to living, but just to existing.

In a town where the only talents were the herring gutters ...

I was convincing myself that there has been enough of politics in my life, it was time to settle down and try finally to "live like everyone else." But somewhere in the depths of my soul a song sounded:

"And my enemies sigh with relief,

And my friends say: "You're tired, just leave

It behind". But both make a mistake:

This is a break. "⁵¹⁸

(Continues in part 3, "Willemstad")

⁵¹⁷ Sysiphus (English Sisyphus) was a son of Aeolus, and ruler of Corinth. He was noted for trickery. He was punished in Tartarus by being compelled to roll a stone to the top of a hill. The stone always escaped him near the top and rolled back to the bottom. Also: Sisyphean: endless and unavailing (task)

⁵¹⁸ Song of the Russian singer Igor Talkov