

Натиг Расулзаде

Suicide notes



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«PEN-клуб»

Расулзаде Н.

Suicide notes / Н. Расулзаде — «PEN-клуб»,

Роман в криминальном жанре о молодом человеке, сражавшимся в Афганистане и ставшим калекой вследствие полученного ранения. Теперь, вернувшись на родину, он вынужден ступить на преступный путь, чтобы прокормить и лечить больную мать, и в финале боссы наркомафии его уничтожают.

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Natig Rasulzade

Suicide notes

Novel

I'm twenty five, I've been to war, and over three years ago now, at the end of 1981 I got back from Afghanistan, I still had nine months until full demob, I got blown up by a mine and lost an arm, actually it wasn't me but a fellow next to me in the chain, we walked in a chain, we were moving towards an afghan village and this place, we had known it before, wasn't mined, this mine that blew up my friend was accidental, some bastard fixed it there, just in case, for some plonker, and there you are – my friend stepped on it and flew into the air before my eyes, myself being thrown away by the blast, I fell immediately, feeling a cutting pain in my elbow and before passing out managed to raise my head and see how, a few paces away, in a cloud of dust and rocks, were quietly (I went deaf from the blast) falling down to earth human entrails of indistinguishable colour. We hadn't expected a mine here, how on earth had he managed to step on that stinker, did himself in as well as mutilating me, well whatever, it's in the past now... I hadn't really been close to him, not like we had squabbled or something, it just happens like this – we simply hadn't got on well together from the beginning and later on didn't get any closer; the guy as I knew him hadn't been much... well he had been a bit of a coward, though it's not very nice to say this kind of thing about the deceased, still nice or not but it's true, quite a few had noticed this in our division. He hadn't really been trying to be a hero, liked to stay put, sit snug quietly in a safe place, but Afghanistan is not really an amusement park, you won't sit snug for too long, war is war, and we all were afraid, afraid of getting killed, getting crippled, well becoming invalids because we all knew just too well that if you become an invalid here in Afghan and go back home, that's it, that's the end for you, nobody would bother to take care of you, won't even notice you, as if you didn't even exist, just like the war in Afghanistan didn't exist. A simple pension will take all your remaining strength to get it from the state, and in the end all that would drive you crazy. For heroes, obviously, it's a bit easier, but they're tight on heroes – it's not like mushrooms growing after the rain, there's not enough medals for all of us, though if it was up to me, I would give medals to all the guys who served here with dignity, honestly, because even that is not easy here – to serve with dignity, without fear and cowardice. I for example, tell you the truth, was scared every minute, because in my thoughts I always was at home, and at home, in Baku, I left behind my mother, my father had passed away just recently but I hadn't been able to go to his funeral, I was in hospital. I also have a brother but he'd been living apart from us for a long time. He lives in Saratov, stayed there after the army, got married and now has his own family, kids and work. He's much older than me, now he's over forty and has been living his own life for a long time and almost forgot our mom. Mom doesn't have anyone else apart from the two of us. Who would take care of her should something happen to me? So I was afraid, how wouldn't you be afraid of getting killed or wounded at war? That's it. If something happens to me, how would mom survive on her own? On the pension that she would receive for me even a cat couldn't survive nowadays. She is old and sick, she's got to eat and drink, right? Alright, suppose she'll be eating little, buying cheap foodstuffs, living without fruit and vegetables, but still she needs medication, she constantly has to receive treatment for her diabetes, treat her goitre, treat all her health problems, problems that any elderly person has, and medication – go and try to find it and even if you do our pharmacists – sons of bitches-will rip off such a price from you that you wouldn't want to live. My older brother, Akram, he doesn't help mother and almost completely forgot about her, at least before, he would seldom send some money to her, but now he has three children and all of them are at an age when they want fancy, fashionable clothes and that kind of stuff, his wife Lyusa also doesn't get along well with mom cause mom was against their marriage, she wanted Akram to marry an Azerbaijani girl here in Baku, so Lyusa always

kept this in mind and since then did everything to distance Akram from us, though again how can he help mother anyway, they're not really rolling in money over there, no way, hardly make ends meet, no joke – three kids, feed them, clothe them, provide for them, anyway... That's why I was afraid that I might die there in Afghanistan, then my mother would be in a very difficult situation, because she doesn't even receive the state pension, hadn't made it to pension age – fell ill, and now they are only trying to figure out whether she is entitled to a pension and if so to how much... And there you are, as ill luck would have it, a splinter whacked my arm, got into my elbow, that splinter smashed my whole elbow so badly that the moment the doctor at hospital saw it he had no doubts that only amputation could do here, so they amputated it, and now I'm without my left arm below the elbow. What I feared the most happened – I became an invalid. Before Afghan I worked in a factory, after school tried to enter university, didn't pass of course, just had a wish to go to university because almost all kids in our class were from well – off families and everybody was always saying that after school they would definitely go to university so I too decided not to be lagging behind, even though I had been warned: prepare some good dough or at least have some strong pull, I obviously had neither, and to be honest my knowledge after school was such that it wouldn't be difficult to fail me on the exam, but I could pass, well they give some students an A mark instead of D, so why not give me a C mark instead of C, well no – they failed me; screw them anyway and I went to the factory, that's called ***– the cobbler should stick to his last, so I would sweat my guts out in the factory until I was called up for the army and sent to Afghan; meaning that before I was standing by a machine on the factory making not bad money and now where would I go without an arm, who needs me like this, whatever... As to our friend, well the one that got blown up on a mine, his name was Vitya, for exploding on an accidental mine and exploding me along the way he was made a hero posthumously, well maybe this is right?... I'm probably expressing my thoughts in a very confusing, muddled way, writing incoherently, but at school I was very good at literature, basically liked this subject, did a lot of reading, so I thought it wouldn't be such a bad idea to start something like writings or notes about my life, most obsessively this thought was visiting me after Afghan where I, it seems, had seen everything, but almost immediately on my return, I didn't even have time to rest properly, I got a sentence, had to do time, and after prison decided to describe everything because I felt that loads of various crap had accumulated in me, I was filled with anger – enough anger for a platoon of soldiers, after what I had to go through I was angry against the whole world: so I thought let me start writing may be it will ease me up a bit, I would feel better. At the same time I met a girl, something turned around inside me, now I had a strong urge to share my feelings with someone, and there was no one there for me to do so, to pour my heart out to: I had no friends left after school, nor had I made any new ones, I had nobody to open my soul to, which sometimes I so desperately needed: so I started writing, as well, I decided to remember and bring up all that happened in the past, prior to my meeting that girl; besides, I had always been sure that when you write, it becomes somehow easier, as if you got rid of some rubbish stuck to your soul, moved it on paper and whatever bad stuff that had happened to you goes away a bit and you can look at it differently, through the eyes of some other person; I had come across this thought in other writers' works, certainly I read it somewhere, in some book, and believed it very much, so I decided to write down for myself everything that had happened and would happen to me, jot it all down in this notebook, which now I carry with me in my pocket all the time, never part with it, writing down various things where and when I can. I write and it is like I spoke to a close and kind person, shared with him something that was depressing me, and I felt better. Even though, probably, all notes are written with a secret hope that they will be read by someone someday. Well, I don't know... So, I had my arm cut off at hospital, was lying unconscious, came back to from pain, nearly howled, the damned arm did burn, though it's not there anymore but it ached so much as if it was still there, and it was so unbearable that in the end I couldn't take it anymore, I gritted and gritted my teeth and then thought – no, damn I can't take it, I will scream, so I started screaming. A nurse came running, then left and came back with the doctor, he examined the

