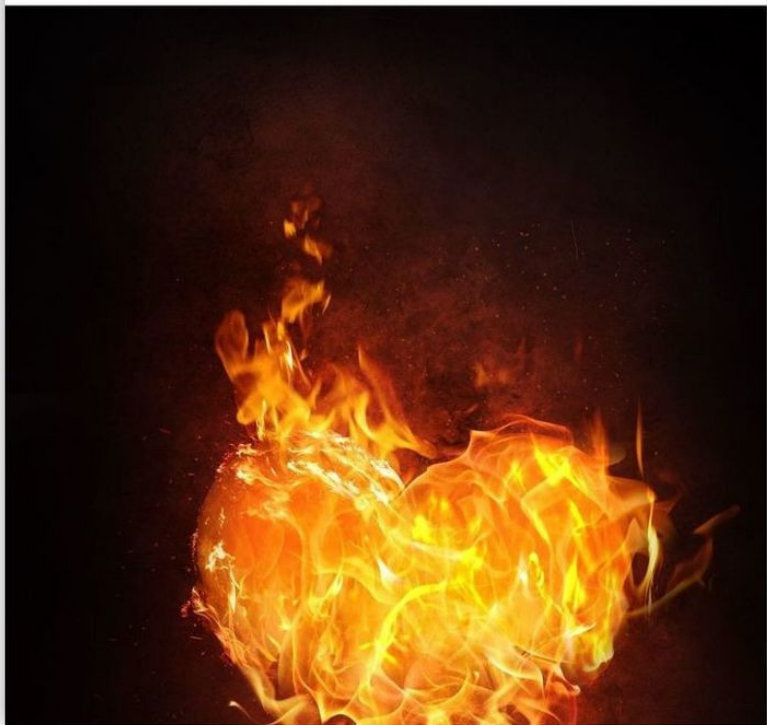


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Valery Osinsky
The Lodger



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http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=54860490

ISBN 9785449875693

Аннотация

A young calculating scoundrel wants to use the landlady of the apartment for his own purposes. He is twenty years old. She is forty-eight years old. But unexpectedly, the young man falls in love with the owner of the apartment. The book tells about the complex relationships of people of different generations, who act contrary to the opinions of their friends and acquaintances. The book became a literary event in Russia. Publishers in France, Bulgaria and China are interested in the book.

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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Valery Osinsky

Editor Mark Bishop

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ISBN 978-5-4498-7569-3

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

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The LODGER

1

When the story opened, my acquaintances hung a new label on my former image of a provincial simpleton: a budding scoundrel. They were struck by the cynicism of a twenty-year-old boy who had swindled an «old woman».

I will begin with the family of my Moscow uncle, mother's younger brother.

My summer visits usually coincided with holiday pilgrimages to the capital of numerous relatives of the Rayevskys (my uncle's last name), so this made life difficult for my uncle's family. I am soft by nature if I am praised. Alas – rarely! And over the years more often irritated uncle with barbed alertness of fatherlessness and straightforwardness of a provincial. The family relationship was confined to amiable: «As a mother»? I remember the midnight arrogant chatter of the Rajevskys, assimilated Muscovites in the first knee, in the kitchen about the cultural and political life of the country, and Aunt Natasha's unchanging advice, Madame forty years old, with false eyelashes and red chignon on the back of her head: «Read the «Rose of the World', you may not read the rest!» My aunt taught at a technical university by her own method, without abstracts: she read the textbook impromptu.

Uncle Kadya is an engineer by training, by post someone's deputy that made his figure odious for his family, considered himself a philosopher. His method of cognition excluded book and other knowledge: they clogged up the firstborn thought. Uncle, in his words, comprehended the truth by an inner sense. Usually he puffed on a cigarette and was barely audible, under the reverence of close, he unbent the monograms of his banal absurdities. Daughters of the Rayevsky, my cousins Fenya and Katya, the round perennial «C» schoolgirls, between the kitchen idle talk and school, respectively, from fourteen and thirteen years, begged in the pubs, gratis cocktails in the elderly impotent, who had money. In general, my relatives are kind and tolerant people. But we lived a different life. And could neither get used to each other.

That summer, on the unfinished veranda of the Rayevsky dacha, in demobilization tunic, hung with shiny trinkets, intoxicating from freedom and kisses accumulated over two years, I am with army straightforwardness stunned uncle – he asked lazily at my plans – «Register me in Moscow!»

What was waiting for me at home? Drinking friends, aging mother (father left us long ago), unemployment. My whole biography: discos, pubs, lustful sixteen-year-old fools, libraries with tedious books on the school curriculum and the boredom of a country town. I did not know yet: people live everywhere, the glitter of the capital is the colorful façade of the tomfoolery, where everyone is for himself, where people getting stupid with

fatigue and loneliness. I dreamed of Moscow, good luck, and did not think to retreat.

Uncle carefully asked: «And what will you do here?» «Do not know!» An oppressive panic pause and an unambiguous hint: «Consult with mom. When you decide, let's talk!» Gray with fright Aunt Natasha hard rubbed her temples. «I have found out at the police station. You won't be able to register me just like that,» I was finishing off relatives. «To go as a cop by a limit – it's five years thrown out of life. Besides, I'll still have to live with you! Not in the dorm same! I spoke with Katya. She is eighteen. We have different surnames. We can marry fictitiously...»

Katya smoked in a rocking chair, independently crossing her legs of horse grace. Her pimply physiognomy of maturing virgin (in the chastity of the sister, however, not sure: the prostitute Oia, girlfriend sisters, lived in the apartment for a long time, and as they say, with whom will lead ...) expressed willingness to enter into a fictitious marriage.

The brilliant idea of marrying a cousin shook relatives. To the orphan delicately explained his delusions. First, incest; secondly, Katya was suspected of dementia from early childhood (often she walked naked around the apartment in the presence of strangers men) and could blurt out, anywhere, anything; and thirdly, there is a surplus of living space, but what the hell did I give up here?

The explanation ended with a scandal. With youthful maximalism, I decided to break with my uncle forever.

In those days, the Raevskys were repairing an apartment.

In a memorable week of family passions, I was settled in one of the countless Moscow apartment blocks to a good friend of the uncle, a woman of retirement or about that age, to Elena Nikolaevna Kurushina. From her in a sullen mood, not expecting anything good from life, I had driven home, firmly intending to return.

2

Chronic disease of megacities – loneliness – each heals in its own way.

At first, Elena Nikolaevna clung to work, then thought out obligations to her Moscow acquaintances, who still remembered her. Kurushina's father once held a post in the government of Prime Minister Podgorny. Behind the glass of the sideboard, bureaucratic jackets around the superior in the group photograph dissolved the illegible countenance of Kurushin. Long ago, in her past, there were university orgies of golden youth, a husband, a tinsel of life. Parents left the money, allowing her not to work. In the first week the hostess told about herself. No sadder than the story of life wasted.

