

СЕРГЕЙ
ВОДЕННИКОВ

Надежда

(Love and Life)



роман

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LOVE AND LIFE

She is considered caring
about the wrecked, among other things;
and the one who sees her, they say,
will think about her for the rest of his life.

A.S. Green

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Prologue

I

"I'm guilty, I'm guilty on all sides. I am twenty-six years older, and should have been wiser and more circumspect," - Alexei reflected, digging in his garden on Sunday. Sad thoughts tormented him since Thursday, but he still could not understand what exactly he did wrong again.

On Thursday, as always, he conducted laboratory work and seminars with students of the Moscow Institute of Chemical Technologies. Then he began to wait in a secluded room for his graduate student Nadia. On Thursdays he taught her astrology. Not a very typical occupation for teachers who were brought up in Soviet times on the principles of materialism. But he no longer really trusted the dogmas of materialism, and from some time astrology became one of his serious hobbies.

Nadia came and they drank tea.

- Medicine is one of the most developed parts of astrology. Health has always interested everyone. From ancient times and until recently, many volumes of astrological research were devoted to medicine, - he began his story. Nadia was a grateful listener, catching on the fly astrological wisdom. Alexei was happy to have found such a student.

- I have here in the journal given several examples of patients' horoscopes, - he continued. - Let's sit next to each other so we can watch.

They sat down on the sofa. He put his arm around her shoulders, she put her head on his shoulder. They began to analyze the horoscopes. But the further, the more difficult it became for him to do it. Thoughts scattered, the words became heavy and stuck in his throat. Nadia changed her position. Now she was lying coquettishly on her stomach, propping her head in her hands, and it was not clear whether she was looking at the journal or at him. He began stroking her head and back, trying to talk about horoscopes at the same time. Then he tried to lift her skirt, but she strike him on his arm. She sat up, hugged his neck with all her strength and began to whisper something inaudible in his ear. It seems that it was some kind of vile swearing, like "Oh, you scoundrel, bastard! You want to cheat on your wife!"

Glancing at the journal completely lost all meaning. Nadia collapsed completely in his lap. Alexei continued to stroke her. He tried to unbutton her blouse, but she strike him on his arm again. They never went further than this, but now the situation has somehow especially strained him. A warm wave, rising from below, covered his head. The heart was beating fast, the ears were pounding. He barely controlled himself and was afraid that at some point he might lose the temper. Finally, he took her off his knees and stood up with the words "I can no longer." After

everything that had been said between them before, he could not do otherwise. She remained to sit on the sofa and said resentfully and pleadingly:

- Just don't humiliate me, please!

He could still feel the magic of her body and struggled to collect his thoughts. "Why is she dissatisfied again? What are these words for? Am I humiliating her? And what can I answer? "I won't humiliate you, baby"? Stupid somehow!" Some instinctive irritation arose in him, spurred on by a feeling of unsatisfied desire, and he said aloud:

- And where have you seen love without humiliation?!

These words struck Nadia on the spot. She collapsed and buried her face in the pillow. Shocked Alexei watched tears gushed from her eyes. He was puzzled. What was so terrible he said? And in the end, isn't it true?

Nadia lay there for ten or fifteen minutes. Then she got up and sat down at the table. She looked somehow detached, all immersed in incomprehensible experiences. Alexei tried to cheer her up. He recalled a couple of funny stories, but, unable to squeeze a smile out of Nadia, he became going away. "It seems, I'm superfluous here," - he thought. Having already taken his cloak and cap, in the doorway he turned to the motionless Nadia and returned again.

- Let's play Erudite on the computer! - he suggested. Nadia refused. Alexei brewed a new portion of tea. They sat in silence again. Finally, Nadia began to gradually recover from her torpor.

- I can no longer call you Alexei Vladimirovich. This is already irreversible, - she said.

"What a problem, call what you want!" - he thought.

- Tell me, what status can I have now?

"What the hell! What is this "status"? Is she not satisfied with the status of a graduate student? Or is she afraid that I will offer her to become a mistress?" Aloud he said:

- You can become a family friend. I'll try to talk to my wife about it.

Nadia brightened a little. He seemed to give her a straw she was ready to grab onto. Again they sat and were silent, until, in the end, she offered to go for a walk.

They left the entrance and began to bypass the buildings of the institute. Walked in silence for a long time. He was glad that he once again had the opportunity to take her arm, and did not dare to break the silence. Finally, she said:

- We must stop these Thursday meetings. There is no longer any sense in them.

Alexei felt that they were starting to cut him in the heart with a knife.

- And walks too.

The knife sank deeper and began to turn.

They finished bypassing the institute and again approached the steps of the entrance. It seemed to Alexei that now they would part, she would leave and they would never see each other again. Nadia opened the door.

- Don't follow me.

- Just write, please! - he pleaded. She nodded and the door slammed shut. He trudged to the metro station.

II

Working Friday has passed. No e-mails arrived. On Saturday, he and his wife went to the summer cottage. There were still no letters. Alexei literally could not find a place for himself and on Sunday decided that he had to write himself. Mechanically doing garden chores, he began to compose a text in his head. He tried to explain something, to justify something, but nothing coherent came out of the clumsy phrases. Everything that had happened seemed incredible, ridiculous and inexplicable. Mentally crossing out one letter, he immediately took up another, but by evening, tired and convinced of the futility of his efforts, he decided that, perhaps, it was better to write not to Nadia, but to their mutual friend and his peer Dmitry. But this matter did not work out either. He still continued to compose something while driving on the way home, until, having reached the garage, he finally decided that he would not write anything to anyone, since everything was pointless and useless.

As soon as he entered home and looked on the Internet, he discovered that Nadia had written herself. The letter had arrived just half an hour ago.

"I've been writing this horror for two days. Each line is watered with tears, pardon the pathos," - Alexei began to read. *"If I don't speak out now, I'll end up in the hospital again, not otherwise. I personally won't be able to, I'll burst into tears."*

He rubbed his forehead in surprise and continued to read about all the misadventures that Nadia had experienced in her 27 years of life. The letter ended as follows:

"I myself don't know whether I want something or not. I can't even touch this terrible tangle and I can't figure it out."

Like probably any other person, I have a desire to be loved. The need to love others was buried in my soul, but the need to be loved still remained. Therefore, I play all sorts of cat and mouse - both with you and with others. I want to be loved, but I cannot love on my own. Now. Whether I will ever be able to - I do not know. I will not consider this. At the same time, if I met someone who was both free and serious, then I immediately broke off the relationship. Or simply didn't let them go in any direction other than friendship. I choose the most inappropriate partners who do not require love from me, they have different goals, or they are satisfied with

visibility. But at least I find an outlet in this illusion that someone needs me. Although I myself know very well that this is not so. But at least I can dream, there's nothing else left for me anyway.

Don't worry about hurting me. It hurts, but it's not directly related to you. "A tale of the times of old, the deeds of days of other years ..."

Forgive me again for everything. I, in turn, do not hold any grudges and forgive everything.

If, after all of the above, you do not feel a strong disgust for me, then I am ready to start our acquaintance with a clean slate and restore the ruined respect. Let bygones be bygones.

It will just be difficult for me in the near future, I have to hide a lot back."

Alexei rubbed his forehead again, reread everything from the beginning and wondered what he knew about this girl so far. When and how did their acquaintance begin? One after another, pictures of the recent past involuntarily began to emerge in his memory.

Part 1

Hope

Does it matter what and how happy a person is!

I.A. Bunin

Chapter 1.

On the cycling hike

I

Alexei worked as an associate professor at the Department of Physics. He was friends with Professor Vladimir Danilovich, whom young friends often simply called Professor, and often came to his room to talk and drink tea. Some company always gathered here. Besides Alexei, Dmitry, a bearded man of medium height with a heavy and clumsy build, was also a frequenter of tea parties. They were both connected by close scientific interests and a great love for cycling trips. The Professor often invited students as well. For some time now, classmates Nadia and Sasha began to visit him. And then one day, when they were already in their fourth year, Dmitry invited them both to take part in the next summer campaign. Sasha did not go in the end; Alexei could not go either. But Nadia decided to try. On the first day, she almost died of fatigue and felt ashamed of slowing down the group. But then she got into it and in the end was satisfied.

The following year, both friends, Dmitry and Alexei, invited her again. At the same time, Alexei smiled his extraordinary smile. There were no other volunteers this time, so the three of them decided to go. Nadia had already graduated from the institute, but she stayed there to work in the library and expected to enter the graduate school.

The cycling hike, the route of which was compiled by Dmitry, was supposed to start from Pskov. Alexei and Nadia were going to arrive there together, Dmitry took tickets for another train. On the day of departure, Alexei arrived at the station in advance, found their second-class carriage, dismantled and packed the bicycle, laid it under the ceiling across the linen shelves, so

that it was right between the walls, and began to wait for the girl. She still didn't show up. Finally, when the train had already started, and Alexei decided that, apparently, he would have to travel with Dmitry alone, the mobile phone rang, and Nadia said that at the last minute she managed to jump into the door of the last carriage with all the cargo. Alexei went to meet her.

Nadia stood in the vestibule, soaking wet, but nonetheless joyfully animated.

- I got caught in a downpour when I was leaving the dorm, - she said.

At first they dragged the large saddle backpack together, then the bike. Alexei helped to remove the wheels, rearrange the pedals, turn the handlebars sideways and wrap the bike in a sheet. Then he lifted her bike up and put it on his. Changed clothes. It was possible to relax.

- Let's go to the restaurant to eat and drink beer, - he suggested. Nadia agreed.

They sat down at a table and began to talk about the trip, about the rain, about the turmoil in which Nadia was getting ready today and about how she almost missed the train. Somehow, the conversation then turned to the topic of family.

- I recently thought about why a family is needed at all, - said Alexei. - Well, to raise children, that's understandable. Children cement the marriage, unite the family. But then they grow up, begin to live their own separate lives. And what is the family for after that? Well, they say that with age, love is replaced by mutual respect. I agree. Respect is really needed. But why wedlock? Is it really only to stuff each other with potions in old age? Or hold on to a jointly acquired house, property, habitual order of things? As Pushkin said, *"by us the habits have been got instead of happiness from God"*. Or here's another:

"My uncle keeps to honest systems:

By falling ill yet not in jest,

He made me love him with insistence

And couldn't find some better test."

How did he make others love and respect him? Well, of course, a crowd of heirs fussed around him. But does SUCH a family really deserve to be sacredly preserved?

It is difficult to say why Alexei said all this. But he certainly did not expect Nadia to take the conversation seriously. You never know what you can blab over a bottle of beer.

Both were in anticipation of the upcoming travel. The wheels of the train rattled rhythmically, taking them farther and farther away from the boring city.

II

They arrived in Pskov at 8 am and began to wait for Dmitry, who was supposed to arrive four hours later. Nadia certainly could not be called a beauty, despite the fact that she used to think of herself as such. Wide-hipped, full-breasted, with black eyes and braided dark, almost

black hair, she resembled the archetype of the Don Cossack woman, who can stop a galloping horse. A small head with regular facial features strangely did not correspond to the massive proportions of the body.

In order not to waste time, she dressed in camping clothes. It turned out to be a wide lilac T-shirt, which laid down in folds on the protruding breasts, and a short dark blue skirt with a side slit. Alexei looked with curiosity at the weighty thigh exposed in the slit. "Too bad she's not my type", - he thought.

He himself was a 51-year-old man with a regular oval face, a high forehead covered with dark hair with glimpses of noble gray hair, a rather large straight nose, but a small mouth and small, close-set pig eyes. Despite certain shortcomings in appearance, in his youth he was quite handsome. In any case, his photograph hung for a long time on the window of a barbershop next to the house. And even now, women of the appropriate age often admired his slender build, swift elastic gait and powerful legs of a trained cyclist. But his smile was especially attractive. It seemed that she illuminated his face, usually gloomy and thoughtful, with an inner light that brought happiness and joy to everyone around.