stump, gave her a nod, she gave me an injection and the pain left a little. I fell asleep, slept like a log and when I woke the pain was weaker, you could bear it and I didn't complain. Very soon the pain left and my stump was healing up fast, good. From my early childhood all my wounds were healing fast, the doctor was happy that I was getting well, nurses joked with me, everyone was happy, only I was angry and always sombre, nothing gladdened me, the arm was gone, what's so good about it? Where would I go now? What did I need this stump for? Only to stick it up that bastard who sent us into this mess... Sometimes I thought about Akram, about mom I thought all the time, yes, but about Akram seldom, and once I thought how lucky he had been that he had served in the army before these Afghan events started. Otherwise they would have definitely taken him, he could have been killed or mutilated like me, they definitely would have taken him because our family was rather hard up, and we didn't have anything to pay off to free him from the army. I'm not joking, people did pay for their kids, and instead of some boy from a rich, well connected family they would take someone else and send him to war in Afghanistan. I served with one chap like this myself. He came from the same city as me, and once he told me that first he had been told he would be serving in Kazakhstan only to, so to say, be notified the very last day that he was being sent to Afghanistan. He was a shrewd chap and later found out that the guy whose place he had taken simply had been paid off for. And there are plenty of similar incidents, otherwise how would one explain that as long as I fought there I had never come across say one son of a minister, or deputy minister, or Central Committee person, or council of ministers, or at least a son of some big boss among our soldiers in Afghan, I met none of that kind. Whoever you asked – their fathers were workers, kolkhoz peasants, miners and so on, none of them was the offspring of some big wheel parents. How come? What happened? What, high – ranking people do not have sons? Of course they have, it's just what would they do there under the bullets? Being thrown into the air like poor sod Vitya? Blown into bits? Wounded, and falling in to ravines under pressing fire? Being taken prisoner and asked for ransom, and in the event of inability to pay being tortured, burned, cut, humiliated and at last, after defiling with excrements a hardly breathing body, have their heads cut off? What did they have to do on this alien land when there were more than enough guys like me? They'd be better off pawing girls at their institute lectures, smoking fancy cigarettes, and taking hundreds of rubles for pocket money from their parents. Well, what can you say... Of course what would they be doing here, what had they lost on this foreign land? And what have we lost on this foreign land? Or is it foreign for some and not so much for the others, it turns out that it's not so foreign for the ones like me? What have tens of guys that were killed under fire in front of my eyes in a little more than a year lost in Afghan? What have I lost in Afghan? Now I can give a definite answer to this question – my arm, yes and also the faith in the wisdom of our leaders, not that this faith was very strong before, but still... In hospital, I remember, one bed across from me there was young lieutenant. He had both his legs amputated – they had been torn apart by a shell, or rather shell splinters got him. His legs were so much stuffed with those splinters that there was no bone left intact, therefore keeping his legs was not possible. A young guy, a bit older than me. We spoke a few times, even though he wasn't very talkative, you wouldn't want to talk much in such a condition. He once told me that he had never wanted to be a soldier, but in their family they insisted on it because all men in their family had been in the military, his grandfather and his father, but he himself always dreamt of becoming an actor, and he was a handsome guy too, that you could say, with such an inspired face. His father still serves, and it was him who insisted on the military career of his son. The guy didn't like being a soldier, but still he had studied and got his lieutenant stripes and a ticket to Afghanistan, with his father's blessing to boot. And that's how it turned out. The man became a disabled invalid. Once I was woken up at night by a strange mumbling over my head. I turned around quietly and saw on the windowsill, a couple of steps away from me, the legless lieutenant sitting on the windowsill and quietly whispering something. Automatically, not yet understanding what's going on, I started listening... The bedside table, I recollect, was by the windowsill... He must have moved it from the bed to the window and climbed on the bedside table and from it onto the window... So

he's sitting on the windowsill, whispering something as if praying, sort of monotonously, like a man who hasn't got enough spirit to read properly, just waves his hand with his index finger pointed like someone telling off a misbehaving child. So I listened up. "Your mother this and that, and I wish bad luck to you, and your half – witted father, him decorated with orders, and all your orders, and your mother, and all your decorations, and all your stinking lives in this world" – was he saying in foul language wildly gritting his teeth. That's roughly what I heard and at first didn't understand anything but then it struck me – the window is open, he's sitting on the windowsill in front of the open window! I involuntarily yelled, he was startled and looked at me, said something through his clenched teeth, turned around on his hands, quickly leaned back, and that moment the windowsill became empty. I shouted, louder now, calling for the nurse on duty. My weird, animal kind of scream woke everybody up and I, it seems, kept screaming for some time, with my hand pointed to the window. I went to the window, the nurse was already in the room, lights came back on, I glanced outside – the lieutenant was lying down there in his underwear that completely covered the stumps of his legs. He lay there with his head somehow unnaturally popped out, his arms stretched... Our hospital was in Kabul, the ward – on the fourth floor, the top one, and the lad hit, probably how he had anticipated, the ground with his head down. When we rushed downstairs I approached him and clearly saw how his head had been smashed, the skull was cracked open and some darkish matter was appearing inside in the gap. One eye had dropped out and was lying on the lieutenant's collar bone. The eye socket was dead, scary, and creepy for me because I clearly remembered these lively, moving and full of sorrow, light – blue eyes of this young guy. What only recently was so alive and now dead seems doubly dead and somewhat sinister like death itself. The body was immediately covered with a bed linen. Well, thanks for that. He left behind a wife and a little girl. A day after this incident I got checked out of hospital.

And having checked out of hospital, without an arm I went straight home, still having ten months to go until full demobilization. In some sense, it comes out, I was lucky. Well, every cloud has a silver lining, so to say, even without one arm but I'm still alive and coming back home on my feet and not in a zinc coffin. So I went to Baku, my home, where else would I go? I thought let's make mom happy with my stump. She was happy of course, with arm or without; at least her son was back home alive. She roughly knew what was going on there where I had just come back from, I had written to her, though in the letters I tried not tell the whole truth about it, so that she wouldn't have worried too much. I never described that war in dismal colours, never wrote about any dangers, well not the whole truth, in other words like our media covers these events – they probably also don't want to disturb the public with some petty issues, like me not wanting to disturb my mom. She clung to me, hugged me, wouldn't let go for sometime, literally shed tears on my stump. "Thank you for coming back alive sonny, – she said through her tears – so many families in Baku have lost their sons there, I trembled with fear every day, thought... thank God you're back alive... Thank you." "Thank me?! What are you thanking me for? – I said, – say thank you to the party and the government for my coming back alive. *The winter has gone and summer's here, we thank our party for this beautiful year.* Something like this." "Oh", – mom gave me a faint smile and slapped me on the back, – even after having been to war you haven't become more serious." "Never mind – said mom – we'll survive, now that you're back we'll survive. Just don't say things like that, be careful, for a hasty word you can pay with your youth." That fear of the old times repressions still lives in mother. "Well – I said – don't you worry about paying for it, we paid for it a long time ago, I have become disabled at my age, let's see now how they pay us back." And as if I knew it about this payment. I was entitled to a pension as a disabled war veteran, but I nearly dropped dead while I was trying to get it. It's disgusting to even remember how many thresholds I had to haunt, references to get, applications to write, decorations to show, sort of, here they are, everything is in order, all by the rule, not only our wise leader has them, I also have them, don't you worry, and my stump is also real, dear comrades from the military medical commission, not a fake, you can touch it if you like... Eventually I got so disgusted by all this stuff that I wanted to scream, to get a knife and stab all these bastards from whom this miserable pension

of mine depended, or stab myself like some Japanese samurai, with a hope that for the rest of their lives they will be conscience stricken... Then I went to my factory, even though I knew in advance that it would not do any good. And so it happened. Some bastard in the personnel department – with a well fed mug – declared at the end of our conversation that, well, I didn't send you to that war and you can't have any grudges against me because we can take you back at the factory – and then this bastard smirks like all them bastards smirk – only if your hand grows back again. He didn't manage to hold himself and chuckled at his own wit. Yes – I said and felt that my kettle was boiling over, a bit more and I'll explode and then won't be able to say anything at all, I barely held myself because I had left my last nerves in Afghan, became a real psycho. Yes – I said – it wasn't you shit face sent me to Afghan, but I fought there and risked to get killed there every minute only so you here with your other bastards could grow fat cheeks and backsides, so you here could rip off dough from young guys for their employment, you dirty scum, and then pay off for your bastard son skipping his army service, and avoiding going to war. So that you on the money of workmen like me, money that you suck from them like a leech, making up various reasons, you could on that money fix your bastards in institutes, buy them cars and leather coats. I told him roughly like that, in the end I couldn't hold on and yelled at him. He stared at me, flushed with anger, eyes bulging out, he hadn't faced such dumbfounding impudence for a long time, in short he looked as if he would kick off right now, which would be very appropriate from my point of view. But I'm all wound up, on the edge, I couldn't just leave slamming the door behind me – not enough, that's for the refined. I was ready to kill him for mocking at my battlefield wound. So I grabbed the first thing I got my hand on – pity it was a light plastic stationery kit – and hurled it at his red bald spot. Take this! – I said *** your mother...! And I stepped out. I didn't hear a sound behind my back, that scum was probably still in shock. Well, obviously with my character (though, if you think of it, what did my character have to do with it, people have to be provided with work regardless of their bad or good characters but here it's different and everyone considers it normal) afterwards I didn't find any other work except as a night watchman. Eventually I began receiving the pension, an unexpected miracle, I by the way thought that everyone had forgotten about my existence. So the pension plus wages as a night watchman at a construction site, overall: five or six trips to the market. In one word, if you don't spend anything on clothing and medical treatment or do this very seldom – the money was just enough for food. But I was young, and still am young now, though I'm disabled, sometimes I forgot about it. Honestly, I wanted to dress well, wanted girls falling in love with me, or at least have money for hookers, who in our city you couldn't even come close to if you had less than a fifty in your pocket. I wanted us to have plenty of everything and first of all wanted that mom was in no need of anything, because she unlike me needed only the necessary things. What kind of a son I am if she wouldn't have the very necessary things? That's why I constantly thought about money, thought where to get, earn more money, what I could do, fix something. So one night I sat in my booth, looking after some dog shit which in our building site was more common than any construction materials, I sat looking at my stump, smoking my favourite “Prima”, because I started to love what I could have; I sat thinking my sad thoughts: how could I start living normally, like a normal person. On my arrival from Afghanistan I tried to enter the institute again, but it was more like trying my luck, I understood that I had lost my last knowledge at war but thought that like a war veteran I would get some discount. But regardless of my veteran benefits, they cut me down like a rabbit. And now before the new attempt to become a student and eventually an engineer I had a whole year ahead. A whole year of expectations and loads of unrealized opportunities to become a human being without a higher education. So I sat there thinking about all this stuff and heard some steps. I looked out of the booth and saw one absolutely plastered guy staggering towards me. I met him and said – what are you wandering about the building site for? Either you've got no better place for a night walk, or you're trying to steal something? If you've come for stealing, I'll knock you down stiff in a second, because it is my job here to protect our precious and not yet dragged away socialist property. He looked at me with his cloudy eyes, he