And that is how I remember her: a miniature, dryish one, with a constant downy shawl on the shoulders and piercing, tired, green eyes summed up with a black pencil. She called me «sweet boy», went quietly and easily. She was then forty-eight years old.

Wait, how was it? Summer, a day sheltered by a warm

Moscow sky. Uncle brought me into her tiny apartment with old-fashioned furniture, the woman spread her arms and said indifferently-amiably: «Here, my sweet boy, if you like, stay!»

She had a chest voice, pleasant and quiet. I also remember the lush brown hair laid around the head. In the kitchen, a radio was mumbling, and in the living room a decorative clock in a patterned glass ticked sonorously. I misspoke and called her Anna Fedotovna. The woman raised an eyebrow mockingly, corrected me and added «dear Herman».

Something in me touched her. For a few evenings, as in a train with a nameless companion, whom time would dissolve tomorrow, we got closer.

On the day of departure, the hostess gathered me presents: products, fragrant soap, terry towel – out of nicety, I was refusing to accept. (But accepted!) On the train, I felt sad, just wanted to cry.

But already then, the poisonous sprout of my intention poisoned her and my life.

3

And here I am again in Moscow.

Kurushina set the table. She was wearing a blue flannel dressing gown, bright Chinese hairpins in her hair. She used them in solemn occasions.

I flopped into a chair under a cape, looked around. Nothing

changed. Faience elephants on the sideboard, glass clocks, a sofa under a shaggy cape, flowers in clay pots, books. The woman handled with the plates unhurriedly and deftly. When walking, the hem of her robe revealed her white slender calves. I thought absently: the human body is aging more slowly than the face.

«What are you going to do?»

«I wrote to you...»

«Yes, yes, my friend. Sorry.»

I beautified the letters to her approximately as follows: «... To be Uncle Stepa – for nothing!» and «... it is better to spend the whole life in the Kyrgyz tent than to bow at the construction site for a permanent stamp in the passport.» In a word, I did not suffer from rebellious longing for the parental home. Neither I nor Elena Nikolaevna, we did not meet a man who wanted to break out from Moscow.

Soon I was eagerly eating her «branded» homemade dumplings with broth and black pepper.

«Do you know what I have thought?» suddenly asked Kurushina. She lit a cigarette, leaned on the table and carefully looked at the flame of the dying match in her thin, long fingers, with scarlet, well-groomed nails. «I have acquaintances. They owe my father. One time we were friends. They have a daughter about your age. If you want, I talk to them. Maybe they will agree to arrange your marriage. Live at me for a while. And then we decide...»

Forgetting to chew, I swallowed and scalded the palate.

Looked at the woman. Why did she help me? Wanted to keep me next to her? Upon the whole, this is her matter.

«It will take money,» I agreed, thinking. «I have no so much.»

«My father left family jewels, listed in the catalog. I'll show them to you somehow. Unique collection. You will give the girl something like as your own. When you earn, you will return the money.»

«Are you not afraid that I will deceive you? You do not know me at all!»

«Afraid!» she answered half seriously. «But you want to stay in Moscow? And I hope your uncle will help me deal with you, if anything goes wrong!»

We smiled.

I snuggled up my cheek against Kurushina's hand and she gently smoothed my hair.

But at twenty, I no longer believed in the selflessness of people. To trust a person, one must possess his soul.

4

Before the army, for my uncle's birthday, I was introduced to the family of his college mate. And with their daughter, my age and friend of the sisters.

Nelia was a shy, quiet, slender, sharp-nosed, blond, curly hair, anemic, angular face. She was shy about her appearance. But she had her own judgments and, in my opinion, like me, she barely

tolerated the Raevsky idle talk. Her father – he seems to have owned a sewing workshop – he didn't stint on his daughter. Nelia always dressed well. My sisters were jealous of her, and they were angry when someone started talking about a girl.

Before the army I two or three times invited Nelia in the cafe. In her presence on me as if put on a steel corset, in the head poured sawdust, and tongue was sewed to the palate with boot nails. Shyness seems to have brought us closer. From army, I remember, I wrote it several letters.

In almost two and a half years I have changed: not Casanova, but not «dandelion». So far, as they say the army, I «dragged the service», mother, modest head of the kindergarten, saved up some money and dressed her beloved son in fashionable at the time belongings. Expensive denim suit «Levis», Polaroids glasses, sneakers – real Adidas! – and a gold thread around neck. Even as a high school student, in worn, ankle-length trousers, hated to tears, I caught myself curious glances of girls. But was imagining their disappointment with my shirt, faded from washing, and the school jacket, which were wiped on the sleeves, and rather ran away. Army khaki changes the view of fashion. I always cut my hair short and shaved smoothly. Plus I tanned for two months of beach indulgence in between working as a dishwasher in a resort hotel.

The next day after my arrival, I went to the store where Nelia (according to data from two months ago from the sisters) passed the Institute's practice.

She's grown up, and let's just say: took shape in woman. But her summer freckles, her fragile, bird like feet, hands, fuzz on the forearms and shyness resembled the erstwhile Nelia.

In cafe «Space» on the second floor we with the girl sipped champagne from wine glasses and picked tin spoons ice cream in plastic cups on long legs. Barely smoldering conversation seemed again brought us closer. Scurrying waitresses in starched aprons and branded caps, children indulged at the next table, a dozen students pushed the chairs together and were discharging the stuffiness with bursts of laughter.

I didn't tell Nele about the main thing: about intentions in this city. In those years, the registration in Moscow meant the work to choose, and not on limit, made me «white bone», in my opinion, equal to Muscovites. I was not allowed in the front door of Moscow, forced to Dodge between the hooks of the laws. After the summer trips to my uncle it seemed to me: Muscovites, polite and friendly in the subway or a stone's throw from the store which visitors need, as border guards were repelling the invasion of extraneous in their world. You can make the right connections here, as in any new place, through friends I don't have. My gloomy fantasies would be amazed Nelia. But I was afraid to open my ugly world to her.

I walked the girl home. And asked not to tell the Rayevskys, that I was back.

Her heels tapped loudly under the arch of the house. And I, clasping hands behind my back, thought: neither Nelia, nor the

other girl that Kurushina spoke of, I will not marry. The landlady is the most suitable victim.

5

The case helped me.

One writer has this: in the catechism of the virtues and dignities of modern man, the ability to acquire money, almost the main point. Compatriots same from century in age, not only do not able to acquire, without stealing, but also spend in vain and ugly. However, everyone wants to settle in life. I am no exception. Like many egoists, I am lazy and impatient. I want to get everything effortlessly. And that would not come up with a poor woman, or anyone else, for my benefit, I already subconsciously rejected benefactor's efforts. Is it possible to rely on the whim of a man who suddenly will missed his cozy loneliness, will discerned a wretch in me and will recoiled. No, put someone else's soul at my disposal!