Finally, a joyful Dmitry appeared, everyone got busy with their bicycles and soon set off. The great convenience of cycling lies in the fact that the backpack hangs on the rear trunk and does not put pressure on the shoulders. Therefore, at the beginning of the way, Alexei always had the feeling of flying, as if the wings were opening from behind.

First, they drove along a highway warmed up in the sun in an endless stream of cars and roaring smelly trucks overtaking them. Then turned onto a country road. Gone were the cottages. Now there were fields along the road. The sunflowers nodded their heads merrily. To the right, the fast waters of the Velikaya River shone like a blue ribbon. The farther they moved away from the city, the more they immersed themselves in the atmosphere of patriarchal peace and quiet.

They stopped at the village of Volzhenets to freshen up with holy water from Olga's spring. According to legend, the Holy Princess Olga was born nearby and she washed herself more than once from it. Water acquired healing power and helped to cure eye diseases. Until the middle of the 19th century, there was a large influx of pilgrims from all over Russia.

Found a spring. It was located on the very bank of the river under a steep cliff. From above it was covered with a wooden well house. Nearby stood the icon of St. Olga. They opened the lid, looked into the well and... They saw only a hole with a small puddle at the bottom. The spring was empty.

Asked the locals what was the matter. It turned out that a certain visiting woman bought a plot nearby and, like any self-respecting "new Russian", decided to drill a well, but foolishly

drilled through a layer of limestone that held water, and the water left. The old-timers didn't remember this ever happening. The whole village was left without the source from which people took drinking water. They really never had tap water.

- It is necessary to hammer an aspen log into this well, - said the all-knowing Dmitry.

When, a couple of years later, he was again in these parts, he found out that the well had indeed been hammered with something. The water in the spring again went, however, half-heartedly. And the locals, who made a vow to build a chapel in honor of the holy princess, if the water returns, fulfilled their promise.

Meanwhile, our heroes continued to move. The first day was filled with adventure. There was a ford across Velikaya not far from Volzhenets. They went back and forth across the river many times until all the things and bicycles were dragged. It turned out that at some point Alexei cut his toe on a sharp stone. To stop the bleeding, he, on the advice of Dmitry, chewed yarrow and applied this chaw to the wound. The bleeding really stopped. The wound was then disinfected and bandaged.

By the end of the day they reached the place planned for spending the night. The place looked very attractive: a pine forest, a fireplace in a clearing, a path to the river. But already at the entrance to the forest, horseflies began to pursue, and as soon as the travelers stopped, they swooped in a continuous cloud. Apparently, somewhere nearby there was a livestock farm. Nadia hurriedly changed her skirt for pants, set up her tent, climbed in there and said that she would not climb out again until morning. The men, on the other hand, preferred to take a dip first, and then took up the fire. It was getting dark. The work progressed, and soon there were not only firewood, but also logs for sitting.

- What do you say, it was not in vain that we invited Nadia? - Dmitry asked.

- Not in vain. At least it's clear for whom we are doing all this, - Alexei answered. Dmitry agreed. True, it was not at all so clear, since Nadia did not get out.

Meanwhile, as soon as the fire blazed, the horseflies suddenly disappeared and did not appear again in their former numbers even the next day.

- Amazing, - Alexei said.

- They all burned in the fire, - said Dmitry. - They fly into the flames of the fire. Look, there should be a ring of burnt corpses around it.

Alexei tried to make out countless flies lying on the ground, but he saw nothing and did not know whether to believe Dmitry or not.

- Nadia, come out, there are no more horseflies!

But she didn't come out.



River Velikaya (2010)

The next morning, Alexei noticed that Nadia looked at him strangely when he called his wife. It seems she was asking Dmitry something about him. "A woman's heart is a dark jungle. It's better not to attach any importance", - thought Alexei.

After breakfast, they packed the tents and moved on. A day later passed Ostrov, three days later - Novorzhev, then - Velikiye Luki, after which began to go deeper into the Tver region by rural roads. One day a light rain caught them on their way. Travelers leaned on the pedals in the hope of finding some cover, and it really was soon found. It was an abandoned village with dilapidated houses. They drove up to the nearest of them and settled down under the miraculously preserved roof of the veranda. They sat with their legs dangling down on the logs on which the collapsed floor once lay. Took out a dry ration and began to eat bread, cookies, sweets, drinking well water. The rain eased, Dmitry offered to continue moving, but Alexei and Nadia did not want to rush. They enjoyed the tranquility of the environment.

- Wait, let's sit a little longer, - said Alexei.

Around the veranda stood an old garden. Moisture dripped from the leaves of the apple trees. It smelled of freshness, rain and rotten logs. Hearts were filled with a sense of delight and belonging of all of them to each other and to everything around. They wanted to be happy for the whole world, for themselves, for their friends, for the fact that they are here together and they feel good. And again, as at the first halt, it seemed to Alexei that Nadia looked at him strangely.

In the evening he asked her:

- I remember you were going to graduate school. Would you like to come to me? I can be your supervisor. - A seductive smile appeared on his face.

- What will I do?

- I work with colloidal particles. You will help me. I came up with an interesting problem related to the publication of Korean authors, and you can take it on. I don't want to do anything by myself anymore.

Even so? - Dmitry asked. - Yes. I thought about quitting everything altogether, both science and teaching, and go to guard garages.

Nadia said:

- But I want you to teach me astrology as well.

- Of course, I agree. Let's practice regularly, - Alexei was delighted and smiled again.

Thus, they reached an agreement.

It is interesting what Nadia thought of him? Maybe he looks like a person whom no one understands: neither at home, nor at work? But smart, he could tell a lot of interesting things. Shouldn't she help him?

III

If Nadia's thoughts were exactly like that, then she was not far from the truth. True, Alexei had a good and trusting relationship with his wife, an adult daughter was about to get married, and he believed that a strong family rear would allow him to survive any life's hardships. On the other hand, things have not been going very well at work lately.

At one time, he graduated from the Faculty of Physics of Moscow State University, and defended his Ph.D. thesis there. So Alexei was a physicist by education, but then he worked all the time surrounded by chemists. First - at the Institute of Non-Ferrous Metallurgy. He devoted more than twenty years of his life to this organization. The once large and promising institute began to decline in the 1980s. In the nineties, it was finally transferred to self-sufficiency while maintaining a small state support. Salaries did not grow at all, and inflation was at a galloping pace. Ordinary employees, who had barely made ends meet before, became practically beggars and earned extra money wherever they could. Alexei received a small extra income at the Faculty of Chemistry of his native Moscow State University, with which he was again brought together by scientific interests. Together with a couple of students, he was engaged there in scientific work in the field of magnetic materials. Nevertheless, the main burden of supporting the family then fell on his wife, who worked as a pharmacist in a pharmacy.

In the end, Alexei got tired of messing around at the Institute of Non-Ferrous Metallurgy with old, obsolete devices for a penny salary, and he decided to try his hand at teaching. He managed to get a job at the Department of Physics of the Institute of Chemical Technologies, where he began teaching general physics. At first it was a part-time job, then he moved there to a full-time job, and finally parted ways with the Institute of Non-Ferrous Metallurgy. Earnings in his new place turned out to be a little higher and, which was important for those years, was quite stable.

At first, he enthusiastically conducted seminars and laboratory work with students, gaining the teaching experience he lacked, but soon he began to be disappointed here also, and the further, the more. Alexei believed that with his education, work experience and not too old age, he would quickly take leading positions in the department, but it turned out differently. He, as a new employee, was entrusted with lecturing only at evening courses. There were already enough lecturers for daytime students. At the department, which dealt with a non-core subject and did not produce graduates, no one was interested in his scientific work. Only the head of the department once a year was glad that in the report it was possible to write very worthy numbers of scientific publications, in terms of the number and level of which Alexei was not equal in this team. Wages stagnated firmly and, as inflation continued, became smaller and smaller in real terms. There were no prospects for any professional growth. In addition, he was surrounded by

employees, most of whom were already well over sixty, and they looked at him as if he was young and not yet well deserved. Among the elderly, barely able to stand on their feet, he felt almost like an errand boy. Dmitry, with whom he became friends from the very first day of work at the department, was in the same position. The younger teachers could be counted on the fingers. All of them were either part-time workers, or were some strange and useless individuals who were unable to find a more decent income.

At the Faculty of Chemistry, where Alexei continued to do scientific work, the situation, meanwhile, was also ambiguous. Fate brought him there with a very active undergraduate student Slava, who became interested in the topic of colloidal crystals¹. This passion was also passed on to Alexei, who abandoned his previous work with magnetic materials and expended a lot of effort to figure out a new promising direction. Slava's supervisor was the head of the Department of New Materials, who did not interfere with their wonderful creative union. Despite his young age, Slava was a classy chemist and made excellent experiments on synthesis, while Alexei was involved in setting physical problems and interpreting the properties of the materials obtained. As a result, in the four years that Slava studied first at the magistracy and then at graduate school, they published four joint publications in significant Russian and foreign periodicals, established cooperation with Chinese partners, and won a large scientific grant. The authority of Alexei among the employees has grown significantly, and the money received under the grant served as an important material support for both Slava and him: in the 2000s, his wife's earnings were no longer as great as in the nineties.

Slava defended his Ph.D. thesis ahead of schedule and left at the invitation to the United States. In the care of Alexei there were several students, both his own and from among those who were led by Slava. Difficulties began with them. It is worth noting that Slava in some respects completely spoiled Alexei. He not only freed him from chemical experimental work, but he himself was engaged in graduate school with all the students. Slava's favorite was the eldest girl Sonya, who by the time of his defense entered the magistracy. When, after Slava's departure, Alexei came to the laboratory to deal with the remaining household, he had the feeling that she was looking at him as an uninvited guest, a vandal who, in dirty boots, had tumbled into the holy of holies of her adored scientific supervisor. Another student, younger, suddenly stood out by the fact that he began to write all sorts of nasty things about Alexei on the Internet. Having typed his last name in Yandex, Alexei once read with surprise and indignation that, it turns out, he sold some secrets to a Japanese professor. The name of the author was fictitious, but his very identity left no doubt. A student with incredible ambition wrote in a chat that from now on he would independently do this work and defend the honor of Russian science, and some girls agreed with

¹ A colloidal crystal is a spatially periodic structure of colloidal particles. (*Author's note*)

him with approval. Alexei, by virtue of his then conformism, did not inflate a scandal out of this. Ruthlessly break off relations with unworthy people, as well as many other things, later Nadia taught him. However, this student did not spoil his mood for long: a year later, without finishing his studies at the magistracy, he married Sonya, who defended her diploma, and both left for the States following Slava. One more student was lost to Aleksei due to his own stupidity and inept leadership: she left to do a master's degree to another supervisor from an academic institute. There was only one youngest student left, who by the beginning of that summer, when Alexei went on a hike with Nadia, also decided to leave him.

Alexei was left with nothing. He lost his previous qualifications, but never learned how to grow colloidal crystals on his own. Most likely, it was ignorance of all the subtleties of experimental work that was the main reason for the subsequent failures. Indeed, the supervisor must have unquestioned authority for the student; the situation when a student feels the supervisor's weakness is not normal.

Only the support of a competent chemist could rectify the situation. Alexei himself did not even realize to what extent he needed the help of a student, partner and like-minded person then, but Nadia, apparently, felt this with her womanly heart.

IV

In September, Alexei began to bring Nadia up to date. He asked the last student who had recently left him to show her the techniques of synthesis. Nadia learned them easily and quickly; after all, she was a certified chemist, moreover, a very good student. Then he formulated tasks for her further work: to develop a technique for the reproducible production of particles of different sizes and to implement the method of ordering them published by Korean authors. Nadia took up reading relevant literature. Experiments began, and at first everything seemed to be going in a satisfactory way. True, the newly minted graduate student refused to follow Alexei's advice to work at Moscow State University, where there was a good experimental base. Instead, she asked the Professor for a room at the Institute of Chemical Technologies and dragged some of the equipment from the university laboratory there. She needed to be located near her library, where she still continued to work: it was impossible to live on a postgraduate scholarship alone.