was drunk but my refined wit at such late hour surprised him. He flapped his eye lashes, suddenly hiccupped, smiled and moved to me trying to hug and kiss me. So I easily, to keep him on his feet, shoved him off with my hand, which even though it is in the singular is, thank God, healthy, and persistently repeated the question. He mumbled something, nodded benevolently, went in his pocket and pulled out – my God! – a wad of fifties. He took one note from the bundle and pushed it to me and put the bundle back in his pocket, pity not the other way around. Champagne – he mumbled, stammering, stumbling over his words so I could hardly make out what he wanted. “Champagne, – he said, – and be quick.” “Shoot off to Kubinka and back, – he continued, – quickly.” Kubinka – our soviet black market in Baku where you could buy anything anytime was quite far away from the site. “Get a taxi, – he said in the end.” I stood there like fool with the green note in my hand, and he was already walking back. That moment I woke up and rushed after him. I reached him when he was entering through the back door – it must have led to the kitchen – of the glass – fronted café which was across the road from our building site. This café, they said, was about to be demolished due to the new construction of a multi – storey building nearby, but it was still standing there, all shabby, covered with dust from the pile of cement and sand at the building site. Our builders lunched there during the day for a ruble or two. So I went into this glass café after him. Called him, shouted a couple of times but he probably hadn’t heard me or paid attention, so I went after him through a rotten, stinking corridor and entered an inconspicuous little door after this jolly fellow. I entered and froze still. There was enough to make you dumbfounded! Brightly lit, spacious restaurant suite, at the table a drunk bunch of eight – ten people, table – my eyes hurt by the splendour – what you wouldn’t have there (later I was recalling, figured out – there wasn’t champagne on the table), chicks sat at the table, in front of each an open Marlboro pack. They giggle, squeal, kiss each other, and behind that door when I had been going after that drunk dickhead everything was quiet, dead kingdom. The door it turned out was soundproof. They stared at me, then at that chum who gave me the money. He already managed to cuddle up on the lap of one of the girls. “What is it? – that psycho said, fluttering his uncomprehending eyes at me.” I handed him his money back. He began, how he could, explaining to this crowd that he had been sending me to Kubinka after champagne. This news made them rejoice, they were all heavily drunk and were slow to grasp anything, so they also started giving me money. Well, I thought, if I start explaining anything to them – it will take till the morning, to hell with you, I’ll go, drink as much as you like. I thought why not, let’s have a free ride once in a lifetime at the expense of these nutters, and if some madman in my absence decides to clean the building site of the dog crap, I hope they choke on it! In short, I went to Kubinka and brought them three bottles of champagne, a box of American cigarettes and put it all on the table along with the change. When I turned around to leave, they clutched at my trousers and wouldn’t let go. They were laughing, looking at the crumpled notes on the table, you see, they were very amused by the fact that I returned them their change and they sat me at their table. I didn’t pose, drank with them, I was hungry too, and the food was top class. They were served by the chef of this stinking joint, turns out it was stinking for some and fragrant for others. And he served them at VIP standards so I understood that these are most likely big shots here, or at least wealthy people. Early in the morning the feast finished. Everybody left and my psycho asked me to take him home. “Do you remember the address? – I asked him.” “Sure, – he replied with a self – satisfied smile.” I had enough time till my boss would appear and I, supporting this fellow, flagged down a car and went with him. At his place I paid the taxi with my own money because I hadn’t taken the change from the table, woke him up and helped him to get to the third floor, or rather dragged him on my back. The flat astonished me much more than that luxurious night feast around the building site. I had only seen something like that in museums, and even that didn’t happen often. The flat was rich; it’s difficult for me to describe it. There were moulded golden cupids on the ceiling, splendid furniture, a video recorder, (I had only heard that they existed) great tableware, about a thousand rubles worth, one – hundred – and – fifty – ruble lighters on the coffee table, in short – you would be dazzled only by spending too much time in a flat like this.

So I decided not to wait for this visual effect, especially because Osman – that’s how his friends called him, I remembered – dropped on the sofa and was already snoring. I left quietly closing the door behind me. That’s how I met Nagiyev, it’s Osman’s surname – for some reason he didn’t like being called by his first name. About two days later, in the evening as I started my shift, Nagiyev suddenly pulled in with his new “Lada”. He came to me and without any other words just said that he needed me. So I started helping him in some small ways, go there, and bring this and that, find something. He expressed his requests very cordially, so it looked as if he was asking me for a favour, he also paid not bad dough for that, often it added up to six – seven hundred rubles a month. Obviously it was much more than my pension. This money came in very handy at home, and soon enough I couldn’t even imagine what I would have done without Nagiyev’s money. Mom now had to stay in hospital longer and longer and that was again additional expenses and quite significant for me: to her doctor, for injections, to the nurse and so on – it cost a pretty penny, sometimes added up to a thousand rubles along with the food that I had bought and delivered to her because the food in our city hospitals was more symbolic than real, just enough so that the patient didn’t drop dead. So I couldn’t go on without that money anymore. I told mom that I was making some money on the side. She trusted me but tried to find out in more detail how exactly I was doing it. I didn’t reply, changed the subject and she didn’t insist just heaving a sigh. Then I was trying to convince her that I work honestly, no dodgy dealings, and she would calm down. And really I was working, wasn’t I? I wasn’t stealing or anything. Now quite often I had to take part in drinking sprees that Nagiyev was giving, sometimes he was bringing drugs and all his gang was screaming with delight. They tried to pull me into it but I refused categorically and they left me alone. They were all getting high from the drugs – it was funny to look at – they injected stuff, and smoked grass. Nagiyev was smart, his kind don’t rush headlong into it, he was far too serious for that, much too enterprising, he didn’t get too far into the drugs, and booze, he would chill out one day, then get some rest, and then doing business all week. His business was doing great, he was making good money, and mainly he was engaged in the clothing trade. I asked him once, how come he doesn’t work anywhere, isn’t he worried that they might declare him a sponger? “Well, – he told me – why do you think I’m not working anywhere? I work, if you’re interested, as a laboratory assistant at a factory laboratory. You see, I almost ruined my health working there with all those bad, poisonous chemicals.” He giggled. “I see, – I said.” I wouldn’t be surprised if it turned out that he “works” in the laboratory of the factory at which I toiled in the past. He lived alone in that luxurious flat of his. In his thirty four years he had been married twice and twice divorced. He black marketed big time, had connections with other cities, with their traders. They brought goods from there, he sent from here. A couple of times he sent me to Moscow and Vilnius with large parcels, in other words he was doing business and kept his eyes open. I often took bags stuffed with clothes to his mother, who lived with her feeble – minded daughter, Nagiyev’s sister, in another part of the city. I only had a glimpse of Nagiyev’s sister once when I was waiting in their hall. She had Downs’s syndrome, though it’s not easy to tell their age, I thought she was about forty – forty five but looked like a very chubby child. I also often brought stuffed bags from Nagiyev’s mother. One she would hang over my shoulder, the other I took in my hand, and it looked as if she’d rather I had not just two but four hands. Lately I moved about the place in a taxi most of the time. As to moving forward in time... I don’t really know whether I moved at all, as if time stood still for me, was kind of sticky... One day Nagiyev told me to go to the airport to meet some friend of his from Odessa. So I went. I met him. The guy was a bright, smart, kind of fashionable and jolly young man. With a porter we took all his suitcases to the car and rode. At Nagiyev’s there already were sitting two broads – when did he manage? – and all three of them were a bit squint – eyed. Nagiyev and Odessit hugged and kissed them and started partying straight away. I tried to leave but Nagiyev asked me to stay and have a drink with them. I stayed since I had nowhere to rush to, mom checked out of hospital a week ago and so far was feeling ok – touch wood! We drank vodka; there was caviar, Nagiyev’s favourite Swiss cheese, olives, mushrooms, pickled aubergine, skewered sturgeon, and our national pasty with meat