Why do I need Kurasina's kindness? Why do I need her awakened maternal feeling? I don't give a damn about him! I have a native mother. I needed everything she owned. I needed to get caught in this town. After all, wild, boundless power – even over a fly – is also a kind of bliss. Man is a despot by nature and loves to be a tormentor. Would you call that cynicism? Shucks! I'm not going to kill anyone or rob anyone for some stupid idea of universal happiness. It doesn't matter who wants to give

themselves to me. Easy success is my idol. In twenty years, I've had enough of the miserable life of the mother, relatives, friends and the poor honest fools, a hundred-year succession of work, patience, mind, character, firm calculation, stork on the roof!

You know, I love people: soft, pliable material in capable hands! Master the skill of its processing, and your success will amaze everyone!

In twenty – about women I have were the next views!

To like them, you need to grasp a few general rules: no stereotypes of behavior, ability to navigate by circumstances, bolder fantasize, to be witty, assertive and try to offer bullshit nontrivially. Cunning, invent the most outlandish tricks, grovel before a woman! And wasted! If you don't understand the innermost of her. And if you understand: say and do platitudes, and you will be forgiven. It is important to consider whether a woman's heart is busy, a lot depends on the charm, from... There are many wisdoms are known to the person who is looking for! There are no impregnable fortresses, there are untalented warlords. Yes! God forbid you waste your time on dullard. But if you are attracted to women of primitive mind, pander to them: speak easier so that you are understood, not scared of you, and you in fools not remained.

In short, I knew nothing about women.

On word believe me: mentally I'm normal; in any case, I did not turn to a specialist. (Although, this does not mean health!) Those months disgust me and make me feel sorry for the granny.

But even my remorse are too lazy to fight the scoundrel inside of me. However to get to the point.

I reasoned so. It is accepted that pornographic films are mostly watched by men, not women. Even in public, a man leafing through a spicy magazine, and a woman – no: from shyness, from shame, disgust... But every observant person will find at least one reverse example in the behavior of those and other. In ten years old on a crowded beach I saw a middle-aged woman, with a slack belly and a «lifeline» on the sides, covered with a wide-brimmed Panama hat and dark glasses, near the men's locker room, for, as they say, there was no place to fall an apple. She turned to face the bars of the locker room, arranged with half-open blinds, when the cell was occupied by young men. Later I looked at the oblique cut of the boards from her corner and found: the locker room is visible through, which is not noticeable at a distance. In the sauna, an elderly cleaning lady was spying on my friend, a real handsome man with well-developed muscles. He noticed her and laughed: «Let grandma get high!»

And our kindergarten pranks, current aunts and uncles: what were we doing under the covers when the nanny was leaving? Then we matured, civilization varnished our sexual immediacy! Sometimes in bed I asked women: are they shy to look at me? They usually giggled or shrugged their shoulders, and quickly looked under my belly, if I was going up for cigarettes. I think that and in fifteen, and seventy the sex instinct is dormant in a healthy woman. But how deeply it is hidden under morality,

conventions, all that makes people think about sex, but not speak openly, only a woman knows. And only she knows about their secret desires.

Nature has worked hard on my appearance. Believe me without evidence: I'm not going to glue my photo here. In the army and after I kept the regime: performed the hated gymnastics under the pressure gauge of orphan songs «boyish» pop groups, drenching with ice water. Good jokers claimed: if only I'd taken care of my body and decided to shoot for glossy magazines, posters depicting Stallone and Schwarzenegger would be depreciated. In short, I was physically developed, and as they say, though not Marcello Mastroiani, but was able to please women.

At first on «citizen» I was waking up at six in the morning, how many did not swear to sleep off for two years of service. By my rise it was possible to check the clock: quarter to six the eyelids were automatically opened, and the brain continued to sleep. Kurushina also was waking up early.

On the eve we sat for a long time for chess, until two o'clock of the night, thoroughly played enough. The woman slept. The clock was ticking with a ringing in the room. The morning coolness oozed through the open window. In the drowsy silence of the house, the chirping of the sparrows on the windowsill seemed deafening. Cringe with cold, I slammed the window leaf and slipped under the blanket. I sleep completely naked for reasons of hygiene.

The sun warmed the bedroom. I threw back the blanket: I decided lying around and get up. I covered my eyes with the back of my hand and dozed off.

It's been something about an hour. There were footsteps behind the wall. Or I dreamed. Suddenly near the sofa creaked the floor. I cautiously opened my eyelids. The woman stood hesitantly above me. She couldn't see my eyes under my hand. Out of mischief, I changed my mind about pulling on the blanket. I imagined myself through the eyes of Kurushina: lad in sleepy bliss; the sun gilds faded chest hair; the blanket between the thighs, white stripe tan and soft, pliable in sleep male outlines; a flexible hand covers his forehead, and trembling a little. Maybe she wanted to wrap me in a blanket, like a boy. Or maybe the shameless invasion embarrassed her...

I turned around. The doorway gaped of the dawn gloom.

An hour later, I washed and came out to the kitchen for breakfast of melted in the oven sandwiches with cheese. Elena Nikolaevna was smoking at the window.

«Good morning!» she said amiably, and smiled. She smiled only with her lips. A square ashtray of glass had fresh wrinkled cigarette butts in it...

I was afraid to look at her hands and see the pale brown spots of old age on her flaccid skin. But the hand of a woman with a simple gold ring on her ring finger was graceful and flexible.

Something happened that morning. What – I didn't understand.

The same evening, not yet having had time to change after going out into the city, rosy and out of breath, Elena Nikolaevna entered the room where I was sleepily leafing through the book, and said vividly: «They agree! Though, Oksana in Sochi and will return at the end of the month. Her parents will talk to her. Well, let's wait, sweet boy!»

I have stared at Kurushina by sleepily-nightingale glance.

«Ah, these! What should I do for a whole month? Should I look for tsarina's slippers for Oksana?»

Kurushina, offended by sarcasm, shrugged her shoulders and answered dryly: «Take a rest, look the city,» she pulled off her gas scarf and went to her room.

Mechanically caught the eye over her figure, I imagined squeamishly, touching with the lips to her flabby skin, to light yellow used the flesh, smelling sour stuffiness of old body, hugging, probably, bony, dry shoulders under a green synthetic blouse and snuggle to sluggish breast...

And here the imagination began to beat like a bird in a snare and froze.

So, obviously, a pathologist at the morgue with routine discontent washes corpse fat, accidentally caught under a burst rubber glove.