Alexei took special pleasure in studying astrology with Nadia. He began by saying that astrologers are not gods, they do not see everything, even, one might say, very little, but, nevertheless, there are questions that are worked out very carefully in astrology. Note that at first Nadia considered this subject frivolous, but very quickly her attitude changed, and she saw all its depth. This opinion of hers was strengthened when her own birth horoscope was parsed. The

resulting astropsychological portrait turned out to be very plausible. There were also some unexpected findings. So, for example, when they touched on the topic of parents, Alexei noticed that there is a sign in Nadia's horoscope indicating that one of them offended her. Nadia left it without comment.

- Look better what my health can be, - she said.

Alexei replied that she must have problems with her stomach, liver and heart. Well, she did not hide her stomach problems. But about the heart, on the contrary, she did not tell anyone.

- Yes, I have a congenital heart defect, but nothing serious, - she informed sparingly.

Every Thursday evening, Alexei waited for Nadia in the Professor's laboratory for the next class, and every time she arrived at the agreed time. This brought Alexei to ecstatic tenderness. "I wonder what she really comes for? What if she doesn't come next time?" But the next time she came again. Alexei was almost happy. Only the distance that existed between them was upsetting. As a long, wide table, on opposite sides of which, facing each other, they usually sat primly: he in a suit and tie, she in a long dark dress. But how much he wanted to sit next to her, to attract her to him, to hug her... But Alexei did not dare to take such actions. Still, he is married and clearly not a couple for her; he has to be careful not to spoil anything, he quite rightly thought.

It was already spring when they got to the topic of the Black Moon¹.

- I have the Black Moon in the higher education and science sector. Maybe I shouldn't have gone to graduate school? - Nadia asked.

- Well, this is not the most significant factor in the horoscope, - Alexei answered. - It may not manifest itself at all for many years, and then it will play a dirty trick. Let's hope everything goes well.

- The Black Moon can give a special type of love, love-passion, as a rule, painful and unhappy, - he continued, and then approached the question from the other side. - A nine-year cycle in a person's life is associated with the period of circulation of the Black Moon. Take, for example, a woman. Until the age of nine, this is a child, an almost sexless creature. From nine to eighteen - a nymphet, from eighteen to twenty-seven - a girl of marriageable age, from twenty-seven to thirty-six - a woman in her prime, from thirty-six to forty-five - Balzac age, from forty-five to fifty-four - "berry again"², and after fifty-five - a retired grandmother.

After listening to this unusual classification, Nadia suddenly said:

¹ The Black Moon is the apogee of the lunar orbit. (*Author's note*)

² "At forty-five a woman is a berry again" - the Russian saying means that at forty-five a woman becomes sexy again. (*Author's note*)

- Don't tell me more about the Black Moon. I don't want to hear about it. I don't care about love at all. I am frigid.

Alexei froze in surprise. "My aunt! People don't usually talk about things like that, - he thought. - What was it? Warning? Request for help? And is she really frigid?"

Returning home, he took out a medical guide and read: "Frigidity (sexual coldness) is the weakening or absence of sexual desire and (or) the inability of a woman to experience sexual satisfaction (orgasm). Frigidity can be caused by a number of different factors." Reading the reasons did not give anything: they all seemed incredible to Alexei. "Weird. Very strange. She is not afraid of men, they do not disgust her. It is clear that she enjoys male company. Who drove it into her head that she is frigid? Or did she do it to herself? It would be nice to sort this out."

"What if she really asked for help? How could I help her with this?" He imagined the matter in such a way that he must get to her erogenous zones, caress them, achieve excitement, and then the mythical frigidity will dissipate like smoke, without a trace. True, the question arose, what would happen next after such a "cure". What could be the implications for their relationship? "Well, whatever happens, the girl is worth it", - he thought. His inflamed imagination was already drawing erotic scenes one more exciting than the other. If, in the end, she becomes pregnant from him, he continued his reasoning, then he will not leave her. Even if the wife kicks him out of the house. "Let her kick out. I will endure." But, nevertheless, the best option would be if, after gaining sensuality, she found herself a younger partner and married him. Then all problems would be solved. He slowed down his erotic fantasies, cooled off a bit and, already in a more sober state, decided that it was probably better to wait and do nothing for the time being. "Let's wait and see what kind of frigidity it is," - he concluded.

Chapter 2.

Nadiusha

I

Nadiusha was born in one of the provincial towns of the Southern Volga region. Mom was an emergency doctor, she worked in shifts, and her daughter often stayed alone with her dad. The strange girl did not like to mess with dolls, but she loved to collect technical designers with him. Flying planes and helicopters, for example. Often she herself invented what needs to be done, drew a sketch, and dad turned a part on it at the factory where he worked.

Everything changed when she was 10 years old. Nadiusha barely had time to acquire the features of an angular teenager when he raped her. Taking advantage of the girl's confusion and fear, he pulled off her panties, tied her hands with a bandage, threw her on the floor like a sheaf

of straw and did his dirty work. Nadiusha lay in the blood for a long time, while her father put himself in order in the bathroom. Then he took her to the bathroom also, ordered her to wash herself, said that he hadn't done anything terrible to her, and that in no case should she dare to tell her mother anything.

More than physical pain, the girl was tormented by mental pain. Who is she to him - a soulless doll? How could he so neglect her will, her feelings and desires, her love for him, finally? And at the same time enjoy her pain, get pleasure from everything that happens! The unfortunate girl could not come to her senses. Through a veil of tears, an airplane caught her eye. Angrily, she broke it and threw it out the window.

A couple of days later, when her mother was on duty again, her father raped her again.

"The truth always comes out", - Nadiusha learned this truth very quickly. The mother noticed oddities in the behavior of the child, examined her daughter and was horrified. The conversation with his father was short: he left and did not appear in Nadiusha's life again.

Mother was a strong and strong-willed woman. She tried to do everything she could so that the growing daughter did not feel left out. Despite the difficult years, the girl had everything she needed, but the family could not afford more. Even ordinary sweets rarely visited their table. Even so her mother had big plans for her future. She dreamed of her daughter's medical career.

Her daughter, meanwhile, studied well. She grew up as a determined, very independent, introverted and at the same time cocky girl. She was known as a hooligan at school, but, nevertheless, she was trusted by teachers and parents. It was believed that, wherever the children were, if Nadiusha was with them, then nothing bad would happen. By the end of the school, she blossomed and became an extraordinary beauty. The guys looked at her on the street with admiration.

It's time for the last school year. She had to decide on her future profession. The mother imagined that her daughter would go to study at the Voronezh Medical Institute, where she herself had once studied. She will live with relatives with whom she herself once lived. In the institute itself, everyone is familiar. With future work - no problem. Everything is thought out and built.

But Nadiusha suddenly said that she did not want to be a doctor. The mother couldn't believe her ears. "The girl plays pranks", - she decided. But the girl insisted. She talked about it many, many times. Why she did not want to become a doctor, she herself could not really explain, but she only understood that it was none of her business. She liked mathematics, liked technology, she was drawn to technical and engineering universities. Mother did not even want to listen: "What other engineering universities? How can you like it? Nonsense. Some prank."

For herself, such areas of activity were of no interest, and therefore she believed that they could not be liked in principle.

Toward the end of the school year, the debate got tougher. There were several quarrels. As a result, the mother categorically stated that Nadiusha should not even think about any nonsense. It will be as she sees fit. Voronezh Medical Institute, period. She feeds her, she decides.

And again, as it had once been during the violation from her father, Nadiusha felt that a person close to her was encroaching on her freedom and will. Not immediately, but gradually, a firm decision crystallized: "This will not be. I'll run away, but I'll do it my way." The mother was preparing for her daughter's departure to Voronezh. And the daughter, with all the seriousness and thoroughness that she was capable of, began to prepare for the escape. To Moscow. There are many universities, there are plenty to choose from. Take the Petrochemical Institute, for example. Applicants are given a hostel, fine. And the exams are suitable (the Unified State Exam had not yet been introduced).

The girl began to secretly save money. Of those that mother sometimes gave for pocket money. Bought a train ticket as soon as she found out mother's work schedule for July. Chose the day when mother was supposed to work at night. In the morning, she will come tired, go to bed and not pay attention to her absence. And in the evening, a neighbor will bring her an envelope with a letter in which it will be written that Nadiusha has begun an independent life and asks not to worry and not to look for her.

While she thought about all this, she experienced more than one painful minute. And remorse, and fear, and self-pity. There was a little bit of everything in moments of mental weakness. Almost all the accumulated money was spent on the ticket, but this did not bother her. The spiritual uplift caused by the conscious desire for freedom and independence did not leave, and three days before the date on which her mother and her departure to Voronezh was scheduled, the train, rapidly picking up speed, carried her to unknown Moscow. With bated breath, she listened to the sound of wheels. The Rubicon has been crossed. There is no return and cannot be. And everything, of course, will work out, because it should be so.

II

The train brought Nadiusha to the Paveletsky railway station. First of all, she sent a letter to her mother from the railway station post office and indicated the restant address for return correspondence. By the way, they did not have a landline phone, neither did they have a mobile phone. A mobile phone was then generally considered an attribute of a rich person in the provinces, communication was maintained mainly through mail. In an emergency, Nadiusha

could call a neighbor. Surprisingly, she accurately guessed the reaction of her mother, who did not look for her and waited for the prodigal daughter herself to come home with a confession.

Out on a wide square, the fugitive found herself in a new world. The tall buildings and busy traffic were breathtaking. She had never seen anything like it before. For the first time in her life, she went down to the subway and began to look for a way to the Petrochemical Institute. She was interested in this issue in advance, leafing through brochures for applicants, so there were no major problems. The surprise arose later, when the girl began to apply to the selection committee. It turned out that she had to pay for the hostel right away, but she had no money. In dismay, Nadiusha went out into the street and began to wander around the hostel in confusion, looking at the building from all sides.

Not far from the entrance stood a group of young guys. They noticed an unfamiliar beauty dressed modestly in a T-shirt and jeans, whose luxurious dark hair spilled over her shoulders. Someone called out to her: "Girl, can we help you?" Nadiusha told them her story. The guys only held out: "Yes-ah-ah ..." Then they began to deliberate. One of them, who turned out to be a graduate student living in the hostel, suggested:

- The room next to me is now empty, everyone has left for the summer, and they left me the keys to water the flowers. You can live there while you take your exams.

The other guy had something to do with administration and personnel department. After talking for a while with the guard, he said:

- You can come in, you are welcome. I'll make sure your name is on the list of persons who can pass by showing the passport.

Nadiusha was not even very surprised, taking everything as if it was the natural course of things. Rising to the twelfth floor, she moved into an empty three-bed block with the only condition to water the flowers instead of the graduate student who had entrusted her with the keys.

The company that Nadiusha met at the entrance to the hostel played a big role in the first months of her life in Moscow. Among the young people who met her then, one Chechen stood out for his appearance - a tall, slender guy with a black beard, a third-year student. His name was Rashid, and he was known for making and selling pirated movie CDs. Rashid offered the girl he liked to work as a courier, that is, to deliver discs to customers. As a result, the financial problem was solved. The modest money that he paid her was enough not only for food, but also to pay for the hostel until the end of the year after successful admission to the university.

From the first of September, Nadiusha has already become a full-fledged student. She was settled third in a kopeck piece. She slept on a cot that barely fit between two beds. There were no conditions for the learning. In this tightness, she generally tried to spend as little time as

possible, especially since student life was in full swing, and there was always a place to go: cinema, discos, concerts of the author's song, KVN¹ performances, feasts on the occasion of someone's birthday captured and swirled. By the end of autumn, relations with her mother improved, she sent Nadiusha warm boots and a fur coat. At the same time, the proud and independent daughter refused money, writing that she earns enough, not to mention scholarships. Both of them found that they could well do without each other, and this was a kind of discovery for them.

Everything was going well until the girl failed the first exam session. She simply did not expect any problems here, believing that everything would happen somehow by itself, as easily and naturally as she passed the entrance exams. But it turned out differently, and after an unsuccessful attempt to retake one of the exams, she was doomed to be expelled.