or vegetables – kutabs. Then we drank champagne. Now and then Nagiyev and Odessit went to the bedroom with the girls, each one with both at once, and whenever Odessit went with them, a little while later from the bedroom came out squeals and howls, which made drunken Nagiyev sombre. Then he would get up from the table and start picking at Igor who just got back from the bedroom, about why the girls were lying, saying that it's good with him but keeping quiet, whereas with Odessit they squealed with pleasure. "What's the point? – said Igor and sat at the table." The girls giggled and him, Nagiyev, flew into a rage and started sending them away, trying to take his dresses back off them. When they got changed and demanded their money, he threw it behind them shoving them out onto the landing. Igor caught up with them and also paid. When he came back, Nagiyev, reaching boiling point, was very angry at him and was looking for a chance to provoke him. They drank some more and little by little remembering old grudges, ended up fighting. I jumped up to separate them but Nagiyev shoved me away telling me to mind my own business. He grabbed Igor by his collar, shook and pushed him away. It wasn't a strong push but drunken Igor fell down. Nagiyev, not paying any attention to him, sat at the table and started drinking beer panting heavily. I got up from the sofa to see why Igor wasn't getting up and approaching him noticed how, slowly, his eyes became glassy. "Hey! – I said to Nagiyev, – have a look." "Leave me alone, – he barked, – has he fallen asleep there or what?" I unbuttoned Igor's shirt and put my ear to his chest – in Afghanistan I learned to recognize the slightest glimmer of life in a human body – the heart wasn't beating. Igor fell, hitting the sharp end of the cupboard with his temple, the temple was dented, the bone broken and a thin trickle of blood was coming out of it. The guy was dead, they don't get deader, damn, and the first thing I thought of was that I got into a shit worse than anything I had before in my life. I raised my head – Nagiyev stood above me white as a sheet. "He's dead, – I said, – you've killed him." Why I said these absolutely unnecessary and obvious words, I can't clearly remember. Could be that I already anticipated what would follow and wanted to some degree to protect myself from that pointless statement of facts. Nagiyev looked sobered up. "Calm down, – he suddenly said, and really he looked quite calm if one didn't take into account the ashen paleness of his face, – we have to figure out what to do." We sat at the table. There was nothing we could do for Igor now, I had wide experience with stiffs, had there been a tiny, minute piece of hope, I would immediately call an ambulance. But he was dead and no ambulance could have revived him. "Now, – said Nagiyev suddenly with the tone of a man who already decided everything, paused and continued, – you will take this matter on yourself." I thought I had misheard him. I haven't even started becoming abashed by his impudence, while he was already explaining to me point after point that it will be better for both of us. Practically he was trying to persuade me. I much too late understood that I was being cajoled and unfortunately began to consider Nagiyev's words, just with a silly, lost smile saying from time to time: "Are you crazy?", "Have you gone mad?", which of course couldn't be taken into account as a counter – argument against Nagiyev's reasoning. "First of all, – Nagiyev said, without paying attention to my remarks – first of all, you're a war veteran, – one, decorations – two, disabled – three, this is manslaughter, I'm a witness (here I choked with indignation, he's a witness, you see) – four, – Nagiyev continued with perfect calm, – good lawyer is my problem, – he kindly added, – five, considering all these facts the sentence will be minimal, I'm telling you, they won't give you much, I'll do everything, and now listen to me very carefully, – he said in some icy, almost threatening voice, and I really began to listen to him very carefully, even forgot about my remarks, – here's what it is, – he said, – for each year you're inside I'm giving you seven grand, it's six hundred a month. Not you, not your mother never even dreamt of that kind of money until you met me, try to earn it working as night watchman on your building site. Now I'll give you a flat payment of fifteen grand, so that while you're doing time your mother is well provided for. Apart from that, I will take care of her, and will do everything she needs, you know me. The rest of the dough you'll get when you're out." He made a pause, and then I automatically put into this pause my now favorite phrase: "Have you gone mad?" He quietly looked at me for a few seconds. No, of course he didn't look like a madman. "And now listen to me even more carefully, –

he said in a while, – and try to use your brains.” “Well, – said I.” And he goes, – if you don’t take it on yourself, I am obviously going down, but I promise you: I’ll do everything to take you with me as an accomplice in murder. You know my connections; I think you understand that it won’t be difficult for me to share the sentence with you. I’ll take you with me, you can be as sure about that as about my promise to pay you for doing time for me. And if we both go down, then after the jail you’re nobody, like before. At that moment I had an urge to knock him down, I sprang up with my fist clenched, but he just frowned, turned away from me and said with indifference, – “Fool”. I settled down. We sat quietly for a while. “Well? – said Nagiyev.” “I have to think about it, – I replied.” “Think, – he said, – we have to decide now.” I thought, I even liked how cold – bloodedly I analyzed all pros and cons; the fact that he would take me with him raised no doubts in me, that’s for sure, he could do that easily. And then mom will be left with almost no means to support herself, alone. If I take fifteen grand from him and leave it to mom – that’s better than nothing. I’ll get the rest when I am out, as we agreed, and with that money I will be able to set up my future life, get rid of him once and for all, and live my life without running his errands. It will hardly be worse there than it had been in Afghan, what could there be so terrible that I hadn’t seen at war in Afghan? It seemed that I considered everything. And I said yes I agree. “I agree, – said I, – give me fifteen grand right now.” “Deal? – Nagiyev asked.” “I told you: I agreed, – said I without shaking his hand as if not noticing his.” “Then why you won’t shake hands? – he asked suspiciously.” “Because I am disgusted by this deal, – I replied to him.” “Alright, – Nagiyev said – but I’m warning you: don’t you play any jokes on us. We know where your mother lives, so if you try to stitch me up, I’m warning you now get it out of your head.” “I wouldn’t even think of it, – said I, – as to my mother the less you think about her, the healthier you will be.” “Alright, alright, – he said, – calm down, I just wanted to warn you.” He went to the bedroom and came back with wads of cash. “Fifteen, – he said, – want to count it?” “No, – I replied, – but I want the rest afterwards, when I get out.” “As we agreed, – he said, – you know my word, – for each month six hundred, no matter how much you get. Don’t you worry, I can tell you for sure you won’t get more than a fiver – you’ll see. Well six years tops and half will be reduced under amnesty, you’ll see, pray that I would owe you more than this fifteen grand, lest you have to pay me the difference to balance off the years, – he went on.” His last words were obviously said to make an impression on me, to sort of lull me into a calm. He got so carried away in his joy that he managed to persuade a dummy like me to get involved in such rotten business. Well, it would have been all the same for me, I could never have managed to wriggle out of it had he decided to take me doing time with him. However, it was late night when I took a ride home, hid the money in the kitchen cupboard (who would in his right mind come to rob a flat like ours with mom?), left a note for mom that I was leaving for another city, didn’t want to scare her – she’d find out anyway, they will call her for sure, but what would I write to her, that I had killed a man and money that I received for that I’m leaving for you mom? I wrote that I’d be sending her letters, she shouldn’t worry, and everything is alright. I wrote that the money she would find is mine and consequently hers as well. It’s not stolen and that’s why I’m asking her to spend it on herself while I’m away, which was true actually, I didn’t steal it, will be working for it paying it off in years of my life. So how would you call that if not earned? Then I quietly came to the head of the bed, cautiously kissed mom (at one moment I suddenly wanted to wake her up, wanted her to wake up and I would tell her everything, maybe cried, if I could, putting my head on her knees, but fortunately this crazy idea quickly left my head) and stepped out locking the door with my key and throwing the key inside through the night vent. Our flat was on the ground floor of an old, pre – war house and all neighbours here in the courtyard knew each other very well and liked to say that a close neighbour is better than a remote relative, tried to prove it in everyday life. That is why to some extent I was not worried about mom, I knew that neighbours won’t leave her alone, but whatever their help was that didn’t mean that she did not have to be provided with the means of existence. I was walking along the night street and remember when I was turning into the avenue near the circus to catch a ride, I absolutely unexpectedly and inexplicably for myself suddenly thought

that I hadn't been to the circus for ages, maybe since my childhood years, and I adored the circus. In childhood every visit to the circus, normally with my late father, turned into a great event, and right here and now I suddenly wished that I was going to the circus! Well, alright. I stopped a car and went to Nagiyev's, getting off as he had asked two blocks away from his apartment. Nagiyev tried to look calm, tried to show that he never doubted my decency and honesty. We had a drink, I drank more, for courage, and closer to the morning I started calling the police... Generally, we thought about everything. Everything, except for one thing. Investigator and some other son of a bitch were beating me up in the interrogations; they did it very skillfully, mainly hitting me on the head and abdomen in order not to leave any marks. They wanted to kick out a confession from me. I understood straight away what the investigator needed. He wanted me to name Nagiyev as an accomplice. He could take a good bribe from Nagiyev. What could he take from me? I'm poor as a church mouse. And so they beat me up, the bastards beat me up professionally, bloody coppers, but I got through it, I didn't crack and finally they had to pass the case to the court as manslaughter. The court judged the case as an accident with one aggravating circumstance – I had been drunk. The late Igor also was one hell of a fruitcake. He had been wanted by the police all over Soviet Union as a crook and swindler – what people!? Eh! He's wanted, (just don't understand how they looked for him) as he's travelling from city to city dragging a load of suitcases with him. I think this also played a little positive role. Nagiyev must have had second sight; they gave me a short sentence – five years of high security labour camp. My lawyer was good, experienced, Nagiyev held his word. And a lot of what he'd said was taken into account: war veteran, have decorations and so on. At least here my former service helped. So I was sent to the prison camp, Mordovskaya SSR, write to me, eh– hey! This is how I turned up in a prison camp, not having even rested properly after Afghanistan. Yes, I have seen much for my twenty five years of age. I don't ever want to remember the war, unnerves me, I'm still having Afghan dreams, as if our regiment was preparing for combat, or we drive – a column of BTR troop carriers in the valley, pass the cursed mountains, hidden and scary, where, like polecats, mujaheddins, having fired at the column, immediately hide in the connecting caves, change locations of their anti – aircraft guns, or I see how they having passed through underground passages from a village just shelled by us appear right behind our backs, and now we are surrounded and have to break through this ring of fire... I'd jump with horror, awakened by my own scream... Sometimes it makes you wonder – have I really been through all this hell? Alright... I don't want to talk about it. I can't imagine how one can write about war. After many years, maybe, cause even to remember it causes a painful fear... Or am I a coward or I'm getting nervous? Well, alright... I got into the camp. On one of the first days just after work – lights out – I'm in the barrack hut dog – tired. In the beginning I kept away from everyone, well obviously everyone here knew all about me, what sentence and how much time I had to do, but for some I was still a dark horse. And so it seemed they decided to try me out, to see what I was made of. Whether I was a green gull or a criminal. From the bunk by the window in the centre of the barrack hut – the place considered respectable – as I glanced in that direction, an inmate, a strapping fellow of about forty years of age with a horse face, quietly beckoned me. I came. Beside him another two, grinning, probably, in anticipation of the show. “Why are you like that? – asked me the horse face.” “Like what? – I said.” “Kind of impolite, – said the horse face adding in a tender voice, – go on, take your shoes off”. “Why is that? – I said.” “Take'em off, take'em off! – said the second inmate next to the horse face, – when the boss man himself tells you. Or we'll rip your second arm off”. I understood that if I didn't put an end to their little teasing right now, later on it would grow into much bigger trouble. “Well – I said – if the boss man himself tells it, what can you do?” And I took off my shoes. I saw that this boss man was winking to his guys and they were nicely pushing me away from him, and that the boss man took off his trousers and said to me, you see, he said, I wanna take a piss but I don't feel like going to the close – stool cause it so impolitely stinks there. So he took it out, and pissed, I twitched towards him but was nudged away. Then he called me, take this, he said, throw it into the close – stool, I stepped in as his guys made way, and the