With enviable patience, checking my unexpected discovery, I was installing in a woman a taste for explicit nature. I was sleeping until lunch, or so. To do this I methodically «swallowed» the volumes in their ordinal numbers on spines. If Elena Nikolaevna happened to come to me, the woman invariably found a blanket perfectly crumpled at the feet of a sleepy lodger, on the floor near the sofa a wide pillow for four of my heads and a two-meter baby doll, shamelessly spread out in his sleep. A long, lazy awakening accompanied the negotiations through the all apartment. Finally, hunger has always defeated the basic instinct, I would jump up and dress in front of the open door. A cunning strategist of bed battles! Blithely chatting, I kept a sharp eye on the murky shadow of the hostess on the floor of the corridor from the kitchen. As soon as the shadow ceased to loom from the stove to the table and from the table to the sink, and quickly thickened, I usually dived into swimming trunks, and turning to the door sideways, innocently pulling them on my knees, as if I did not suspect that the woman, looking down, hurriedly slides into her room. (Where she, probably, was fainting from the grandiose tricks of the tomboy: cruel joke!) Young sclerosmatic specially was forgetting in the room on a chair towel, and after a shower, as Apollo Belvedere, for decency hiding behind the door, was asking bring, was holding out the hand and accidentally blinding

a woman with nudity. I promoted shamelessness as the worldview of the modern generation, about which Kurushina knew almost nothing. Diligently teased in her a woman.

My impunity was encouraged by the almost absolute isolation of our coexistence and the age difference of almost thirty years. Of course, I was afraid to be in a stupid position. Who knows what she thought of me? But naked children we're not suspect in bad!

I scolded myself as a nutcase. In the dark, clasping my head, I was remembering my performances the day before, and burned with shame. Every time, I swore to myself, that tomorrow I'd stop getting into mischief. But in the morning, I used to forget my vows and come up with new nudist tricks of launching a major charm attack of granny. Kurushina was accepting my tricks as I presented them: carelessness and nothing more.

In the evenings we yawned at the TV or played chess. I was messing around, clowning, amusing her with stories about my uncle's family, street observations about passers-by. She was nodding reproachfully and repeated: «Is it possible talk about people like that?» But she liked my openness.

I always went to the grocery store myself. Kurushina flatly refused (to my secret relief) to take money from me for accommodation. Sometimes we walked in the near park by the pond.

In one of such evenings she told me how her mother was dying. Somewhere lonely cracked the cicada. Croaked the frogs.

From under unkempt decorative bushes and shaggy chestnuts by muddy-light asphalt track was spreading evening gloom. And I thought: the youth of this woman ended, in essence, not so long ago. If I'd known her before, may be – on my memory. She was loved, kissed. As well leisurely, she was wandering along by the drowsy alley with someone, and they had a good, simply and sweetly-anxiously. I so clearly imagined its living, clean eyes, lush, thick brown hair, smile of her freshly lips, her light, flying gait, crumpled white flowers, flexible, young body, the happiness of her youth, that unwittingly turned around to her clear dark silhouette on the bluish-matte background of the pond. And I have not seen Kurushina's stoop and signs of decrepitude, in which I convinced himself. At that moment, something furry tickled my eyes and chest inside, and I barely overcame desire to hug her. «Folly»! – muttered me, and the vision crumbled. The woman didn't get suspicious of anything. Waving away at haunt mosquitoes, she turned home: «They'll gobble us, sweet buddy!»

But memories of the evening still long were worried about memory, like music, the motive of which is forgotten, but a lonely chord sounds.

In the morning the rain still did not dare to sprinkle the city, dried by the heat. I was sitting in bed lowering in the flip flops of the legs, and pondered how to kill the day.

«Are you up, fireman?» jokingly asked Kurushina, floating into the room door with a plastic watering pot. She squinted at me – am I dressed? – and, accustomed to my frivolous

appearance, she peeled back the tulle curtain to water the flowers on the windowsill. Inventive attaboy stretched herself luxuriously, slowly extricated himself from the blankets and strode to the chair behind things, just as the woman turned. Kurushina petrified, caught herself and impulsively walked up to the flowers on the balcony window.

«Are you dressed up?» asked she dryly over her shoulder.

«Mm-hmm...»

Then she went out without looking at me.

The chills that accompanied the extravagant act replaced shame and self-loathing. I was cleaning the bed, things, for a long time splashing in the shower: I was preparing to play out the scene to the end. I came up with a dozen excuses...

But I blushed after the first its phrase.

«Arthur, I'm a woman,» reproachfully uttered Kurushina and dragged on a cigarette. From the windowsill, her arms crossed over her chest, she looked at the shame of the guest: I'm timely sat on the stool. «You're not being nice. You're not a boy anymore!» I almost fell on the ground floor in shame, but I held on with all my strength. «Don't look at me with innocent eyes, sweet boy. You know exactly what I mean!» Her mouth twitched into a smirk. «I noticed it the first day! (What she noticed – it was obvious to the donkey!) Is that how you act in front of your mother? I don't know, maybe it's customary for you...»

«No, not in front of my mother!» I muttered.

«There is such a disease...»

«No-no!» I buried my flaming face in my hands and exhaled noisily through my nose. And here – epiphany! In me has awakened the actor. «That’s a first time with me. From the first day, as I saw you, I wanted to touch you. I’m talking nonsense, right? But, but...» I swallowed, and rubbing my closed eyelids (what a passage!) quieted the trembling in my voice, «I can’t get rid of the obsession.»

Kurushina turned pale and squinted from a trickle of cigarette smoke.

«Yes,» she coughed. «Let’s forget this conversation, Arthur!»

She understood my desperate shame and paused speaking so I can calm down. But I could not nohow to calm down and spelled insinuatingly: «If you didn’t like my behavior right away, why didn’t you say so on the first day?»

Kurushina frowned, and her cheeks turned pink. But suddenly she silently laughed and embraced her chin by her palm. The lace edge of her nightgown floated out of her sleeve. Just as quickly the woman calmed down, and with the same irony in her eyes looked at the lodger.

«Ladies «man, you’re a real ladies’ man!» she nodded reproachfully. «Eat, the potatoes are cold!» She put out her cigarette and gently shoved my head.

I had a feeling that I was trying to fool myself.

Shameful exposé broke in me a mainspring of evil. From schoolboy unwillingness to acknowledge the superiority of the experience and mind Kurasini on pathetic childish stratagems I continued the farce. Through the force. With a sticky feeling inside. And she kept quiet. And her silence was infuriating me.