The students began to leave for the winter holidays. Rashid was going to go home to Grozny also. He suggested:

- Nadiusha, come with me. You will see my house, the city, you will meet my parents. You'll like it.

Without thinking twice, she agreed. She, in fact, did not care where and why to go. It was necessary, after all, to do something. Nadiusha was least of all worried about the continued attacks of terrorists in Chechnya.

A few days later, in the evening, after a tiring journey with transfers, since it was not possible to buy tickets for a direct train, they were already in Grozny. At the exit from the station, a captious policeman checked the documents and inquired about the purpose of the visit, then Rashid took a taxi. Outside the car window floated the gloomy silhouettes of buildings, alternating with fences, bashfully covering something that sometimes looked like ruins, and sometimes - like just started construction. The farther they went, the ruins, with collapses from the hit shells, became more and more obvious and frightening. Small houses, restored by the efforts of the inhabitants themselves, flickered between the ruins, until, in the end, the surroundings disappeared into darkness due to the lack of lighting, and only lights in individual windows and rare passers-by indicated that people lived here. Finally they reached, apparently, the very outskirts, since nothing further could be seen at all. They got out of the car near a three-story old brick house designed for several families, which had survived after the hostilities. Several holes in the wall were filled with fresh bricks. Around - only dirt, wastelands and the outlines of the ruins barely visible in the dark from the side of the city.

¹ KVN – a humorous performance popular among Russian students. (*Author's note*)

The owners were already waiting for them. An elderly father came out, looking unfriendly at Nadiusha, and two brothers, as tall and slender as Rashid himself. The mother appeared in a black shawl, busy in the kitchen.

- Meet my future bride, - said Rashid.

“Since when have I become a bride?” - Nadiusha wondered to herself.

- I did not have time to tell you: I want you to become my wife, - Rashid explained to the perplexed girl.

- I'll think about it, - she replied restrainedly.

- But why? Don't you like me? After all, you will be my bride!

- I did not say that!

- Come on, don't put on an act! - Rashid got up too. - You should have guessed why I brought you here.

Blood rushed to Nadiusha's head. She grabbed her bag and was ready to run without looking back, but hesitated, because it was not clear where to run on the outskirts of this unfamiliar, scary and dark city, living in the conditions of a counter-terrorist operation. Only now did she realize the full horror of her situation.

Meanwhile, the whole family jumped up from their seats, and some kind of hubbub arose in a language Nadiusha did not understand. It looked like the parents were reproaching Rashid for something, and he was embarrassedly making excuses. Finally, the older brother, who looked at Nadiusha with interest, undertook to explain:

- My brother is just a pig and boor. I ask you to stay. It is not customary for a girl to wander alone at night. You can sleep in my room, and I will find a place for myself. In two days I'm going to Moscow, and if you want I'll take you there, but until then no one will touch you here.

Nadiusha agreed. At night, she could not fall asleep in any way, she kept thinking that if she trusted someone, it would certainly turned out that he was a scoundrel. All sorts of horrors seemed to her, it seemed that the door would open, all three brothers would come in, grab her, gag her mouth, begin to mock and rape her. She fought, cried, lowed through the gag, but at the most tense moment, when all the worst was to happen, she suddenly woke up.

The next two days dragged on endlessly. The girl tried to catch everyone's eyes less, and especially Rashid. However, his brother fulfilled his promise, and in due time they were on the train to Moscow. How he managed to get her a ticket, she did not specify. He, like a gentleman, refused to take money for it from the guest. All the way she tried to smile at him in order to work off her debt, but as soon as they arrived and went out onto the platform of the station, she immediately said that she no longer wanted to see either him or his dear brother.

Chapter 3.

Hiking again

I

Summer has come, it's time to get ready for a new hike. This time there was assembled a large group. One old friend of Alexei and Dmitry, an experienced cyclist, with an adult daughter and eleven-year-old son Sania, and a few other people decided to take part in the travel. All together went by train to Sebezh on Friday, July 13, 2012.

Alexei had a series of troubles before this event. There was an impression that some force warned him against participating in the campaign. He had to urgently deal with several health problems. Literally on the eve of departure, his eye suddenly turned red, Alexei took a bottle of chloramphenicol with him and for a long time was engaged in treatment. He did not carry out an astrological analysis of the moment of departure, but upon his return he was surprised to find that an asteroid bearing the name Nadia had come to the Ascendant¹ of his birth horoscope by that time.

The journey began in weather not too rainy, but cold. In order to pedal, it was convenient. They drove through the southern regions of the Pskov region, not far from the border with Belarus. All the way passed from lake to lake, one more beautiful than the other. Here was a small lake, Maly Zelenets, lost in the forests of the Sebezh National Park. They had to pay a little to stay there. Here was a long spit on a waving under the gusts of wind lake Sviblo. Here was a chic, with a magnificent sandy shore, lake Nevedro. And here was another modest forest lake with the strange name Leshni, which they reached by the end of the first week. Nearby, in a clearing, fishermen from the nearest (two kilometers away) village equipped a fire pit, a table and a bench. The place looked very cozy, and the friends decided to stand for one day, not to go anywhere.

The next day, the arrow of the camping thermometer froze at around 15 degrees. The heat from the fire did not reach the bench. Everyone froze sitting on it, and the southerner Nadia - especially. Dmitry, laughing and joking, began to warm her back with his protruding potbelly. Following him, Alexei did the same. Embracing her shoulders, he snuggled up from behind and warmed her with his chest and belly. Sania did not lag behind, spinning on Nadia's knees.

There was plenty of time, people decided to go for blueberries. Three remained in the camp: Aleksei, Nadia and Sania. They talked about rubbish. Nadia was still freezing, and Alexei continued to warm her up. The occupation, as he observed, was quite pleasant. He tried stroking

¹ Ascendant - the rising degree of the ecliptic, one of the key points of the horoscope. (*Author's note*)



Evening on Lake Leshni (2012)

her head, and she seemed to enjoy it. Thoughts about sex began to appear: he wonder if he offered this, would she refuse or not? For the fact that she would agree, he mentally gave five percent, and for the fact that she would give a slap - eighty-five. In the end, it seemed to him that the best situation in order to find out this burning question could not be found. "It is better if I dot all the "and" now, rather than suddenly this topic pops up unexpectedly in some other, less suitable conditions, for example, on a joint trip to a foreign conference. Oh, that would be a bad time to sort things out!" - he thought. He could not vouch for the fact that this topic would never come up at all. It was too noticeable that Nadia treated him somehow in a special way, not just as a simple scientific supervisor. There was something else on her part, and he wanted to know what it was. Finally, he could not stand it and decided to utter the words that were spinning on his tongue:

- I would like to warm you in your tent.

There was a pause for a while. Sania pricked up her ears. Then Nadia replied:

- Go, make me hot tea on the fire, and then let's go to the tent.

Alexei decided that she was joking, and did not move.

- What are you standing for? Bring some tea and let's go.

Alexei, not believing his ears, was playing for time, hoping that the trick would be clarified and the situation would be resolved.

- Come on, finally, - Nadia repeated for the third time.

There was nothing left but to go and deal with the extinct fire.

II

Aleksei did not have time to boil tea, when the rest of the company came from the forest with full bowlers of blueberries with jokes and laughter. Nadia acted as if nothing had happened. However, from that moment on, Alexei's attitude towards her changed. He was tormented by the question of whether she was joking then or not. He cherished the hope that not, and this thought warmed him, like a warm spring breeze filled with the fragrance of the earth waking up from winter hibernation. Such a young girl was not indifferent to him! It so warmed male pride, so inspired, so exalted and strengthened self-confidence! Every day he looked for and found confirmation of her disposition towards him: now Nadia smiled, now they held hands, now she agreed to ride with him on a boat that turned up happily, now they stood together on the shore, admiring the play of the sunset over the lake ... He fell in love with her with tender romantic love, as a schoolboy falls in love with his first girlfriend. Only for him it was a swan song: he understood that the unexpected feeling came to him, most likely for the last time.

- You must have missed something in your youth, - his mother would tell him later. Maybe she will be right about something: in his student years, Alexei was too serious to devote time to such nonsense.

In addition, it turned out that he had a lot in common with Nadia: both loved hiking and traveling, both knew how to look at things enthusiastically and romantically, both were interested in mysticism, both played badminton well, and generally loved the same games. She loved to ride a boat - he could row well. She was an excellent swimmer and could swim as far as no one else dared - he could freely swim even further.

However, several days passed, and Alexei began to notice that Nadia seemed to be straining his obsessive attention. Finally, one day, when he tried to hug her in the water, she pushed him away and said that Sania was watching them from the shore. That evening, after supper, she invited him to take a walk along the road.

For some time they walked in silence. Apparently, Nadia was embarrassed and did not know where to start. Finally said:

- Alexei Vladimirovich, today you have crossed all boundaries. I want to end this.

From the very first words, Alexei realized that he was mistaken about her, and a very unpleasant conversation was ahead.

- Tell me, please, - she continued, - what did I do wrong that gave rise to your behavior?

- There was nothing like you are asking about, - he replied. - I'm just not made of stone. So much time to spend with you. I wanted to find out the relationship. And then, tell me, why didn't you just slap me on Leshni? Then everything would be over at once.

- It's all about Sania. He listened to us very carefully.

It suddenly dawned on Alexei. The little scoundrel! From the height of his years, he did not take him into account at all, but meanwhile this little boy blabbed everything to everyone. And she just didn't want to make a laughingstock out of him!

- I would like to restore purely friendly relations, - she suggested.

- But I don't believe in friendship between a man and a woman. It exists only for the time being.

This answer seemed to puzzle and upset Nadia.

- But you are married! But what about the duty to the wife?

- I gave her all my debts a long time ago.

- But you can hurt her!

- Why hurt? I just don't need to tell her about our relationship, that's all!

- What if the truth comes out?

- I have her tacit consent to spend time with you.

She did not believe and suddenly gained the gift of eloquence. She talked about the fact that there are rules of morality and ethics developed by mankind, that it is very ugly to violate them, that he had to keep his purity and fidelity, but not chase skirts and not jeopardize the integrity of the family. She ended the whole speech with the words that she saw him standing very high, and now he fell very low in her eyes.

“I didn't think that this girl would read morals to me! - Alexei thought. – What does she want? Back to purely friendly relations? Again stiffly sit opposite each other?” But after a week of inspiration, this thought was almost unbearable for him. After all, he just wanted a little more freedom, a little less constraint. The most painful question about sex was for him, at his age, in itself not so important, as it was important to believe that it is possible in principle. To see a carrot in front of him, which would give strength to strive forward. After all, what is a woman who fundamentally rejects sex? Tea without theine, coffee without odor, cigarette without smoke, beer without alcohol. What's left? Only frigidity and related problems.

He asked:

- Do I have any hope? You are Hope¹, right? You cannot deprive me of it.
- But there is almost no hope.
- “Almost no” isn't zero, is it?
- It's practically zero. Don't count on it.
- Listen, Nadia, but you can at least pretend that you love me. I do not need anything else.

And he read Pushkin's verses to her, substituting her name in them:

*Nadezhda! I ask to be pitied,
I do not dare to plead for love;
Love, for the sins I have committed,
I am perhaps unworthy of.
But make believe! Your gaze, dear elf,
Is fit to conjure with, believe me!
Ah, it is easy to deceive me!...
I long to be deceived myself!²*

Nadia didn't answer.

For half the night, Alexei mentally went over the details of the conversation. It would seem that everything is clear: he imagined God knows what, and she firmly lowered him to the ground. But did she get it right? Did he explain everything properly? Why did she insist all the

¹ Nadezhda, Nadia, Nadiusha – Russian name, translated means "hope". (Author's note)

² Fragment from Pushkin's poem “Confession”. Translated by K. Eiermann, modified by S. Vodennikov.

time that he acted unworthily, lowly? What did he actually do? Expressed in words the desire that he really had? But isn't it better to know a person as he is than to make a bronze statue out of him? And then, why did she say at the end that he wants to take what is badly lying? It's kind of embarrassing even. Why only "take"? Why not "give"? Was he only thinking about himself? After all, his goal was, on the contrary, to find out how she relates to him! Even if he acted extremely awkwardly. And what? Does she want nothing from him? Is it because she's frigid? "I do not believe!" - he said to himself.