whole barrack hut was watching the fun, so I came and bent down quietly, peacefully, inside I was all boiling with rage, carefully picked the boot so as not to spill its disgusting contents and with all my might put it over the boss man's head, who never expected I'd dare it. I pulled it over his head with all my strength; luckily it was small, smaller than his own fists. My boot fitted him exactly, went down over his ears, and the urine obviously lavishly showered his horse face, which had to be done. His sidekicks? I knocked them down straight away – that's where my Afghan training came in useful – got them a couple of times with my feet and they were out, good men with their knuckle – dusters. But the boss man himself took some time. That son of a bitch took out a knife in addition to being experienced in wrestling – won't take him with bare hands – I had to sweat. This boss man was a hard nut and regardless of his not – so – young age was skilfully dodging my hits, and often hit me badly trying to get me in the head or in the guts. I knocked out the knife from his hands in the beginning of the fight, so now we were sort of equal. I fought him mostly with my head and feet keeping my hand in reserve and when he was forgetting that I still have it, though only one, but still a hand, I suddenly used it and sometimes used it quite well. But I couldn't manage to topple him, knock him off his feet, or if I did, he would immediately get up again. However, he couldn't knock me down either, and having caught our breath we flew at each other again, already both heavily beaten up, tired, faces in blood and bruised. We huffed and puffed almost till dawn. None of the inmates in the barrack hut got themselves involved in our brawl, some of them even went to sleep, especially those on the upper bunks because we didn't make much noise. By morning we both could hardly breathe, approached each other clinging to the walls and I managed to pull myself together and gave his horse face such a head butt that he flew a few steps away falling on the floor where he lay unconscious. To be honest I was close to losing consciousness myself. For some time now his guys'd got back from the hibernation in which I had put them but here – I was told later – someone interfered and they were kept away from me, it was decided: let them settle it between themselves one to one – that's about us. Even this fight that lasted a few hours didn't soothe my anger for the insult, for all unanswered insults to me, didn't reduce, and could never reduce all the anger built up in me. I dragged the boss man to the close – stool – his mates appeared, but I'd already taken his knife and sprang at them ready to cut open any one of them. They probably noticed something in the expression on my face and decided to stay away and not get involved. So I dragged him to the close – stool, stood over him hardly breathing, and pissed on his disfigured horse face. He didn't even come to. And I went or rather almost crawled to my bunk, fell on it and don't remember anything after that. Of course, the administration found out about everything, they didn't even have to ask questions, our faces clearly said everything; I was given thirty days in the isolation ward as a punishment. But when I got back to the barrack hut – it was like home sweet home, honestly, it looked so warm and cosy to me after the isolation ward – so, when I got back, I was the boss man here now. And though they nicknamed me “one – arm”, which was actually quite natural; everyone pronounced these words with respect. I though, didn't want to be a boss here at all. It was not that I had been trying to achieve in the fight with the boss man, I only wanted to be left alone, complete my sentence and get out of here. And I kind of achieved it. The boss man after his disgrace tried to kill himself in the isolation ward, but it didn't work out. I don't know, he couldn't find a tool for it or what, I don't care, really. Don't disgrace others and you won't be disgraced, that's what I know. Afterwards my time in the camp was passing without any incidents, not taking into account some minor events, and considering how you can survive in a place like this without any incidents at all. Everything happened. I had to get involved in many things since they acknowledged me as the authority, obtain justice, which, it has to be said, is here understood differently than outside. Justice under the local rules, the inmate rules, so all my involvement in these affairs had limits, because just as outside you may break the law, so here, whatever authority you may have, you're not allowed to go against the rules. If you do, you'll lose your authority right away and straight into the gutter. Prison has its own laws and you can't step over them, I experienced it myself when once I wanted to stop the rape by criminals of a newcomer who had been sentenced for

the same crime. You can see that this is a bitch; – they told me in the barrack hut and that turned out true. The boy was really low and cunning, and later began to tip off the camp administration. Then I understood that this is exactly the incident when you shouldn't interfere – they would do as they wanted anyway and I would look a blockhead and dupe. I did right also because the guy turned out to be a confirmed bugged anyway and I had simply risked putting myself in a funny position. One time, Bespredelshiks (criminals who didn't abide by any rules – neither civil or their own criminal ones) went against me, but when they got convinced that I was more desperate than them and didn't care about their rule of lawlessness and Bespredel, they backed down and after the initial conflict we didn't make life difficult for one another. I had come to understand a lot in prison, swear to God, the main thing I understood was that prison didn't correct any criminal, on the contrary, it even more embitters and what's most terrible about it, very often it turns accidentally imprisoned people into desperate criminals – and accidentals were plenty here. In our barrack hut we had one teacher who was sentenced for possession of some prohibited manuscripts. They were considered undermining the fundamentals; he didn't think so and even sent them out to some newspapers. He told me that himself. There was also one professor, a chemist, who ran down a drunk with his car. There was a school principal too, but this one deserved his time, he got sentenced for bribery, was selling fake school leaving certificates with honours at five hundred each. They caught him with direct evidence – five hundreds nicely recorded by the police. I felt pity for them – intelligentsia – they were all kind of unprotected and vulnerable, soft. I protected them as much as I could. What else?.. I could remember a lot about imprisonment but don't feel like it, that's not the point, cause I got here of my own will, it's not easy here, of course, but worst of all here for the innocents. I can imagine what they must be feeling, what they have to go through. One can lose all faith in justice in this world. Well... I got out earlier than expected – got out under amnesty of November holidays of Eighty Four. He calculated even this – that bastard Nagiyev. And so I was out into freedom. After the camp it was an amazing feeling to be out again, I can't express it! It seemed to me that all the bad things in my life were left behind and a life full of happiness and joy awaited me ahead. Really, hadn't I had enough trouble in my life? But one thing probably slipped out of my attention – happiness and joy must be made with your own hands, in my case one hand... I was glad of course to be going home, waiting to see mom, I missed her a lot. Though we wrote to each other, I worried about her enough, thought many thoughts about her. I felt sorry for her, could even cry, she had been through so much because of me. Waited for me when I was at war, terrified with fear every day, waited for me when I was in prison, grew old before her time, cried her eyes out, poor mom. So there in the camp I gave a word to myself that if I get out, or rather when I get out I would do everything to enable my mother lead a normal, decent life. So that she is in no need of anything, she had lived in poverty enough; I swore on my freedom that I would do it, otherwise what kind of a son I am? As I travelled I looked from the train window at the fields, empty steppes, and small forests and if I spotted a picturesque place, I would start imagining how it would be to build a little house here and live with my mom away from everyone. Is it bad to live here with no trouble unlike in the city swamped with people trying to humiliate and insult you, spit into your soul, get you in trouble, where on every step you have to watch yourself in order not to smash the face that insulted your human dignity? When mom saw me she nearly passed out from happiness, even though I had written to her that I was coming back. I picked her up and sat her on the sofa, gave her a few drops of Valocordin. She came to a little and started crying. "Come on, mom, – I said – everything is alright now, calm down dear..." She, of course, looked years older, her illnesses got to her, eyesight worsened, and my story also hadn't made her happier. Obviously, she had been at the court, wrote complaints to all the authorities where she only could, even to the Prosecutor General of the country. Wrote that her son had been slandered, made to take blame for a murder he didn't commit, he couldn't commit even accidentally. Asked in her letters to look into it more scrupulously (so the investigator was more scrupulous in beating the truth out of me, well it's in the past now), wore herself out while I was doing time. But I'm out now, I said to her, I'm with