I hated everything about her: as she smokes, a cigarette between two fingers of the hand, a palm props up the elbow – such a kind of secular lady from the third entrance; as carefully and slowly she straightens jabot of old-fashioned blouse, made of green silk; paints lips with bright lipstick at the mirror; mannerly tidies up by studs lush hair, wound around the head; was infuriating her somnambulistic gait in a moment of reflections; delicate the paper rustling in the outhouse, at my approach; her cleanliness; the mysterious smile of Mona Lisa; miniature Slippers with POM-poms, that made her walk inaudible; fragile shoulders. I wanted screamed into her powdered face, into her eyes, tinted with cheap pencil: «Old broad! Funny comedic old broad»! I wanted to enjoy the helplessness of a well-bred man in front of the boor. But her femininity, her majestic bearing – seemed to me amazing! Can't remember my girlfriends of the same age having such effortless grace: without any violence to themselves. My imagination was carrying her back thirty years, was enlivening the image of a young girl, the daughter of a major head, careless, easy, unaware of the existence of tens of millions of my kind. Her education was amazing me, an ignoramus. She was reading in the

original Stendhal, Goethe and Steinbeck. Somewhere in the depths of her heart smoldered unfulfilled hopes, experiences. But she was simple and sociable. Where did the stupid, cruel evil of my original conception go! Now every morning I waited for her to Wake up. I forgot the funny tricks of the strip, forgot the city, my ambitions. And hopelessly watched in myself symptoms of sickness, severe, prolonged, poorly treatable.

9

I was meeting with Nelia, because nobody, except the Rayevskys and two or three people in the city didn't know. We with the girl were whiled away the time and that's enough!

Our cultural program is usually was ended in uncrowded bars over coffee with cognac, or we left away to sunbathe in Strogino, where even on weekdays the idle people consoled themselves with warm water of a big muddy puddle.

We were roasting in the sun in the red dust from the energetic trampling of beach volleyball players, among the burnt thighs, assholes, noses, which were pasted scraps of newspapers, colorful exhibition of blankets, bedding and air mattresses. On the beach I was resting from the voracious thoughts.

«Where are you living in Moscow?» asked Nelya.

She propped herself up on her elbow and looked at me over the dark glasses from under the Panama painted like a fly agaric. Her axillary hollow has deepened, and the shoulder straps of her

bathing suit sagged down, and weak chest in the freckles, with swollen pink nipple looked out of her bra shyly. I buried my face in my fingers.

«So... At an acquaintance's house.»

The girl, obviously, also laid down prone. Her voice sounded muffled:

«Dad said you are living at some woman.»

I pricked up my ears.

«He also said she was retired...»

«She doesn't need handouts. Uncle reported?»

«Probably...»

We listened to the maiden squeal for a while: three jokers dragged her to the water.

«Katya told me why you had a fight with your uncle.»

«And what do you think?»

She shrugged and sighed. I felt like I was being x-rayed, and with professional curiosity poked their fingers at the dark spots of black and white picture. It is easy to guess how my relatives found out about my shelter. I grimaced at the thought, as if the dentist's drill had dug into the fabric of my tooth: whether mistress said anything unwanted?

«Isn't it hard for your mother to support you for the third month?» was pestering Nelia to me.

«May be!» I shrugged. I was too lazy to remind about the work in the seaside boarding house.

«My cousin is the third year was not working and not studying

nowhere, and his mother can't inhaled on him...»

«This is a common thing for Moscow. My sisters don't work anywhere either. Thanks for the analogy.»

«Please don't be angry. Just... I don't think you're what they say. And what kind of man you are, I don't know.»

«And I don't know either!» Imagination drew a confidential meeting of old friends, their participation in the boy. I bit my lip. «Why for she did that?»

For the rest of the day, I answered beside the point, and Nelia seemed to regret the beach conversation. At the bar I had too much and trudged behind the girl. I was annoyed by her manner to slow pace on high heels («Yes still with her stilts!» – thought I with drunk angry.), causing the hair on the back of her head were swaying like the mane of a horse, which is slowly climbing up the hill, revealing a thin neck and sharp vertebrae. In addition to pettiness, this evening I found inside me a huge store of spite to Kurashina. I also remember the crimson sunset with storm clouds over the flat roofs and the floating target of the keyhole.

The hostess opened the door, and the tenant tumbled into the hallway. The image was jumping to the right and to the starting point with the frequency of the pulse in the ears.

«Are you drunk?» Kurushina was stunned.

«A little bit!» answered I modestly and staggering hobbled past on the move discarding clothes. «Greetings from uncle»!

«Did you say something?» asked stunned Elena Nikolaevna.

«Did you call uncle?»

Kurushina talked to me like I'm sober. For this reason, she nervously wrapped herself up in a shawl, and replied somewhat arrogantly: «Yeah, I talked to him...»

«Then everything is clear!»

«Clear what?»

«And the fact that he is talking bosh! That I live at your expense and...» I gave a small sob: probably, I really fairly slurped of vodka.

«What a bullshit!» Kurushina perplexedly walked into the room. «Who told you that? Arkady got a call from your mother saying you were in Moscow. You haven't written to her in a month. Arkady was very surprised and called back. I confirmed that you at me».

She was so upset she didn't notice my nudity. I collapsed on the couch naked. I took deep breath: the woman became a silent accomplice of my naturist performances. All the spite and insulting words to her, like a pile of rubble spilled out the window. I was carrying tearful nonsense, was confessing to her in love, try to embrace and stumbling hobbled to the bathroom. She nursed with me, allowed me to molest and laid me on her sofa upon which I collapsed. I was laughing. And she was repeating with joking astonishment: «How awfully you're drunk!»

But alcohol has little effect on my memory. In excitement, I tried to touch her hip, hands, belly as if playing little rough with a girlfriend, and was distracting her by chatter. I was drunk enough to overcome my shame, but sober enough to enjoy the

forced touch of a woman's clothing, sliding palm. I was hugging and pressing her hips (surprisingly firm) to my stomach. At one point the woman did not pull away and for a moment her hand froze on my shoulder, her head drooped, and it seemed to me, Elena Nikolaevna shuddered. But, guessing my tension, almost of ecstasy as she quickly pushed the admirer to the bed. I collapsed on the couch and pulled her along. She rested her fist to my pubic hair, jerked away, looked intently into my eyes. But I pretended to laugh and tried to stretch my lips to her cheek. She was not leaving, she fixing the pillow, padded the blanket, and when I was trying to grab her palm or to hug her waist, sliding by hand over the bottom of her belly, the woman firmly, but not abruptly was pulling away. It seemed that we both play and write off the game on a drunken night out, which tomorrow will forget. And this bliss continued until I fell into a motley starfall.

I lay in the predawn gloom with my eyes open, looking at the flowers on the Wallpaper, protruding in the transparent light of dawn, and timidly remembered the previous fun day. Imagination in vain drew a decrepit old woman, her wrinkled, dry hands, sluggish body. The obsession drove me crazy, but I did not resist the terrible lustful desire – it seemed shameful – to repeat. . .