Morning has come. Alexey went to wash. A bright sun rose in a cloudless sky. The lake gleamed under his rays, scattering many glare in all directions. Soon Nadia also came up.

- I do not take what is badly lying. I try to give others what they may need, - he told her.

- I don't want anything from you! - she replied.

Sunlight at once faded for Alexei. It wasn't just the words she'd said, though they confirmed his worst fears. The main thing, however, was in the icy tone in which they were spoken. As if she doused him with the grave cold of the upcoming separation. Instantly he imagined to himself all that mournful path to a complete break, which she outlined. She doesn't need anything! She doesn't need him, or his love, or his friendship, or trips with him, or evenings with him, or astrology classes - nothing is needed! How, I wonder, she will refuse all this? And what about graduate school? Is she ready to sacrifice it too? For what? To never see him again?

"But what if I try to tie her tighter? Fall her in love with myself? - he thought desperately. - What will she do then? How can she break these bonds? And can she? There will be something to see. To perish, so with music!"

But will he be able to carry out this wild plan? Is it possible to make a girl love him if she doesn't want to? And what means does he have for this? There are none! So what is he doing here on this hike then? Why not immediately leave the whole company and go to the train?

With a heavy heart, he got on his bicycle and rode after the others.

III

For two days Alexei remained in painful reflection. All this time, Nadia seemed to be waiting for something from him, some new explanations or apologies. But what could he add to what has already been said?

Sanka kept spinning around Nadia; even on the road sought to ride next to her.

- Protects, - said Dmitry. - Tries to protect her from you.

"Well, well, what children have become, however! What a knight on a school bicycle", - Alexei thought.

He was mainly concerned with two questions. Firstly, what does Nadia want from him: restore friendly relations or break all ties altogether. Secondly, how could "purely friendly relations" be restored? What exactly is needed for this: do not touch her, do not look at her? Is it possible? What steps in this direction does she expect from him?

First he came up with a way to find the answer to the first question. It seemed to him useless to ask Nadia straight on: yesterday she said one thing, today another, tomorrow she will come up with something else. It's better to somehow do without new explanations. Just to ask her for a hug. If she hugs, then she wants him to stay with her. If not, then it is necessary to leave the whole company and forget once and for all about the girl who excited him, no matter how hard it may be.

By the evening of the second day after the previous explanation, they, with great difficulty, overcoming a deep stream and an overgrown field, made their way to Lake Edritsa with beautiful clear and transparent water, which had not been visited for a long time. In the shade of tall bird cherry bushes, the remains of a path along which people used to go to the lake have been preserved. Here they set up camp. Alexei decided that it was no longer worth delaying the conversation, and asked Nadia to step aside. They moved fifteen meters away; the girl's sandals slipped through the mud on the path.

Before Alexei had time to collect his thoughts, Nadia began to attack him with questions. He was perplexed. He did not understand what words she expected from him. What could have changed in those two days? He repeated the thesis that he did not believe in friendship between a man and a woman.

- In that case, I'll leave graduate school! - Nadia screamed. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she rushed back to the fire.

Cursing everything and everyone, Alexei went after her. It was no longer possible to hide the scandal.

- You want to leave graduate school, and I'm trying to do everything possible to prevent this from happening, - he said, and again asked her to step aside. In order not to get into the mud once more, they went in the other direction. It was necessary to finally make the intended proposal, otherwise everything would become meaningless.

- I propose to conclude an agreement.

- What?

- Can you just hug me?

- I can.

- And promise it won't be the last time?

- Yes.

He felt inspired and could no longer stop.

- And promise me that you will walk with me by the arm?

- Yes.

- Well, then hug the same!

Alexei was amazed at how swiftly she hugged him.

"Thank God, that's all resolved!" - he thought. Of course, he was not going to pester her in the future with demands for hugs. She does not reject him - that was the main thing for him.

More than two months later, Nadia told him how she herself felt about this conversation on Edritsa: "You, having driven me ankle-deep into the mud (literally), declared that if I did not satisfy your sexual demands, I could go to hell, because you do not know how you can treat me differently. Later, however, you graciously allowed me to stay on the terms of taking me by the arm and hugging me. After that, a righteous anger arose in me, and I decided to teach you a lesson. There was no specific plan, there was just a desire to fool around and quit."

It turned out that both of them were dissatisfied with the actions of the other, and each wanted to turn his partner's head. In order to teach a lesson, so to speak, and arrange a stormy parting, if there is no way to avoid it. And this explosive mixture of mutual affection, love, wounded pride, distrust, despair and anger was simply doomed to explode someday. But Alexei did not understand this yet. For the first time in three days, he fell asleep quietly. "She will stay with me and everything will be fine, - he thought. - Besides, I managed to negotiate permission to walk arm in arm with her. At least there's some use in this whole stupid situation. So what more can I want!"

IV

The next day, Alexei firmly decided to bring the conversation to an end.

- Nadia, - he turned to her, - if I behave in an unworthy manner, then please say the magic word "key", and I will give you a tool with which you can control me.

She laughed:

- How difficult! It's better to hit the head with a frying pan right away!

On that day, they went to Lake Zhizhitskoe, known not only for its beauty and gigantic size, but also for the no less gigantic monument to the composer Mussorgsky, standing on its northern shore. Mussorgsky was born in these parts in the family estate near the village of Karevo. The history of the Mussorgsky family and himself is fraught with amazing mysteries

and secrets. He even corrected his surname for himself: his real surname, according to the register of births, was "Musirsky". And the date of his birth on March 16, 1839, indicated on the tombstone in St. Petersburg, is also incorrect: on March 16, 1881, he died, and was born on March 21! But the composer himself was constantly mistaken and said that he was born on the 16th. Why? Did he know the date of his death in advance? And another amazing story here. His grandfather Alexei Grigorievich did everything to get rid of the serf yard girl who gave birth to a child - the future father of the composer. Even tried to marry her off. But you can't escape fate, and at the age of sixty he married a forty-two-year-old servant. Was she a witch?

They arrived at the lake quite early. Putting up tents, Alexei and Nadia went for a walk along the coast together. Without hesitation, he immediately took her arm and took great pleasure from it. Not far from the place where the camp was set up, another clearing was discovered, very skillfully equipped by some artist, whose name was on a sign by the road. The sign also contained a request to all visitors to maintain cleanliness and order. There were many funny figures of people and animals carved from wood in the clearing, and a brightly painted pavilion flaunted in the corner. From the shore a long wooden footbridge led into the water, at the very end of which a bench was placed. It was evident that this cozy place was taken care of very much.

After dinner, both of them, without saying a word, went there. When Alexei went out into the clearing, Nadia, dressed in a black shirt and a patterned skirt below her knees, was already sitting at the far end of the bench, looking thoughtfully into the water. Not wanting to tear her away from her thoughts, he silently sat a little further away. After a while, she herself moved closer to him. Now together they enjoyed the beauty of the mirror surface of the lake. Twilight began to thicken, long dark shadows lay down from the shore. Everything around was still and silent.

- What if so? - she suddenly asked mischievously, quickly sprawled on the bench, shook off her sandals and put her bare feet on his knees.

Alexei's delight knew no bounds. "God, there is happiness in the world!" - he thought, pressing her legs to him, caressing them with rapture, admiring them from fingertips to knees and above, to the edge of the skirt, which he tried to move as far as possible, mentally trying to penetrate where he was forbidden to enter. And at the same time he was careful and tried to avoid provocative actions. "I must awaken her gradually; and also the frying pan can be somewhere nearby," - he rightly believed. He remembered this whole episode as one of the brightest and most delightful moments of their relationship.



Monument to Mussorgsky near Lake Zhizhitskoe

This picture is taken from the personal website of Olga Kharitonova
http://musicfantasy.ucoz.ru/publ/istorija_pamjatnika_m_p_musorgskomu/1-1-0-1



**View of Lake Zhizhitskoe from the hill on which the monument to
Mussorgsky stands (2012)**

Meanwhile, their joint hike was coming to an end. On the next lake, the travelers were supposed to spend one day together, and then split up: part of the group, together with Alexei, was going to head to Staraya Toropa and return from there to Moscow, and the other part, together with Nadia and Dmitry, planned to continue the trip for another two weeks.

A narrow but long lake, where they safely reached, was surrounded by a pine forest. At the opposite bank from the camp, beautiful yellow water lilies grew. During the morning swim, Alexei swam there and delivered one such flower to Nadia. Nadia took it and kept with her all day, as if she had nothing more valuable. By the end of the day it was worn out, and then Alexei brought and gave her another one.

In the evening, everyone sat on logs around the fire. Ate, a general conversation ensued. Alexei sat down next to Nadia and hugged her. There were no objections from her.

- Where is your frying pan? - he asked.

- No, I don't need it now, - she answered, and laid her head on his shoulder.

So they remained sitting in an embrace. The people gradually dispersed into the tents, until, finally, everyone dispersed, and they continued to sit in the ring of night darkness that surrounded on all sides, more and more weakly dispersed by the uneven light of the slowly dying fire.

The next morning both were sad and thoughtful. They began to collect things. Took a couple of collective pictures as a keepsake and parted in different directions.

V

Two weeks passed, Nadia returned from the hike. During all this time, she wrote only once that the connection was unstable, the road was beautiful, but she scratched all her legs. There were still about two weeks left before the beginning of September, and Alexei wanted to extend, at least for this period of time, that feeling of spiritual unity with which they parted. Taking advantage of the fact that his wife left for a few days, he took the risk of inviting Nadia to dine together in a cafe. To his surprise, she agreed and came. The dinner was a success; the conversation was lively and informal. Not wanting to let her go, Alexei suggested that they go for a walk further along the Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure. He had not been there for a very long time, and he was curious to see what was interesting there now. It turned out that there was nothing, except for the model of the Soviet space shuttle Buran on the embankment, which attracted a crowd of parents with children. Passing through the throng of central alleys, Alexei led Nadia further into the wooded part of the park, holding her by the arm. There were fewer people, walking paths described intricate loops between the hills, here and there benches

stood in the shade of trees. They sat down to rest on one of them. Alexei decided to talk a little about work.

- Nadia, - he began, - the Moscow State University is offering me a full-time position.

Nadya looked at him with surprise.

- If I agree, then I will stay part-time at the Institute of Chemical Technologies and continue to lead you. I have until the end of the year to respond. But I would like to understand in advance what and how I will do after that, and already now take on a certain load at the university with an eye to the future. I'm going to teach a special course there that you could take. You may find this useful.

- Yes with pleasure.

Alexei was very pleased to hear this. He continued:

- In addition, it is customary in the department to start teaching students experimental work from the very first year, and therefore I had to think about taking on some first-year student. However, I have one difficulty here, connected with the fact that the student under my supervision will have to defend a term paper in inorganic chemistry in the spring. And what a chemist I am - you know. So I want to consult with you if you can partially take over the leadership of the student and help him with writing the term paper. I will take him only if you promise to help me.

- But why do you need him at all?

- You see, - Alexei smiled, - I'm afraid that today you are here, and tomorrow you can leave, and I will be left alone, without an assistant.

- Yes, I really can leave, - Nadia suddenly answered very seriously. - Alright, let's take a first-year student.

- This is amazing. I hope he helps you too. What kind of work we will plan, we will talk later. First we need to deal with a person, I'll do it soon. But I ask you very much not to abandon him, to bring him to the defense of his coursework.

They sat for a while, hugging each other. Suddenly Alexei, applying force, abruptly knocked her over with his hand and pressed her chest to his knees. Nadia had only time to gasp slightly in surprise, as he had already begun to stroke her hair, shoulders and back. She softened and indulged in the sensation of a wave of blissfully languid warmth and peace surging over her. Who and when stroked her last time, like a child? It must have been a long time ago.