you and everything is alright, mom, now everything is going to be alright, all bad things are behind us. Then, when all main things were said, all talks talked, she asked me about that money. I said, I can tell you one thing, that money isn't stolen, it belongs to me, which means it belongs to you too, I had written this in my note to you. "I know, – she said, – I believed it right away when I read your note, I know you wouldn't lie, wouldn't steal, but where did you get that much?" "Don't ask, I had told you it's not stolen, and that's what matters, isn't it?" "I'm afraid, – she said, – that you would get into some bad company, would trip over, we don't need big money, – she said, – and what would we do with it?" Here I, knowing mom's character, naïve and simple, became alert but didn't show it by anything, said nothing and waited – she will say all herself. Soon she admitted that she had given ten thousand to Akram. "Why? – I asked." She began getting noticeably nervous, started to convince me as if I was arguing with her and wasn't agreeing, but I just asked out of curiosity, she got so nervous that I regretted asking her about it. It turned out that Akram had urgently to buy a flat, it wasn't even a flat, a little house in the suburbs with its own piece of land and even a garden, because in the old flat where they had lived it was terribly damp and both children already suffered from rheumatism. What can you say against it; of course your own brother took money for such necessary, even life saving business – when it comes to children's health what can be more important. "That's right, – I said, – everything is right mom. It's just I can't understand why he remembered about you only when you had money?" "Not at all, – said mom." She got scared when she heard my words. I think she had expected that I would say something like this and possibly thought it over herself. "Not at all, – repeated mother, again getting very agitated, – he simply wrote to me a letter. How would he know that you left me money? How could he know what was going on here?" "Because, – I said, beginning to get angry, – I had sent him a letter from prison asking him not to leave you alone while I was there, so he didn't." "I don't need much, – said mom, – I only regret that I gave him the money without your permission, because it's yours. I wanted to write to you, ask you about it, and then received your letter saying that you're coming back. It's just recently I gave him that money, a month or so ago. I thought, thank God Rustam is coming back we'll manage somehow, and how could I refuse my own son if the matter was so serious? And he didn't actually ask me for anything. Just wrote me a long letter asking how I was doing and also told me about his life and the problems that he had. Could it be that he had a moment when he wanted to share all his trouble with his mother, to talk to me?" "Of course it could be, – I said." "So, – mom obviously felt better, – he wrote and also added that there was a house for sale for ten thousand, in the suburbs, air is great there, it will be good for the children because they were ill, he didn't know what to do. And I replied that I could give him that money but it wasn't mine, and I had to ask your permission, and it would be better if he came for the money himself cause I didn't want to send it by post – what if they asked me where I got it from, what would I say? So he came with one of his sons – with pride, clarified mom, as if they brought her grandchild to show her, she had to deserve it and so she's proud that she did, – they stayed two days, he's lost weight, poor boy, it's hard for him, – mom sighed, and continued, – he got all grey – haired, I didn't notice before, his head is all grey... So, they stayed a while and left. He said he would return the money, said to you not to worry. And also said he would've never taken it from me if it wasn't so necessary, kids are ill, they have to move from the old flat by any means, can't stay in such damp, illness gets worse. You see Rustam the reason is serious. We can do without this money, Rustam, right?" "Sure, – I said, – forget about it mom, you're speaking as if making excuses. That was your money, I wrote to you, you were free to spend it as you liked. You better tell me about yourself, how you lived all this time?" "How could I live, – she said, – missed you a lot, was worried, twice been to hospital while you were away, thanks to the neighbours, they helped me a lot, I don't know what I would do without them, they would go to the bazaar, pharmacy to the shop, or call an ambulance, my feet hurt me much now, swell and swell, they start to hurt in the evening... Well, I won't be scaring you with my old age illnesses... Yes! I almost forgot, I still have four hundred rubles left! Oh, mom, – I said, – what is four hundred rubles nowadays? For some it's pocket money which they can spend in a minute. And

the same minute I regretted saying it, didn't think, honestly, said it without thinking, automatically, and mom I see got upset, probably took it on herself. I said a silly thing, – I said, – hugging her shoulders, – forget it, mom. You should keep away from this kind of people son – she said. From what kind of people? – I asked. From the ones who can spend four hundred in a minute, – she said, – they won't do you any good. Don't you worry about me, mom, – I said, – I'm now experienced, wise and very careful... At night when I was going to bed, she asked me: Did you get very upset because I gave your ten thousand to Akram? No, – I said, – I've already forgotten, – I really did forget, because Nagiyev still owed me a little money as we had agreed, not much, but now for me it was a good sum. This thought about the debt calmed me down a bit and I really began to forget the money mom gave to Akram, what's the difference if I get the money from Nagiyev soon enough anyway? Don't be upset, sonny, – said mom, – he's your brother; you have to help each other, support, when one of you is in trouble. Yes, – I said, – you're right, mom. But he will definitely pay it back, – mom said, – he promised, said he would return it by instalments. If not this, I would keep it for you, I don't need much, and I never spend more than a five a day. Don't think about it, mom, – I said – you did what you thought was right, no need to explain anything. She kept quiet for a while and then said, – I'm explaining it, son, because people like you and me earn our money the hard way, we have to value it, especially if it's earned in an honest way... Of course, this money is earned honestly, – I said – don't you doubt it. I don't, son, – she said, – I always trusted you and Akram, and I wish you supported each other like true brothers, which you are, don't forget about it. Well, good night, Rustam. Goodnight, mom. She left the room. Support each other. Yes, I think, he supported me during hard times, right. Big brother, yeah... On the other hand what could he do? I also remembered mom's excuses and all that talk about the money in such detail because I, to be honest, felt a bit bitter, if she had spent it on herself it's different, but here – what was I doing the time for? But then, there are kids getting ill all the time because they need a new house – also understandable. I remembered how during the course of the conversation mom was trying to create a good impression of Akram, prove me that he's a good person and we have to get close to him. Basically she wanted to patch up our relationship. But how can you get close to him after years that we hadn't heard a word from him. We were complete strangers to each other. Also the difference in age, or at least if we were friendly in our childhood, but from my childhood I only remember with regard to Akram that he would shout at me, telling what to do or give me slaps on the back of my head. With these thoughts I fell asleep, and finally for many days or rather nights I slept without nightmares. The next day I went to Nagiyev's. He greeted me very well, it seemed to me he was glad that I was out, treated me with expensive cognac and cigarettes, but was unusually quiet and not talkative, you could feel that it was not the same Nagiyev – black marketer, though big but still a profiteer, no. Now it was almost completely a different person, he spoke quietly; carefully choosing words, he did not giggle and smiled little. He had a look as if he watched and didn't see you, and at the same time frantically analyzing how he would use you, what else he can squeeze out of you. He asked me in detail how I did time, whether I made any unnecessary acquaintances, if I cut all the ends in prison, will there be any prison mates come looking for me, he asked like a proper investigator. Yes, Nagiyev changed a lot, I noticed it straight away, he even changed the flat's interior – it still was decorated rich, maybe richer than before, but without that screaming impudence, expensive cheap things, huge photographs of sexual intercourse on the walls in the bedroom. All these changes indicated the fact (I only felt it) that Nagiyev now flew much higher, probably to more risky, dangerous heights. I of course didn't know, and didn't want to know, what he was doing, I came on my own business, and when he, at my insignificant question, again went quiet for some time pouting his lips, angry with me asking questions here, I got fed up with all this and not very politely dropped that he didn't have to answer and I was only here because he still owed me something. So let him count and pay it back to me so that I could leave and no longer disturb him. Yes, – he said, – I haven't forgotten about the debt, that's a debt of honour and I will give it back to you, don't you worry. I'm not worried, – I replied, – why should I worry? Let worry the one who

has to pay it back. I'm only happy now, because I will now be back in the black with what I earned with my blood and sweat doing time in prison. But my biting remark wasn't appreciated by him and hung in the air between us. He thought and then spoke again. Listen, – he said, – you're a reliable guy, already time – tested, and that's why I'm telling you this. You can be useful to me, you will get your money, don't worry about it. Think about your future. You can make good money working for me now, but if you prefer the work and miserable pay of a night watchman, it's up to you. What do I have to do? – I asked. We'll see, – replied Nagiyev. I have to know for sure, – I insisted, and it sounded somehow daring, I didn't intend it to sound like this. He watched me intently. You speak to me in a wrong tone, – he said eventually, – don't forget I give you a job, not you. Apart from that you have to remember that we are closely tied up with you now. He was using such round and correct phrases as if making a speech. This also was different in Nagiyev now. Before he wasn't very selective in expressions and sometimes when he got angry his speech was just swearing and nothing else. But I got carried away by form and forgot about the content of his words. It was quite interesting. He obviously was aiming somewhere and soon said it straight. Think yourself, how will you prove now that you didn't kill that Oddesit, ah? So I would advise you to know your place. And keep quiet... he said this just in time because I was already beginning to understand the meaning of his words about Oddesit, when he practically called me a murderer. I sprang at him to grab him by his throat, but my hand froze halfway to his throat cause an ugly thought crawled into my head – really how would I prove now that it wasn't me who killed that Oddesit. I had admitted it and insisted on it, damn! This stigma of a murderer will be with me forever now. Only now this ugly thought dawned on me in it disgusting nakedness, burning my consciousness. Though I had enough time to think it over, only now when someone else reminded me about it, and clearly and unequivocally called me a murderer, I was almost stunned. Have a drink, – said Nagiyev pouring “Napoleon” in my glass, – and have a good think, if you can't wait to get to your building site booth – fine, it's up to you. Considering that here it takes ten – fifteen years to build a block, you will be needed there for a long time. I won't be holding you, but I would advise you to realize what you can lose. I wanted to get into an institute, – I mumbled in reply. In institute, – calmly, without a sound of sarcasm, said Nagiyev, – well, good idea. Even if you manage by some miracle using the penny that I owe you get into institute and graduate in five years time, you will be getting your hundred and forty a month which will be enough to go to the market a couple of times. My congratulations! With me you'll have that in a day or two, understand? In three days you will earn more than your certificated engineer gets in a month. But if you like, well, go and kiss your diploma, it will give you the opportunity to eat bread with boiled potatoes every day. He went quiet. I glanced at his full glass. Why are you not drinking, – I asked without much curiosity, just to break the silence that came after his words. He just waved his hand, – I have heartburn from cognac, – he said, – can't sleep all night after it. But I drink anyway... What would I have to do? – I asked after a little pause. Mainly to travel on business, – Nagiyev answered boringly. And that's all? – I asked, suspecting that he's not telling me the whole truth. Carrying small packages, – he said. I thought. That suits me, – I said. Course it does, – he said, – take small packages here and there and get two – three hundred for each trip. Not a bad life, uh? Alright, – I said, – when do you need me? Day after tomorrow give me a call, – he wrote a number on a piece of paper and handed it to me, – my number has changed. I wanted to put it in my pocket, but he said, – no, memorize it. That's why I wrote it – it's easier to remember, look at it and remember. Just like some spy, – I said. Got it? – he said, – now give it back. He crushed the paper and threw it in the ashtray. Actually, I agreed to Nagiyev's proposal quite reluctantly. I thought I'd begin working for him, stash away some money, get my debt and sneak away from him. I had no choice, had to sort out my life and settle down, but for that I had to find some proper job. I went to a few places between Nagiyev's business trips, tried to find a job, and looked up classifieds. If I found something appropriate for a one armed worker, I would go there for an interview. But as soon as they'd found out that I had a prison sentence, it was over. They wouldn't even consider hiring an ex – inmate. So I had to get a job as a stoker in a multi-