In the kitchen, I was asking embarrassedly about yesterday's riot, apologized and eagerly caught her gestures, facial expressions, with which she will betray herself. I wanted to kiss those hands that caressed my body without caressing. Kurushina was slowly stirring the spoon in the pot and ironically repeated:

«Has amused himself, has amused!» And both of us were silent about my pranks which perfectly remembered.

10

One of those August evenings in Moscow, when the cramped apartment seemed to turn into a matchbox, and you feel like a caught bug, you want to go free, was fading away.

We were walking in the Park next to the house. Trees carefully hidden the scarlet sunset behind thick crowns, and in crystal silence, on the mirror surface of the pond clearly, the voices of people rolled to every word.

Kurushina asked if I had a girlfriend. I told her about Nelia.

«In vain I'm fooling her head...»

«You mean a fake marriage?» I nodded. «Invite her to us!»

I estimated: on the one hand Nelia will satisfy curiosity, with another – snorted – Elena Nikolaevna will see my «love».

«Good. When?»

«Yes, even tomorrow!»

«Goes. I'll call her.»

Morning was busy: shop, kitchen, cleaning the apartment. Kurushina was preparing in earnest.

«Try to be easier!» I advised. «The girl without complexes, will indulge tea with crackers...»

«So and offer her a choice!» Kurushina joked.

She's transformed! It gave me pleasure to spin in the kitchen,

to beat egg yolks with a mixer in an iron bowl, to perform simple culinary tasks.

«When the father was alive,» Elena Nikolaevna was talking, «we even didn't close doors. We had guests all the time. There was someone in the kitchen, either me or mom. Our housekeeper is aunt Ira... What are you grinning? Bourgeois manners?» she spread her hands, stained with flour, as saying – what can I do – we are like that! – and it amused me. «She taught me many delicious things!»

Where did her languor and measured movements, which I learned by heart, disappear? I suddenly realized: she was always sociable and cheerful, and only Arthur gloomy awarded her in his imagination the affectation, imprisoned her in this apartment. What did I know about her, her surroundings? The tenderness to the hostess did not leave me all the hours that I interfered with her.

We set up a meeting with Nellie After work at the subway entrance.

Kurushina even the night before made elaborate hairstyle using curlers —she did not have time to the hairdresser – and now bustled in the gas kerchief. Before leaving I looked into Elena Nikolaevna's room. The woman was going through some dresses in the wardrobe. This ancient monster was exhaling from the open door, the thick odor of naphthalene.

«What will you wear?» I asked.

«This!» she answered boldly, straightening one of the

antediluvian blouses with a frill and the hem of the mourning skirt. «Or, this!» catching the expression of the pretentious costumier, she showed me a dress-hoodie. I twisted my mouth skeptically.

«This is a friendly tea party, not an official reception. Evening dresses are inappropriate. Permission!» I gently pushed away from the wardrobe door the hostess, who was sitting on a chair, and buried himself in things, which were tightly pressed to each other on the hangers. «Wear something simple. But not washed to holes bathrobe. It's too early for you to wear black headscarfes for crones'.»

«Should I dress like a girl?» Kurushina laughed and tried to push away me from things in the wardrobe. I stopped her.

«None of these things fit! Have you updated anything from your wardrobe over the past year?»

She thought for a moment, and pulled out of things cute beige sweater. A store tag hung on the collar. I mentally paired the sweater and dark straight skirt, and pulled her out of things.

«You're crazy!» Kurushina threw up her hands. «It was worn in the sixties, when I was a little older than you...»

«Fashion returns every twenty years, with each new generation. You have beautiful legs, like girls who are hard to get!»

I slammed the wardrobe shut.

The woman snorted, but took her things, rose from her chair, and began to apply them alternately and examine them

in outstretched hands.

To the subway by bus, then on foot, plus real women are always late and back, took an hour and a half. Nelya, as always before going to an unfamiliar place, was keeping silent. She was getting ready for the meeting. The girl was wearing a denim dress with short sleeves, universal for all occasions, and she looked quite solemn-ordinary with a bouquet of tea roses in a transparent cocoon.

Finally, we came.

At the domestic box office were at one time a popular movies about the transfiguration of the homely female-boss, or the matchmaker from the women's hostel in charming beauties. At the end of the film, they were braughting colleagues, acquaintances and the audience into ecstasy, comparable, perhaps, with the shocks from Izaura or Mexican Marousi (although Latin soap Opera is far from our Russian cinema). The metamorphoses of real life shocked the young cynic (at least, who considered himself such) much more than the reincarnation of Alice Freundlich on the screen.

The door opens, I stumble into the denim back of the companion, a golden-haired lamb obscuring the view, and when the daylight finally painfully breaks narrowed pupils, I'm shocked.

Later, on the street, Nelya remembered not only mistress's bracelet – a gold snake with diamond eyes – and earrings, but added with unusual swagger:

«She was a gorgeous woman when she was young. It's awesome!»

Coming out of the grog state, I caught the subtle scent of perfume and fogs. My heart got worried. Before the charmed couple stood a graceful woman of thirty or barely more, in a beige light sweater, favorably outlined her high chest and slender waist. Straight, just below the knees skirt, beautifully outlined the narrow hips of a stranger. Her tiny feet in patent-leather pointed high-heeled shoes, with leather butterflies perched on them, struck with the proportion of all the fine thoroughbred stately beauty. The woman held the flowers presented to her, as they hold a newborn, gently and tenderly. I know, more picky looks immediately would have dug into her neck, to, as by the teeth of the horse to determine its freshness, with a ruler and a magnifying glass in the pupils began to measure millimeters of powder on the face, counting wrinkles. Let them! I was shocked by the identity of my imagination, which depicted the youth of a woman, and the reality, which crushed the myth of the evil omnipotence of years. Unfathomable! And I did not want to comprehend anything and do not want to.

Her face... Her face? How was I supposed to remember her face, in that enchanted distance, where my heart's memory takes me! The magical glow of her eyes, the light that poured from her soul into mine, blinding every nook and cranny of the magic palace of the fairy. Perhaps from the side solemn view of mistress looked ridiculous in comparison with two gray sparrows-guests

from everyday life. But when the queen invited us to the room, I – enchanted, timidly trudged after the young passion.

Elena Nikolaevna, as well as in the morning, remained herself. But this is the uniqueness of this woman: no effort to be yourself at the top, inaccessible to many, even in the moment of highest tension. If I had dared to suspect two women of rivalry, even her youth, which gave odds to the tricks of experience, would not have saved Nelia in my eyes.

How did she do that? Very simply! She showed mother nature her tongue in the mirror, winked, and remained what nature had made her: perfect.