Having luxuriated enough, they got up and moved towards the exit.

- Alexei Vladimirovich, I love you! - he heard incredible words that were impossible to believe. Did he misheard?

- I love you, and Dmitry, and Professor too. I love the whole world!

Still, women are a big mystery. What was it? An accidental confession? Alexei then wondered about it for a long time.

In the subway, he apologized and said that now he could not walk her to the hostel. He began to worry about the long absence from home. The anxiety was not in vain: the daughter was already waiting and wondered where he had disappeared for so long. "Well, I guess I came just in time. I shall have to continue to be careful. There is no need to create problems for yourself from scratch, it's still ahead," - he thought.

A week later, he had another meeting with Nadia: Dmitry invited everyone to his house to see hiking pictures. This time, after the end of the evening, Alexei drove the girl to the hostel by car. At parting, noticing her intense stiffness, he limited himself to kissing her hand.

Chapter 4.

New trials

I

After parting with Rashid and the institute, Nadiusha began to look for a new job. It turned out to be not so simple: in serious companies they did not want to get involved with a minor. She had to be content mainly with casual or temporary earnings. She worked as a cleaner, a dishwasher, a pizza delivery man, a courier, an advertising agent, a promoter (she stood with a poster near the metro station), a merchandiser (she went to supermarkets to offer goods of a certain trading company, which for some reason no one wanted to take) ... She spent the night where she had to, most often - in the cheapest hostels for guest workers. One day, luck turned up to work for a whole month as a waitress in a cafe, but, as in most other cases, she was immediately told there that they would not conclude an employment contract and that she should not count on a longer period. Be that as it may, she lasted half a year, and in the summer, when she turned eighteen, she managed to find a permanent job at a meat processing plant. Now she could afford to rent a room for a couple with another unfortunate girl named Anya. They met back in the personnel department of the meat processing plant, when both brought their applications there. Anya immediately told her story.

She, like Nadiusha, was from the Volga region. From a small town, standing right on the banks of the Volga. From childhood, her parents taught her that, like any other woman, the main goal of her life should be to get married and raise children. Shortly after she graduated from school, a groom turned up, who looked not bad. True, she didn't have any special love for him, and the guy drank besides, but her parents insisted that they weren't looking for good from good: "Who else can you find in our hole? Look around, everyone is like he!" Anya thought and

thought, and agreed. Played a wedding. A year later, a son was born. The parents were happy. The husband regularly brought money by working at a local enterprise.

The misfortune came when her mother was leading her three-year-old grandson to kindergarten in the morning. A drunken visiting driver, who was driving around a deep pothole in the asphalt at unthinkable speed, hooked them both as soon as they stepped onto a pedestrian crossing. When the car was caught up and stopped, it turned out that he could no longer stand on his feet. The boy died on the spot. The mother was in the hospital for two months and died of grief. The husband got drunk, lost his job, and then one day he left and never came back. Anya still had no information about him. A year later, her father died. After burying him, she decided to run wherever her eyes looked, that is, to Moscow.

“Well, finally you began to decide something on your own, - thought Nadiusha. - As for children, I won't have them. It's not for me, I don't like them.”

Both girls now packed up sausage for eight hours a day, but the rest of the time they were free as the wind. The circle of their acquaintances was constantly expanding. Once they got acquainted with a company engaged in role-playing games, they were seriously carried away by this activity and began to devote more and more time to it on weekends.

Each game was preceded by a long preparation. The most experienced leaders developed the idea and action plan, determined the meeting place, the rest chose roles and prepared costumes. The action usually took place somewhere outside the city. They acted out something like an impromptu performance, where everyone, to the best of their desire and ability, was both a director, and a performer, and a spectator at the same time. Most often these were some stories from the Middle Ages. The girls dressed up as noble ladies, maids, fairies and other characters that warmed up the imagination, the guys dressed up as nobles, knights, warriors, robbers.

The armor for all these knights was made by a twenty-eight-year-old guy who usually played the role of a blacksmith. Everyone called him Kolchuga. He received this nickname back in the orphanage, where he grew up without knowing either his father or mother. In the same place, one of the educators, a kind-hearted person, taught him some methods of working with wood, glass and metals. Later, Kolchuga himself developed his abilities, for which he enjoyed well-deserved respect among the participants in role-playing games. He knew how to make beautiful and interesting things, some of his products were even taken for sale by shopkeepers. But his main job was very prosaic: he was an ordinary electrician in the directorate for the maintenance of buildings.

Nadiusha and Kolchuga immediately felt for each other, if not love, then at least interest. They became friends and began to spend a lot of time together: they walked, went to the cinema, to exhibitions. Passion for role-playing games brought them together especially.

Kolchuga looked after Nadia calmly and patiently. For a long time he did not dare to bring her to his home, but one evening nevertheless invited her to come in. It was a room received from the state in a three-room communal apartment, on the first floor of the Khrushchev five-story building. An octogenarian old woman lived nearby, who almost never went anywhere, most often locked herself up and did not follow the order in the common part of the apartment. The third room was inhabited by an alcoholic drunkard.

God, what an apartment it was! She made a depressing impression even on the worldly-wise Nadiusha. The beaten, barely hanging front door; a shabby corridor with spit-stained walls and a dim light bulb under the ceiling. Combined bathroom - it was generally something. Opening a plywood door with a nail instead of a handle, you risked immediately getting into the stinking vomit of an alcoholic. It was impossible to look at the toilet without shuddering. However, Nadiusha did not even look; she didn't even dare to go there. In the kitchen, in front of a piece of black bread, a man sat half asleep, resting his unkempt, shaggy head on the table. He was the main source of dirt and stench. Gnawed fish bones lay around his head, and an empty vodka bottle rolled under the table. Seeing the newcomers, he greeted them with lowing and laid his head again. Kolchuga gave the drunkard a good shake by the shoulders and with difficulty led him into his room.

Nadiusha remained alone with Kolchuga. They went into his modestly furnished but tidy room. The girl drew attention to the many amulets and all sorts of amusing figures made by him that adorned the walls and shelves. But she was no longer in the mood to linger here. Vile smells penetrated through the door, and from this alone she wanted to escape as soon as possible to fresh air.

- Let's take a walk and go to the cinema, there's a good movie on here today, - she suggested.

On the street somehow it immediately became easier. It was a quiet September evening, the city lived its bustling life. They slowly made their way across the square to the cinema. Nadiusha glanced sideways at a short, rustic guy walking modestly beside her. "No, this is not my prince on a white horse," - she thought.

II

It was already spring, when Nadiusha made a new unexpected acquaintance. They were sitting with Anya at a table in a cafe, when suddenly a man, passing by, put his business card in

front of her. "Arthur Reklamyán, President of SUCCESS," - it read. On the reverse side, Nadiusha read: "Amazed by your beauty. I would appreciate it if you call." "Fie, what a vulgarity!" - she thought at first. However, curiosity began to gnaw relentlessly. For two days Nadiusha struggled with it, thinking whether to call or not, but on the third day she gave up and called.

Arthur made an appointment at the same cafe. He turned out to be an elegantly dressed, imposing man of about thirty or thirty-five with a typical Armenian appearance. As soon as Nadiusha entered the door, he approached, introduced himself and offered to get into his car. The Mercedes was driven by a driver. Arthur put the girl in the back seat, sat next to her and ordered to be taken to the Prague restaurant. There they occupied a separate small office. Silently, like a shadow, the waiter came in and out, brought menus and poured glasses of champagne. Nadiusha asked Arthur to order something at his discretion. They drank to the meeting. She had never seen such luxury. The table was littered with fruit. One after another, different exotic snacks appeared. Nadiusha felt like a poor relative who inopportunely asked for someone's celebration.

Arthur told a little about himself. It turned out that he was the owner of a company engaged in the production and supply of advertising equipment. He arrived in Moscow relatively recently, but things immediately went uphill.

- Look, there are billboards with advertising posters on the street, - he said. - But someone has to make and mount them, so that later an advertising company will come with their ads. And we can also supply equipment for the production of posters themselves. We generally do a lot of things. Electronic scoreboards, for example, too. Previously, another company was engaged in all this, but I caught the moment in time when it went bankrupt.

- And why don't you go bankrupt? - Nadiusha asked.

- Well, you don't have to promise, everything is possible, - Arthur answered, - but I have a lot of experience in this area. I started back in Armenia.

And he continued to repeat tirelessly:

- You delighted me at first sight. All my life I dreamed of finding a girl like you.

After dinner, Arthur took her home and said that tomorrow he would come straight to the door. In general, he made a very favorable impression on Nadiusha with his courtesy and ability to easily carry on a conversation. "A very charming man," - she concluded. And in the bottomlessness of his purse, she had to be convinced more than once. The very next evening, as soon as they got into the car, Arthur asked if she would like to buy a new dress. Nadiusha did not object, and he took her to one of the central stores, where together they chose several new clothes. The purchase price was not discussed.

On the third evening there was again a restaurant, but this time they were not alone. There were several men and women in evening dress at the table.

- These are representatives of one of our suppliers, - Arthur said. - They invited us to celebrate the deal.

The men immediately drew attention to Nadiusha and, to Arthur's greatest pleasure, did not hesitate to stare at her until the end of the evening under the sidelong glances of their companions.

The meetings between Nadiusha and Arthur continued almost every day. The visiting young man did not know the city well and was not a member of the elite youth clubs and parties, but he readily and joyfully fulfilled any of Nadiusha's wishes. On Sunday, at her request, they visited the Museum of Fine Arts. A week later, Arthur took her to the Bolshoi Theater to see Eugene Onegin. Nadiusha's head began to spin more and more. "I like him. No matter how much I fell in love with him," - she thought more and more often.

Meanwhile, Arthur could not help but notice her somewhat excessive restraint, if not coldness. She avoided all his attempts at getting closer in every possible way; even kissed somehow reluctantly, as if through force. Attributing this to the peculiarities of upbringing, Arthur still could not resist the question:

- How do you feel about sex?

- Only after marriage, - was the answer.

Three days later, he put a large diamond ring on her finger and proposed marriage. Nadiusha was smitten. She delayed the answer for a couple of days to tease the groom, and then agreed.

Married in May. Anya was her witness. The newlyweds decided not to arrange a wedding: Nadiusha still had no one to invite to it. Even her mother, she decided not to bother she about such a trifle. And they agreed to postpone the wedding trip until the summer.

Arthur brought Nadiusha to his apartment. He occupied several rooms in one of the old high-rise buildings in the center of Moscow. There was no special luxury there, but Nadiusha still found the apartment extraordinary. Only one wide, beautifully made oak bed with a plump mattress was worth something! On it they were to spend their first wedding night.

Nadiusha remembered this terrible night for a long time later. She withstood everything, but everything seemed to her vile and dirty, besides, disgusting memories of the past surfaced, and the next morning she declared in a peremptory tone:

- I don't want to do this anymore. Satisfy your sexual desire as you wish!

Needless to say, for Arthur it was a heavy blow. But, hoping that somehow in the future everything would settle down, the poor husband tried not to show how upset and depressed he was. It seems that he decided that a lot can be forgiven for the incredible beauty of Nadiusha. He invited her to ride around the city, then they ate at a restaurant, and in the evening they went to the theater.

The next day Arthur left for work in the morning. The elderly maid prepared breakfast, cleaned the apartment and also left. Nadiusha was left alone, not knowing what to do. She walked through the rooms, looking at them all. Everywhere was clean and tidy. Here and there hung incomprehensible pictures. There were a few books on the shelves. "I'll have to choose something to read," - she thought, and got completely bored. Fortunately, Arthur's driver soon came and said that in half an hour he would take her to a restaurant, where the owner had already begun to celebrate the next deal.

The following days passed in the same vein. Only the format of the dinner differed: together or with other companions. On Saturday they went to the theater again. And the next week, Nadiusha seriously thought about what she was doing in this house. Why does Arthur need her? Just so he could take her to dinner parties? And does she really love him?