storey building boiler house. The wages were enough only not to die of hunger, so I had to be sly, because our district police officer kept pestering me about finding a job. Though he knew that I'm a war veteran and getting a pension, he probably decided to play safe and started his own initiative. He must have thought if I kept wandering about with nothing to do, I'm bound to mess up. So under his pressure I got that job at the boiler house. But since it was interfering with my business trips, I had to resort to cunning. I left the boiler house and got myself a job at a building site, making a deal with the foreman so that he registered me as a "dead soul" and would take my wages, and I would just drop by the site from time to time, just in case... So we registered all paperwork properly, I reported to the district police officer that I got a job at a building site where they needed one – handed workers – he stared at me unable to understand my joke – and this problem was settled. As to studying, to be honest now I had neither desire nor opportunity to study. And what was the point in that studying since I knew that after five years in an institute I wouldn't become a minister or a big boss. It's no use to me and as Nagiyev said waste five years to get the miserable salary of an engineer or a school teacher in the end, well thanks a lot, not my cup of tea. Well this studying, sod it, didn't bother me much. I'd rather choose some lucrative profession, learn to become a good specialist in let's say fridge or TV repairs and maintenance, always a profitable trade. Or say a dental mechanic can make good money, well maybe this is going too far – it's not for a one – handed person, but the bottom line is I must find something where I could earn a good living. So I decided, to stick around with Nagiyev for a while, make some money, and having saved up a little I'd learn some lucrative trade – become a specialist in it. One thinks sometimes, really, am I bound for the rest of my life to guard bricks on a building site? Isn't it possible to create normal conditions for the disabled in our city? Provide them with jobs, because the disabled – legless, handless – they're also citizens like everybody else. I have seen a programme on the TV recently about how in America they organize sports events for disabled kids. Isn't it humane? Even on TV you could see how happy they were, face shining with joy. Eh, what can you say, one has to learn a lot, and not kick them away from you how they're used to doing here... One day I was at Nagiyev's. He gave me a briefcase with a number lock, a first class train ticket, and sent me to Yerevan, also giving me two hundred and fifty rubles for unexpected expenses, though what unexpected expenses could I have? So I asked him about it. We'll see, said Nagiyev and it seemed to me he got a bit puzzled as if regretting his reply. That should have alerted me that moment and made me think, but I, what a jerk, didn't pay attention to his words, or rather didn't see any second meaning in them, words are words. It was early summer and I was enjoying travelling on the train. I was looking out of the window, and even felt a little happy those minutes, so almost forgot my disability. In one of those minutes a girl of approximately my age stepped out from the next compartment and stood by the window in the corridor. She looked beautiful to me, to be honest now with my condition I wasn't very popular with women, and even before my disability I wasn't much of a heartthrob... Maybe she looked a beauty to me because lately I had almost lost contact with the fair sex, and any more or less pretty woman aroused me? No, she really was very cute. I was full of youth and forgot about my ugly stump hidden in the tucked shirt sleeve when I audaciously approached her and stood nearby. She absent – mindedly glanced at me. Wind was blowing in the window scattering her hair on her forehead, and I unwillingly looked at her with admiration – yes, she was beautiful indeed – I looked and unexpectedly to myself said to her, – yes, it suits you like this. What? – she asked. Your hair, – I replied, – it looks beautiful like this. How exactly, – she asked, and the look in her eyes wasn't unfriendly at all. Not like the look in girls' eyes I got used to recently if I had to speak or ask them something on the street or elsewhere. Like this, – I said, – tousled. Yes? – she laughed, – if so, then I won't comb it. She laughed again, probably also because of too much young energy in her, and suddenly quickly went back into her compartment and shut the door. Here I became gloomy thinking that my new acquaintance didn't work out. And of course I remembered about my stump. That's what scared her, she first spoke to me out of politeness, then noticed it and off she went. Sure, such a beauty, what would she need a cripple like me for? There

are plenty of healthy and handsome young men around, all with hands, legs, and other accessories in place, only thinking how to get some pretty girl in their hands. Why would she make acquaintance with a cripple? – I thought, completely upset and making a move towards my compartment when the door behind me where she disappeared a minute ago opened and she, even more beautiful and happy, came out to the corridor with an apple in her hands. Would you like an apple? she asked, showing me a big apple so beautiful that it looked unreal. I think I kept smiling in a silly way looking at her without answering her question, full of joy from her amazing appearance, so she had to repeat it in a more impatient tone. Yes, I'd love one, – I said with a little challenge in my voice, sort of, if you ask just to be polite, here you are now, sort out this situation. But you only have one apple, – I added right away. Then she, with the agility of a magician, split the apple in two halves, cut prior to that and only put together again out of mischievousness. Yes, she was fooling around a little. She also, like me was made drunk by this glorious day, fast ride, and maybe realization of her own charming and entrancing beauty. When she, copying circus magicians, was separating one half from the other, she quietly and it seemed even shyly said “op”. It was so cute that I couldn't help myself laughing from the joy of her being here with me, took the half she handed me and dug, like her, my teeth into the juicy and tasty pulp of the apple. Through our crunching I managed to put in – Tasty! – so that I didn't look rude. With her I felt myself very at ease, I'd say unusually at ease. She didn't seem to notice that I was disabled, or simply didn't want to notice it, though it was impossible not to see it. But she could leave things unnoticed. Since my adolescence I was shy with girls, though I couldn't complain about my looks – I was tall and athletic. But after I had my arm amputated and got back from war I began avoiding meeting with girls. Sometimes just slept with Nagiyev's for a fifty, just to get rid of nocturnal emissions and sexual dreams, that's all. Normal girls wouldn't come close to me, and I, certain of a fiasco would also avoid them, what's the point... And now this charming girl stands next to me by the window in the corridor of a speeding train. I took it as something from out of this world, something unreal. But the apple she gave me was very real, what's more very tasty. Her smile, sound of her voice, her hair tossed picturesquely, smell of her perfume – all that was more than real. Still I, carefully as if in a dream, as if afraid to scare her off, stretched my hand and touched her shoulder. What is it? – she turned to me with a half smile on her face. Nothing, – I said, – just wanted to make sure that you're still here. I don't like being touched, – she said in a very natural, prepossessing voice, without a shade of disgust or arrogance, as if she was saying that she doesn't like too much sugar in her tea. I'm sorry, – apologized I, – I didn't mean to. It just happened. You have so many birthmarks! And really, there were tiny, no bigger than freckles, and pale, birthmarks on her white hand. Yes, – she said. You will be happy, – I said. Eh! – she replied, – don't say banalities. No, – I corrected myself, – I wanted to say don't forget to share your happiness with me like you shared that apple. Ha, ha! – she laughed, – very funny! I'm falling! Would you like some champagne? – I asked. I'll think about it, – she said. How long? – I inquired. About ten minutes. Alright, – I said, – think. We quietly looked out of the window and when ten minutes passed I said to her, – your time is up. What will you say to me, the anxious one? Keep being anxious, – she said. How should I understand this? I asked. I agree, – she said, solemnly nodding her head. I bowed to her like a clown – according to the rules of our game – bent my only hand offering it to her. She again very naturally not noticing that the hand was single, leaned on it and we went to the restaurant carriage where I ordered some champagne and chocolates because it turned out that we both had already lunched. I felt myself very free with her and we soon became friends. Her name was Carina – she spoke about herself without waiting for questions, when she felt like it. This also seemed to me very natural for a girl like this; later she admitted to me that she hated questions, it's like an invasion of your private life. She had been to Baku visiting her relatives. She lives in Yerevan and is in her last year at university. They live with her mom, they don't have a dad. That's it, – she finalized the short story about her life, – what is your opinion? Only the very best, – I replied, – very positive and very sincere, amazing, humane, touching, weepy, edifying. Oh, what a wit! – she said, – hold me, I'm falling! I'm ready, – replied I, –