From inattentively read books and cheesy productions I absorbed the strange idea of small talk: revived mannequins with sugary smiles are exchanged word stamps. And the table chatter of guys of my circle usually ended cuddling with the owner «s urinal.

Kurushina was talking absolutely ordinary, in my opinion, things, but, fascinated by her charm, demure Nelya, an hour told her the story of his life from his childhood to the commercial store of her father and half an hour later the women are about something whispered, on a smoke break in the kitchen.

I hung around after them and felt myself like a nothing.

Who did you want to seduce, to whom thought to steal into the soul, evil excellent student yard universities? I looked at Elena Nikolaevna and laughed at myself evil, maliciously, with mockery. That's when the bastard in me plaintively squeaked,

fluttered and subsided, releasing a poisonous slime.

I already saw the only friend at the bottom of the glass, strong alcohol muddied the mind, but kept the memory. I wish I could forget that night, the month. And would not moaned on the inside soul is so sweet and hurts from the toothed memories.

I've pretty drunk. Then I put Nelia in a taxi and by some miracle returned to the right entrance. The girl's voice drummed into the tightly clogged barrel of my mind: «She is lonely, because the people of her circle to have forgotten her. And such as we she does not understand. She loves you like a son. She talked about you a lot!»

Then I climbed the stairs to the fourth floor and, buried in knees, howled, licking sickly-bitter tears from the corners of mouth. I loved her. And was quite soberly measuring the insurmountable distance between the island and the mainland, which will never connect.

11

I was blowing my nose bitterly on the steps in front of my first love's apartment, crushed by an unnatural feeling: the mother is the same age as my beloved woman. And just a minute ago I saw off a pretty girl. My girlfriend! I saw off the girl indifferent, like yesterday's rainy day. Who else if not she would have laughed evil at a daffy lover.

I barged into the apartment, as in garden of Gethsemane, and

with the courage of the condemned, hobbled upon the kitchen – Calvary.

«I'm leaving!» I turned a cast-iron tongue, and how the bale fell ass-down on a stool.

«Did the girl not like something?» asked woman cautiously, putting down a rag.

How I wanted to hug her waist and with my palms draw a line of her hips! I buried my chin on my chest.

«Conversely...»

The hostess relieved continued rinsing the dishes.

«Have you quarreled?»

«Yes.»

«Sadly. Touching girl. I hope that everything is not so scary, and you...»

«I told her that I love you!»

Kurushina put the last washed saucer in the dryer. She wrung out the rag and wiped her hands, dragging out an already huge pause by all these manipulations. Then she moved the stool and sat next to me. She adjusted my short forelock to one side and leaned her elbows on her clasped knees, looking into my eyes.

«Thank you, my sweet boy...»

«I love you not the way you think!» suddenly almost shouted me in drunken desperation. «I love you, as a man loves a woman! Scoff! Talk sense! It won't help! – I jumped up – the stool crashed to the floor. I wanted to kick you out of your apartment, like an old rag by which no longer wipes up shoes! Do you

understand? You let a scumbag into your house who holds nothing sacred except his vile desires. Well, what, what I found in you that I have not seen in other women!»

I spoke evilly about the hatred of the early days, about the mockeries with which I had insulted her habits, clothes, appearance, and, finally, of my admiration for her.

«Why did this happen to me?» – I groaned. «Well, if I had not seen women! So no! I'm drunk! Tomorrow I will be bitter, but not ashamed, for this evening. How can I be ashamed of the most precious thing I have? I love you, even if I drunk, even if I dead!»

I sat down on the floor and covered my head with my hands.

Kurushina smoked cigarette after cigarette, the muscles of her face sagging, the corners of her lips Curling down like a horseshoe. She seemed to immediately grow old, hunched over, and her nose with a small hump turned red ugly, her eyes faded, and only the clean, cold stones of gold threads in her ears quivered every time the woman flicked the ash.

«I'm glad you told me everything...»

«I don't think so!»

«You probably think me an old fool, with the reflexes of a childless... Sorry, my sweet boy, I've already begun to express in elaborate words as you! I won't lie, I didn't know what you just told me. I like you. And this is not a fable about a rooster and a cuckoo. I do not presume to analyze your merits. Although you might be curious to hear it. You know something about my past. I haven't always lived here...» she thought for

a moment, as if remembering. «You've backed yourself into a corner. You are blinded by the brilliance of my former life. You are blinded by the desire to touch her. Wait! I'm just an ordinary aging woman. I live, as many do, in the present day, and perhaps a little in vain memories. Let's say I liked you, as you put it, as a man. But this is not enough. Didn't you meet just good people? Maybe I'll feel awkward later, but frankness for frankness. If you think that in a woman under fifty, for you – an old woman, dies interest in a multi-faceted life, you are mistaken. I don't get many the guests now. And your appearance is an event for me. Young, handsome! But my youth has passed. Humble ourselves! Don't put us in a hopeless position. This is not worthy of people able to find a compromise. And thank you for your recognition! It's nice to feel a little younger than what you are!» Kurushina smiled conciliatingly.

«Chewed up like for baby. Like – don't like!» I said through my teeth, and asked stubbornly. «So you like me after all?»

«Surely!» there was no irony or coquetry in her tone, her face was tightened to the smallest features again, and her piercing eyes flashed.

«What to do now?» I asked in a deathly voice.

«Go sleep! Tomorrow I go to people who agreed to help us. Their girl has returned the other day.»

I nodded resignedly and sat for a while with my hands dangling from my lap, staring blankly at the floor.

Laying down to sleep, I knew this was only the beginning!

And fell asleep with joy and fear.

12

We tried not to notice the memorable evening loitering between us. But you might as well walk barefoot through spring puddles, suggesting that there are warm, impenetrable boots on your feet.

I sent a dry «notice» to my mother about my health and lied that I had been hired as a handyman. There were a few small bills and coppers left in my leather «bumblebee».

Two days later, Elena Nikolaevna woke me up in the morning and showed a gift to my bride. I lazily drew back from under the covers in the morning coolness of September and, yawning, bent close: Kurushina sat at the table. A golden snake with tiny diamond eyes coiled in a double spiral on the white tablecloth. The magnificent jewelry work was striking in the fineness of the finish of the smallest fused scales and resemblance to some small arboreal original.

«Not sorry to give?»

I picked up the bracelet to get a better look at it.

Kurushina folded her hands into a fist and rested her chin on her shoulder, glancing sideways at the snake. Then she sighed decisively, as if saying goodbye to the bracelet, and straightened.

«Go today, meet them.»