Doubt, once born, began to grow and grow stronger. By the end of the second week of her marriage, it grew into a firm conviction that she had doomed herself to forever sit in a golden cage. Then she removed the ring from her finger, took out her old clothes, threw away everything that Arthur had managed to give her, and quietly left, so as not to return again. On Monday, as if nothing had happened, Nadiusha went to work at the meat processing plant. For all the employees, she simply returned from vacation, and only Anya knew the truth, but, as a true friend, she was silent. And soon Anya left Moscow altogether: her husband, who had been missing for more than two years, showed up in her hometown. Nadiusha began to rent a room alone; the owners gave her a small discount.

III

Kolchuga stoically survived Nadiusha's trick with marriage. Their relationship has not changed, only he has become more persistent in courting her. Nadiusha saw this, but every time the guy tried to express his feelings, she resolutely avoided the conversation. "Where to rush, the whole life is still ahead," - she thought. Of course, both understood without explanation that they were not indifferent to each other. But only Nadiusha was fettered by the pathological fear of being deceived, generated by her previous life trials, therefore she was even mentally afraid to admit to herself that she loved Kolchuga, and he, in turn, was tormented by the fear of losing her, and this fear demanded decisive action from him.

One day he again invited the girl to his home. The apartment was unusually clean. Nadiusha entered the room. A warm summer breeze fluttered the curtains at the open window. On the table stood a bouquet of red roses in a tall copper vase. "He must have done it himself," - she thought. Kolchuga asked her to sit on a chair, sat down beside her and took her hand.

Nadiusha, you know, I have loved you for a long time and very much and ask you to become my wife, - he blurted out quickly, afraid that she would disappear before he had time to finish.

Nadiusha pulled her hand away and jumped up. A minute later, she gracefully jumped over the window sill, and along with a breath of wind, a voice reached Kolchuga:

- I was already married and I don't want to anymore!

She ran away, having fun: "That's how independent I am, that's how impregnable I am!" Frustrated, Kolchuga called her again and again, but she did not answer the calls. Out of harm. So that he does not molest more with marriage.

Several days passed, and that special his call late in the evening she immediately felt. As if something had tossed her up. She pressed the answer button, but could not understand anything. Only frightening wheezing could be heard. Tried calling back several times to no avail. Nadiusha was in a panic. Having barely coped with it, she remembered that she had the phone of an old Kolchuga's friend, with whom they grew up together in the orphanage. Sturdy Oak, who was indeed a strong commando, responded. In a broken voice, she tried to explain that something had happened to Kolchuga.

- I don't know what, but it must have been something terrible. He wheezed terribly into the phone. I don't feel like myself. I'm afraid something irreparable has happened. I beg you, find him. Do something!

- I will do everything possible. Wait and don't worry. As soon as I know something, I'll let you know.

The agonizing minutes dragged on. Nadiusha has lost track of time. Several times she reached for the phone to call Sturdy Oak, but each time she stopped, trusting that he would tell her everything when he could.

At last the doorbell rang, and Sturdy Oak himself appeared on the threshold. Nadiusha's heart beat with redoubled force.

- What about Kolchuga? Have you learned anything? - she asked with difficulty, turning pale with excitement.

The man looked at her with a hard, searching look.

- He is no more. Killed.

Everything swam before Nadiusha's eyes, the walls went around, and she no longer saw how Sturdy Oak caught her, how he began to do artificial respiration, how the ambulance siren then roared, and the doctors fought for her life.

She became a dog and went about his dog business, sniffing the road ahead of her. Why did she go - the dog did not have such a question. She walked because it was necessary, because there was a road in front of her. But for some reason, the strange question still disturbed her not like a dog. "WHY am I going?" - she finally asked herself clearly and distinctly. And at the same moment, the serene dog world began to crumble, to scatter into the smallest particles, spinning into a whirlwind, in which figures in white coats leaning over her began to appear.

- She's come to her senses, - someone said.

"Yes, I've come to my senses, - she realized. - But WHY? WHY do I need this life? WHY didn't they let me die?" The answer to these questions, from no longer a dog, but a person, no one gave.

IV

Sturdy Oak had good connections. He raised to his feet all his acquaintances in law enforcement agencies. They contacted the telephone operator, determined the coordinates of Kolchuga's mobile phone, and called a police squad there. The guy was found in a dark nook not far from the garage, where he kept a welding machine, blowtorch and other tools. He lay with his throat cut for more than two hours, bleeding. The robber took his bag. With one hand, Kolchuga was able to find the phone in the inner pocket of his jacket, squeeze it and call the last dialed number. It was Nadiusha's number. Before the arrival of the police, he was still alive, but he had not reached the hospital.

When Nadiusha found out about this, her heart and breathing stopped. Sturdy Oak pumped her out before the ambulance arrived: the special forces school helped. Then, in intensive care, the heart stopped three more times. Nadiusha was first in the intensive care unit for a long time, then she spent more than two months in the hospital ward. Sturdy Oak visited regularly.

In her heart, she had a benign tumor in the interatrial septum, which appeared in childhood after a viral disease. After all the experiences, a hole formed in the tumor, as if it had been pierced with a needle. The blood began to be transferred from one atrium to another, the pressure in the cranial box became greatly increased, and the general pressure decreased. She had to learn to live with it, but it was not easy. Nadiusha began to discover some oddities in her

behavior. Sometimes it came to fainting. Somehow slowly her beauty faded. For a long time she did not notice this, until one day she discovered that she had begun to gain weight.

Sturdy Oak continued to follow her, came every day, helped in any way he could, including financially. He helped, by the way, to divorce Arthur, from whom no objections arose. At a personal meeting, Nadiusha drew attention to the cheeky manners of a cynical womanizer that appeared in Arthur. Quickly taking a curious and slightly dismissive look at her plump figure, he only grinned and said:

- I now have as many girls as I can wish.

Then Sturdy Oak took a vacation and arranged for Nadiusha a trip to Thailand. In this earthly paradise, among the sun and the sea, elephants and monkeys, they were together all the time, only at night dispersing to adjoining rooms. Sturdy Oak spared no effort and money. The numerous trips and entertainments with which he tried to bring Nadiusha back to life were very entertaining and could have given her great pleasure if not for the constant pain in her soul and heart. Still, she thawed a little, and already began to worry if he was paying too much attention to her. Sometimes it seemed to her that at her slightest word he was ready to fulfill her every desire.

Two weeks of vacation flew by in an instant, and now they were sitting next to each other on the plane. Nadiusha looked at the Sturdy Oak with a sad look, in which pain and anguish were read. Sturdy, strong, determined man. Surely many girls dried up on him. She stroked his hand.

- My dear Oak, listen to me and try to understand. You have done a lot for me and I will never forget it. But now we have to part. I'm really sorry. I can't be with you anymore. Your presence alone constantly reminds me of Kolchuga. I need to forget everything, both him and you. I want to start my whole life over. I promise to go to college in the summer. Please forgive me.

Sturdy Oak nodded. He could not speak, only hugged her, and she rested her head on his shoulder. From the airport, everyone went their own way.

Nadiusha fulfilled her promise and entered the Institute of Chemical Technologies, where a few years later she met the Professor, Dmitry and Alexei. She never saw Sturdy Oak again.

Chapter 5.

Autumn

I

With the beginning of the academic year, Alexei intended to reorganize in a businesslike way. Arriving at the end of August to the Institute of Chemical Technologies, he greeted Nadia

and said that he would not linger, so as not to interfere with her to work. However, she had other plans.

- Good weather today, - she said. - Let's take a walk along the street.

Alexei did not hesitate for long, said just in case:

- Just don't think that you can break my family, - and after that agreed with a calm soul.

They went out and wandered the streets of the city for about an hour until they reached the zoo. The visit there was postponed, as both still had things to do. They went into the subway and parted ways. Thus began their autumn walks, which immediately became regular. They walked around the city and parks, enjoyed the September sun and communication with each other.

They met every week, starting on Monday, when Nadia came as a freelance student to a special course that Alexei taught at Moscow State University. After classes, they had lunch and walked. One trip was especially memorable. Alexei offered to walk along the Lenin Hills.

- It is beautiful there. Let's take a walk and then go out to the metro bridge.

They admired the flower garden in front of the facade of the university main building, stood on the observation deck, which offers a wonderful panorama of the Moscow River, and began to choose alleys along the steep hilly slope, called "mountains". After wandering up and down a bit, they sat down on a bench to rest. Alexei repeated his usual trick and knocked Nadia over to his knees to stroke. Then they went further. From the beauty of the place, the fresh air and the closeness of the girl, Alexei was completely dizzy. He lost his bearings and, no longer knowing where he was going, looked at Nadia, absorbing with all his heart the joy of her presence.

Another alley suddenly ended in a dead end. A steep path led down the muddy clay slope.

- Your jeans are not too expensive? - he asked. - Can you wash them later if you slide down on your bum?

Nadia was surprised by this proposal and went down first, only slightly dirty. Alexei, with a briefcase in his hand, managed to carefully climb down after her, keeping his suit intact. When they got to the very bottom, to the embankment, along which cheerful crowds of walking youth were moving in both directions, they found that they were already on the other side of the metro bridge. In some incomprehensible way, they slipped past the bridge without noticing it. Maybe, being in ecstasy, they fluttered across the bridge like birds? It's incredible!

- No one has ever courted me like you, - said Nadia.



Main building of the Lomonosov Moscow State University (2023)



Embankment of the Moscow River and metro bridge (2023)

“Yes, I don’t court you at all,” - thought Alexei. It always happens this way: if a person in love to death diligently tries to interest a partner, then he inevitably becomes stupid. And vice versa, a man who does not pursue any far-reaching goal can be completely relaxed and free in his communication. This is a common trap that all women fall into. Alexei, however, did not dissuade Nadia of anything. Minutes of happiness are worth a lot, so why the extra words? *“Does it matter what and how happy a person is!”*

II

It is difficult to say how long this "autumn marathon" of theirs could have continued if Alexei had not made an unfortunate fatal mistake. It was on Monday. After reading another lecture, our hero invited Nadia to visit the "Chocolate" cafe near the university campus. He ordered a glass of wine, a piece of cake, tea, coffee for each. Nadia was more tender than usual and snuggled up to him at the table. The waiter, looking at the strange couple, could not help smirking.

Time passed quickly, and when they headed towards the subway, Alexei smiled his delightful smile and said gratefully:

- I don't know how I deserved the joys that you give me, but I am very grateful to you.

It was noticeable how much Nadia was flattered.

- Let's walk a little more, - she suggested. - And, please, smile again!

They turned around and in high spirits walked along Vernadsky Avenue past the circus and the Children's Musical Theater until they reached the Vorobyovy Gory subway station.

Before reaching home, Alexey saw a strange message: *“Don't try to understand me. Have fun while you have the opportunity. Well, if you get bored, then it should be so!”*

“What is she talking about? Why did she suddenly decide that I would get bored with her?” - he was perplexed, sensing some kind of inner breakdown in her words. He wanted to calm her down, console her, assure her that she would never, under any circumstances, get bored of him, but he wrote to her somehow a little wrong. Here is what Nadia read in his reply message:

“I can guess why you say I shall "getting bored". I probably gave rise to such thoughts. But you conquered me first of all with your spiritual beauty. It can hardly be boring. Another thing is that I have all this turned out to be mixed with sexual attraction. I have already tried to explain to you that the friendship of men with women, as a rule, has such a flavor. Don't try to understand. Or, on the contrary, try, although it is almost impossible, because for this you need to feel the same way as I do. And I'm madly in love with you. I am writing this and I don't know

whether these words will make you feel lighter and happier or not. Or you'll start worrying about my family again. Don't worry, it's not going anywhere. Here for me the choice is not possible, and I am frank with you in this regard. Although, of course, I am both annoyed and sad that, in fact, there is very little that I can do for you. Almost nothing. By the way, today everything was very nice.

Thank you.