you can fall without fear. Don't be silly, – she said without anger, – it's just my favourite word, stupid, isn't it? Not at all. Why? – I asked, – words by themselves can't be stupid. A word is a word. What do you think? she said. Like what? – I asked. Unexpected, – she said having thought a little, is it good? Or not very? What do you think? At the moment I think that everything you like is good, – I replied, – half an hour ago I didn't think so. She looked at me without a smile, holding her eyes on my face for a second. Tell me something about yourself, – she asked looking out of the window. I began telling her some things, only in general in order not to scare her with my not so good and bright autobiography. She listened attentively and with empathy, and then we chatted for a long time, steadily and mutually growing more sympathetic towards each other. In the evening we went to our compartments, I lay down and took a magazine I had taken with me from Baku and started thinking about Carina. My briefcase was still under the table just where I had left it. Though Nagiyev had strictly forbidden me under any circumstances to leave it unattended, how could I take it with me to the restaurant? What would Carina think of me? With thoughts about her I fell asleep. I remember when I was almost asleep, was between dream and reality, one thought stung me waking me for a second: how come she got along with me so easily? Doesn't she see that I'm crippled? But then another thought came: what did we have except some innocent chat between two people travelling together? We talked, had some wine, laughed, it's nothing and doesn't mean anything. Everything else is my imagination. I dreamed and in my thoughts I extended and developed our relationship. Otherwise, what is so strange about a girl who has nothing else to do and is bored, talking to a stranger, a one – armed fellow on a train? I think I'm beginning to acquire some complex of one – handedness. Nothing unusual, with the attitude towards you that you see everyday... When we got out of the train in Yerevan I asked Carina permission to walk her home. Though reluctantly, she agreed. Like me she had almost no luggage, only a big plastic bag with a picture of two well – tanned girls on a gorgeous beach. I asked her by the way, if she was coming back from her relatives empty handed? Eh, – she waved me off, – I visit them often. And then what can you bring? What is there so unusual in Baku, which you can't find in Yerevan? I don't know, – I honestly admitted, – this is my first visit to your city. We took a taxi and I went to see Carina home, I planned to deliver the parcel to the address that Nagiyev gave me after parting with her. As she was getting out of the car Carina smiled at me and when I asked her for a date, she gave me her phone number. From her place I went straight on my business, gave the address which I memorized at Nagiyev's to the driver, and very soon our car pulled in by a beautiful house with a tall, antique front door which, it turned out, I had to enter. There was a concierge sitting by the lift. Can I help you? – she asked. I said the name that Nagiyev had told me to remember along with the address. She made a call from the phone on her desk and while waiting for the answer asked me: “How should I introduce you?” “Tell them it's a guest from Baku”, – I replied as Nagiyev had instructed me. So she spoke into the receiver. I noticed that she was speaking in a very servile way and having put the receiver down tried to smile at me. Her hamster like snout suddenly produced a grimace vaguely resembling a smile. It was as unexpected as if you'd seen a smiling bum which is not accustomed to such things at all. I went up in the lift and rang the door bell. It didn't open for some time but I felt that behind that door someone was standing and examining me through the peephole. I began picking my nose so that those watching me would have no doubt that me is me. A courier is a courier; I wanted to show, picking my nose, a dirty cheek! The door opened. In the opening stood a man face and limbs completely covered by thick hair and any struggle with this strapping fellow would be suicide. Go on! – curtly ordered that King Kong without giving me his hand and calmly looking at me. As I had been instructed in Baku, I took out of my pocket and handed him a torn half of a ten ruble note I had received from Nagiyev. He grabbed the half – note and soundlessly shut the door in my face. He went to match it, I thought, putting together two halves, like in some spy movie, phah! Here I remembered the two halves of the apple that so suddenly fell apart in Carina's hands and my heart pounded with joy at the thought that I had her phone number. The door opened again swiftly with no sound, startling me out of my dreams. This big fellow must do everything without

a sound; he would strangle you in a second, lovingly and quietly without a squeak, better stay away from him. Merchandise, – he said barely audibly, moving only his lips and this time he stretched his hairy hand to my briefcase. I gave him the briefcase. He again disappeared behind that quietly closed door. This time I had to wait longer, but eventually the door opened for the third time. He gave me a small metal box, which had a padlock and was definitely locked. The smart box fitted exactly in the back pocket of my trousers. I remembered how in Baku, with Nagiyev just before my departure, we were trying out in my pocket some thingy very similar to this box. King Kong carefully watched as I put the box in my pocket and only when he was sure that I completed this operation successfully, handed me a train ticket. Go back; – not very politely said King Kong, without changing that vicious expression on his face with which he opened the door first time. Immediately, – he added with a tone not taking any objections. I of course had an immediate itching to tell him to sod off, but I couldn't in any case spoil the game – Nagiyev strictly warned me about it knowing my quick – tempered nature. Otherwise I would give this strapping fellow a good hiding, I swear. I put the ticket in the pocket of my shirt trying with all my behaviour to show him that I didn't give a damn about him but he didn't really bother with me anymore. So I left the house and was going to phone Carina. I realized that it was still too early and went to have a little walk around the city. My call now would have surprised her; it had been little more than half an hour since we parted. But then I thought – let her be surprised, what else could I do here other than calling up Carina? I sat in a café for a while feeling how the metal box was digging into my bottom, and asked the waiter to bring me a two – kopeck coin. After having sat there for some time rolling the coin on the table I suddenly began getting very nervous and agitated. Calm down, calm down, I said to myself, what's the matter? You can get all sorts of damn thoughts in your head, damn it! So I sat at the table rolling and tossing the coin in my hand with such deep and substantial thoughts in my head. No, really, I suddenly got terribly worried and the café was not so cosy anymore causing me feelings of great discomfort. I was right on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Damn it! I got up and left the café. A waiter ran after me and grabbed me by the hand. I pulled my hand out as if his disgusting touch burned it (I remember his hands were wet, he must've been washing something and didn't have time to wipe'em dry) and wanted to kick him in the bollocks but then remembered that I had left without paying for coffee. I paid. Now he was trying to give me the change. Finally I managed to get rid of him and I went along the street. I felt that if she would refuse to see me right now – it's over. So it seemed to me. No, at that moment I was actually convinced that many very important things in my life such as my future, my whole future, depended on her refusal or agreement. No more, no less. When I dialled her number in the phone booth my hand was shaking. The voice of an elderly female, definitely not hers, replied when I asked for Carina that I had got the wrong number and hung up. I also hung up and stepped out of the old – fashioned phone booth. That's it, I thought, she lied to me. She gave me the wrong number because she didn't want me to call her. Refusing wouldn't be polite so she gave me an odd number that came to her mind. But I know where she lives. I can go there. Why would she give me the wrong number, no, no, all her behaviour didn't tally with such a low and cheap deceit, we almost became friends... Those were my thoughts while I was striding along the street up until the moment when I went to the newsagents to get some change and having acquired another two – kopeck coin rushed to call her again. She picked up the receiver, I recognized her voice at once, but just in case I asked in order to make sure. “Carina, – I said into the receiver, – I need to see you.” “Has anything happened?” she asked, and I to my immense joy spotted some notes of anxiety in her voice. “No, – I said, – nothing in particular yet, but it seems to me that if I don't see you right now, something will definitely happen”. “Something bad or good?” – she asked. “Something terrible”. “To whom?”. “To me”. “Yes, the matter is of great importance, – she sighed, – I have to think about it. You have nowhere to go?” “No”. “And when are you leaving?” “Today”, – I said. “It's strange how you travel, – she said, – you by any chance aren't a spy of some foreign intelligence service?” “I'm that, – I said, – you're right. I have to see you as soon as possible.” “I have to, I need to, – she mockingly grumbled, – why men are

such pigs, don't you know? – she kept silent and then added, – well, if you're really leaving today...” “Really”, – I lied, getting into her pause, lied because I already knew: my departure depended on her, on how we got along together. “I wish you knew how tired I am”, – she said. “Where should I meet you?” – I asked. “Let me think, – she said, – one minute”. “One minute has passed”, – I said right away. “It will be better if you come round to my house, – she said, – do you remember the address?” “Do I remember the address? Do I remember the address?! – I exclaimed in an indignant voice. “I am smiling, – she said, – don't think I didn't understand. It's just I'm too tired to laugh”. “Say – I am falling”, – I asked her. “I'm falling”, – she said. “I'll be there in ten minutes”, – I said. “Are you nearby?” “Doesn't matter, I'll take a cab”, “Alright, – she said, – I'll be downstairs in ten minutes”. She, of course got downstairs not in ten but in twenty seven minutes. I kept glancing at my watch and was getting annoyed a bit. I reminded her that she was late which she could easily have avoided because she only had to come down a flight of stairs, not such a long journey. “Don't be a bore”, – she said. It seemed that some new game was beginning between us and in this game we behaved as if we had known each other for ages. Well, at least I quite liked this new direction in our relationship. Carina did look a little tired but that didn't make her less attractive, on the contrary I wanted her so much now so when I asked her where she would like to go, I heard in reply that her mom was away now and it would be better if we went to her place and she would treat me with dinner, so when I heard all this, I got a bit scared. I got scared that if I was left alone with her now I would not be able to control myself and jump at her spoiling everything.

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