Grayish-blue clouds-lambs had frolic racing with the cold

wind. Future relatives lived near the Paveletsky railway station, in a yellow five-story building with a fractional number and shabby courtyards. I was given the name of an old bathhouse as a reference point. To go to strangers with a recommendation of the groom from a woman to whom I had confessed my love a few days ago – is not this the stupidest grimace of circumstances!

If, climbing the stairs, I doubted whether to give the benefactors the jewelry of a loved one, then outside the apartment, after the visit, I confidently showed a weighty thumb to the fish-peephole of the door.

The bride's daddy, thin, sharp-faced and leggy as a grasshopper, with a slicked-back hair comb after a shower, in training trousers and leather Slippers on his bare feet, was sprawled in a chair, absently kept saying» uh-huh» to his wife, and was picking soundly by his tongue between his teeth. Maman, a perfectly ordinary wife of «grasshopper», in a long robe, in front of the TV turned on, was flipping through the magazine «Moscow». Phlegmatic, moon-faced daughter with black curly hair and red eyelids with big kind eyes, as if serving a sentence. When I entered, the women stared at me as if I were a ferocious rhinoceros in a menagerie, with respect and fear. It seems that the family of «pygmies» was rarely visited by giants over one hundred and sixty centimeters tall.

I sat on the couch under cross-examination of future relatives: who are my parents, circle of hobbies, do I suffer from

indigestion...

After the first answers, they became wary.

«If Elena Nikolaevna's recommendations are enough for you, what is your price for the service?» I cut short the daddy's curiosity.

He shifted in his chair, his wife glared at him, and daughter stared at me.

«I am not going to appear at your place again. All expenses are my matter. The main thing is that you do not change your mind. Otherwise, it will be a pity for the lost time!»

Crimson spots covered dad's face. He seemed to be turning boulders of thought in his head. But I didn't let him pin me down with them.

«Elena Nikolaevna needs your ... „I paused, barely perceptible,“ ... friendly help. There is nothing shameful in reward. Isn't that right?»

Dad frowned. Eh, you have no merchant grasp, grasshopper! There is no luxurious, self-righteous daring in you! Didn't trained to bargain!

Of course, if I were older, I wouldn't risk teasing people who were already scared. But I could not tolerate their condescension to Elena Nikolaevna!

In the hallway, dad coughed into the fist and named the amount. Two thousand rubles, at the then rates for registration of one and a half thousand.

«What have you told them?» Attacked me Elena Nikolaevna,

as soon as I crossed the threshold of her apartment. «Alexey Vladimirovich (didn't even try to remember!) just called me. He's shocked! Says you'll gobble me up in half an hour. He told me not to contact you. He said, «you'll survive...»

«Isn't it?»

Kurushina left abruptly, but returned a minute later with a lit cigarette. Her eyes swelled with tears.

«You put me in an awkward...» She sniffled.

«I haven't placed you anywhere!»

I gave her the conversation in detail.

«Let them chat! Fatherless and a yard boy me! Quite good for nothing! And your friends are trash!»

Kurushina heaved a sigh. She sat down next to me on the sofa, wrapped oneself up in a shawl. Then she snuggling cosily to my shoulder.

«Thank you, my sweet boy! This is the first time I encountering this. Heavy!» And after that. «You'll be lost because of your character! You don't like people!»

I was ready to sit with her forever under the drowsy ticking of the clock. I wanted to kiss her hands, hair, lips. But the fear of breaking the solemnity of the moment, frightening away the happiness, restrained me.

13

Even now I can't say why, besides my youth, Lena liked me. To impress the imagination of an experienced, intelligent

woman was unthinkable to me, a half-illiterate guy. She easily distinguished tiny spots on my conscience. My presumptuous judgments about life, about people were stained by two opposite colors. I read a lot and haphazardly. My hasty conclusions amused her. For example, I despised Turgenev's Rudin. The non-resistance of the intolerant Tolstoy was considered a farce. Dostoevsky, in my opinion, treated his mind damaged by the shooting down by writing gloomy novels. I found modern national literature biased and boring. And imported literature I called the fantasies of the well-fed. But I didn't know her well. Fresh spots of childhood: Hemingway, Remark, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, London and others – they appeared in our country as they were translated, therefore, in personal libraries, everyone had about the same set of books – gave a vague idea of their literature. In my opinion, the captain's daughter Pushkin, could have married Deerslayer Cooper, and they would have whiled away one hundred years of solitude together in Kafka's gloomy castle. I made Elena Nikolaevna laugh to tears with my tasteless puns. Concepts of musical culture swirled in my mind like the purple smoke of heavy rock. In painting I liked three the bears on a candy wrapper...

Spiritual poverty is a bridge to moral poverty. For me, military service divided people into shepherds and a herd: the stronger the whip, the more obedient the wards. I despised poverty: I despised people fed on spiritual food and without a penny, or vice versa. The circle of my acquaintances had neither one nor the other.

Of course, I was sorry for mom and I remembered my childhood friends...

It is unlikely that Elena Nikolaevna was attracted by the spiritual mediocrity of the pink rebel. Kurushina met people more worthy than the provincial Mowgli. Met in the past! But people get attached to Pets! And I was a good pupil, quickly studied, was attentive to her, and could well squeeze out sad memories in her heart. Finally, I made all my mistakes, wanting to please.

If a woman is older than a man by two or three years, this is alarming. Six or ten years is suspicious. The difference of twenty or more years is forgivable, may be Piaf, and then only with a vulgar discount on her husband's cunning calculation. Or forgivable for Julia Roberts, who is just a literary character. Imagine the love of a fifty-year-old woman and a twenty-year-old boy as a harmony of spiritual intimacy and sex? – drivel. But in some African tribes, unequal marriage with a woman's age priority is a cultural tradition that is exotic to European thinking. If, I imagine, you put different-sex, healthy peers in a closed space during their sexual heyday, nine cases out of ten will end predictably, even with the most puritanical imagination. And the story of king Oedipus has its own zest, if you exclude the edifying pathos and do not go too deep into the tradition of Euphrates magicians to marry their mothers.

Elena Nikolaevna and I were being carried towards the fatal whirlpool, and the Golden oar was lying on the bottom

of the boat. The possible gossip of friends and neighbors differed in essence, like reflections of one object in crooked mirrors and frightened Kurushin. And yet my love was gradually undermining her discretion.

A real man does not struggle with love for a woman, he just does not remind you of love if the woman does not want it.

Bathing evening. Kurushina's light short steps rustled from the bathroom into the room.

Before bedtime, I absentmindedly drove languid thoughts between the lines of the same paragraph of the book. Outside the window, the autumn rain was sad.

The splash of shower water, the tapping of shampoo and gel jars on the glass stand. My imagination envied the soap suds and the elastic jets of liquid that caressed her body. It seemed that I knew her by heart, to the touch of an unforgettable drunken evening.

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