Your Alex. "

The next day, Nadia, without explaining anything, said that she had been sobbing all night and all morning and demanded that he no longer write to her. Alexei was very depressed by her reaction, and especially by this ban, but, fortunately, she herself violated it a couple of days later, bombarding him with many letters with various questions, mostly of a business nature.

Their relationship became very unstable. Nadia writhed and twisted. At one time she missed him and was ready to throw herself on his neck, at another, shrinking, she withdrew into herself and did not want to see him. A strange cyclicity formed: at the beginning of the week, Nadia greeted him cordially, then her mood deteriorated, and the end of the week ended, as a rule, with some kind of scandal. Alexei did not realize that it was just hard for her to let him go for the weekend. He saw something else: his presence had a bad effect on her, she was upset. So, they need to meet less often until this blues passes. Nadia herself took steps in the same direction. Now she suddenly announced that she would no longer work with his new student at Moscow State University (the freshman he took turned out to be a girl), and demanded that she herself come to her institute. The unfortunate girl began to go to the Institute of Chemical Technologies on Saturdays. Then suddenly one day Nadia stopped coming to Alexei's lectures, and when this happened for the first time, he had to muster all his strength in order to withstand and complete the lesson.

At some point, her words slipped through the correspondence that she went to graduate school with his scientific guidance not for the sake of an attractive dissertation topic, but for his own sake. Now it was Alexei's turn for tears. It seemed to him that she loved him passionately and madly with a secret selfless love, not daring to open up. It seemed that she was ready to make any sacrifices for him. That her coming to him in graduate school was nothing more than an attempt to give him a helping hand from the bottom of her heart in a difficult situation. But he did not see anything, did not understand and allowed himself all sorts of liberties with her! With deadly clarity, he imagined love, which occurs once in a million, and which he simply missed, wasted and can now lose forever. Tears flowed from his eyes in a stream. Something suddenly, like an electric discharge, closed in space and time, and he felt that a channel of some kind of

supernatural connection had been established between him and Nadia, through which from now on her feelings and mood began to be transmitted to him.

The next day, when he was walking to the Institute of Chemical Technologies, he felt as if all the clothes had been removed from his chest, they had opened it, and his soul became completely naked, unprotected, blown by the cold wind. Anyone passing by could touch it, causing pain in aching wounds. Repentant thoughts about Nadia haunted. He tried to imagine, instead of her, the sweet image of his wife he knew so well. His heart sank and began to hurt even more. With horror, Alexei realized that he equally loved both women.

As soon as he saw Nadia, he immediately asked for forgiveness for the obscene proposal at Lake Leshni.

- Forgive me, please, - he said. - I was a fool. I failed to appreciate your friendship. Your friendship is more precious than love.

Then, when he found out about her attitude towards the episode at Edritsa, he apologized for Edritsa too. Their relationship improved for a while, but not for long. And soon the events that were described in the prologue to this story took place.

Part 2

Hopelessness

If you have no aunt,
You won't lose her.
And if you're not living,
Then you won't have to die.
A.Ya. Aronov

Chapter 1.

Surprise

I

To say that Nadia's letter, in which she described all the troubles of her life, made a great impression on Alexei, is to say nothing. He was especially struck by the confidence she placed in him. "How can I justify her trust? - he asked himself. - Maybe I could somehow take on some of her pain? I am strong, I will endure. In any case, it is clear that I am dealing with a special person with whom fate has brought me together for a goal, while known only to it. I must be very careful with her. And, of course, I must endure all her whims, scandals and abuse, - he gave himself a word and thought about what to write in response. - Probably also something about the last period of life. Somehow explain why I showed such an interest in her." He tried. He wrote something about the fact that he had a close-knit family, but all the best memories were left somewhere in the past, and now he is at a crossroads, not knowing how to build his life further. And only after he sent what he had written, he felt that, perhaps, he had chosen the wrong words, and it would be better not to write anything.

Then his thoughts took a different direction. If he previously idolized Nadia, now he began to treat her as a messenger of the Lord God. A day later, he prepared a new text, in which he said that she was apparently born for some great mission, but the dark forces decided to crush her and subjected her to the most severe trials, trying to kill the will to live. She survived, and

now he is ready to support her in any endeavors. He will help her, and his wife will help him. "Did I judge correctly?" - he asked at the end. But he did not immediately send this letter. "Does she need assessments made through the eyes of a common man? - he doubted. - She probably knows everything without me. Who am I, anyway, to tell her something? In my fifty-three years, I have not experienced even a small fraction of what she had experienced, and it is not I who should teach her how to live, but she me."

Meanwhile, he also remembered his proposal to introduce her into the family as a close friend. But it was still not possible to choose the right moment: either the wife came home from work too late, or the daughter was spinning around. And after a week, Alexei felt that Nadia began to lose interest in the issue. Some other thoughts occupied her, the topic of "family friend" became irrelevant, and a conversation with his wife became unnecessary.

In the second week, a new, very kind letter came from her:

"I realized how much you are dear to me, and I understood it calmly and without pain. For the first time in seven years, I felt really good and calm with someone. I didn't even worry about the sexual component.

I understand everything clearly. I have nothing to give you, because I don't have anything (it's tempting to write a poetic "except for a tormented soul", but this is such a dubious value that it's embarrassing to even mention it). And you have everything, and it must be protected. Although I refute common sense by my very existence, I know how to appreciate it in others. I can't make you happy anyway, but I'll try at least not to make you unhappy anymore.

Love, above all, must be selfless. So I will repeat again. I don't need anything from you. Because my feelings do not depend on it.

Maybe someday life will change and I can be of some use to you. Little does it happen.

If it still matters to you whether I am indifferent to you or not, then know that I am not indifferent. If it doesn't matter anymore, I'm not offended. It doesn't change my attitude. Just be happy. And you don't need to understand me. There, God himself will not make out if I go to hell or heaven.

Your Nadia."

Alexei showed this letter to his mother, but she did not believe a single word of it.

In response, he wrote: "You can rely on me always and in everything. I am your faithful knight, and you are the lady of my heart. But let it be our secret.

Forever yours, Alexei."

Nadia did not like the answer.

- What good is your knight? Unsuitable for the household, - she said when they saw each other. - And I also do not want to be a lady of the heart. Get it all out of your head. I'm disgusted

to the point of disgust. And I also can't stand any secrets for some time now. Better tell me if you could marry me.

- But I'm not free.

- That's exactly why I don't like your chatter about "knight" and "lady of the heart."

- It's strange, in general, - she continued, - but something you have awakened in me is not right. You see, I'm starting to want to have a house, a family. I would never have thought before that such desires could arise in me.

"Well, why is it "not right"? It is very much right! After all, that is what matters most. Everything is going right," - he thought.

After a pause, Nadia changed the subject and asked if the "communication channel" that Alexei had told her about was causing much concern.

- Yes, to tell the truth, someone is constantly hammering me, - he answered. - Pretty uncomfortable feeling. The heart is beating, the soul is restless.

- Think what a swell! Tortured him a little bit for two weeks. For many years now I have been "hammered" - and nothing, I'm still alive. By the way, I don't know who you contacted there, but definitely not with me. With some other forces living in another world. But I'll still try to help you.

A couple of days later, she brought a chestnut fruit to the institute.

- Take it, hold it, and then throw it out on the street.

Another day later she asked:

- Well, have you thrown out the chestnut?

- I've thrown it away. And it actually has got a little easier.

- Then it's not our destiny to be together.

- But the "communication channel" hasn't completely disappeared. It seems to me that they just gave me some kind of respite. Maybe small.

- Well, let's see.

Nadia was obviously up to something and, preparing for some incomprehensible but important actions, gradually told about herself such things that Alexei had not imagined until now, although he already knew a lot about her.

- In my family, on the female line, everyone was a village witch (well, there, all sorts of conspiracies, fortune-telling) and everyone had different unusual abilities. My mother, for example, knows how to look for money, and not only on the road. She sees through winning lottery tickets and buys them all in our city. Her biggest win was one hundred thousand rubles. But I have a gift that is very strange and not very pleasant. By God, it seems to me that it would

be better if I, like a mother, found money, and not adventures on my ass. But we don't get to choose...

- What is your gift?

- I change the fate of people.

- How is it?! - Alexei exclaimed in amazement.

- Well, I can give many examples. So, I had a friend manager in Moscow. He led a boring gray life, sitting in the office. And I carried him away with journeys to the mountains, so much so that he began to run away with me there regularly. One day we got together on another trip for a week. The manager lied to the boss that his aunt was dying, begged for a week's vacation. But he just didn't know that the boss was also going to the mountains, and to the same place. And there they unexpectedly met. There was a scandal, my friend's boss kicked him out of work, and then he completely left Moscow. And a year later I received a letter from him that he became a mountaineering instructor, and only now he felt truly happy. Although he lost in wages very much.

- Curious. But can you tell me what kind of guy comes here sometimes to you and sits silently for hours?

- Oh, that's another story. His parents died early, he grew up with some uncle and felt himself useless. He was withdrawn and lost, did not know where to attach himself. He didn't have a heart for anything, and he didn't communicate with anyone. And I fascinated him with art song. At first, we just went to the gatherings of performers, listened. Then he himself began to sing, and so unusually that as soon as one girl heard him, she fell in love with him. And they became husband and wife.

"Hm, but he probably loved you and still loves, but he only knows that it's impossible to talk about it. Well, you trained him!" - thought Alexei. Aloud, he asked:

- Are you preparing some kind of surprise for me, too?

- Yes. You'll know soon.

A few days later, Nadia emailed that the expected surprise might happen tomorrow.

"I invited Dmitry to take part in the meeting as an arbitrator and peacemaker. This may be the last opportunity to tell each other everything frankly, because after all the cruelties that I am preparing, we may not talk at all anymore. Do you agree?"

"I agree to anything, if only it will benefit our relations, and not harm," - Alexei replied.

II

The next day, when he came to the Professor's laboratory after work, Nadia and Dmitry were already sitting at the table. Made tea. Dmitry told an anecdote about an intellectual on

whom they wiped their feet like on a rag, then they washed him and hung him in the wind to dry, and he, poor fellow, caught a cold and died. "Somehow not very funny," - thought Alexei.

- Tell me, Alexei, would you like to tell me what you think of me? - Nadia asked him.

- You know, I have already prepared a letter for you on this topic, but somehow I did not dare to send it. I can do it today if you want.

- Can't you tell now?

- No, I don't want to now. Everything is too complicated. And then, you yourself, it seems, was about to say something. I want to listen to you first.

Dmitry glanced warningly at Nadia, but she was already carried away.

She suddenly got up, threw up her head, flashed her eyes furiously, and exclaimed with pathos:

- I demand that you confess everything to your wife! And then I'll call her and see if you confessed or not.

For a moment, Alexei was taken aback and did not even think of asking what, in fact, he should confess, and how she is going to call his wife. He just froze with his mouth open. Most of all, he was struck by the fact that Nadia decided to verify his confession in this way.

- But that's low and vile, - he said when he had managed to find the power of speech. - You shouldn't do that!

- I'll call your wife, you should know! - again impertinently, with a challenge she said.

- But now is not the right moment: my wife is in the hospital, on a routine examination, - Alexei tried to digest what was happening.

- So tell her later, when you can!

- Yes, how can I communicate with you later, if you go to such meanness?!

Nadia, with an expression of anger and anguish, glanced at him once more and hurriedly left the room. The men also followed her to the exit. Passing by the slightly ajar door to the next room, they managed to notice through the gap that Nadia was standing and crying, leaning her hands on the table.

On the way to the metro, Alexei asked Dmitry:

- You knew about her intentions. Why did she invite you to participate in this performance?

- Don't know. I tried to dissuade her, but I failed.

- But you understand that if she does not back down from her humiliating test, then I will be forced to break off all relations with her!

- Do not boil, everything is not so simple and, it seems to me, it can go on in different ways. Lately, I've talked quite a lot with Nadia, and I got the impression that she lives not quite in our world.

- That is?

- Well, with one foot in our world, and the other in some other. There she receives some instructions, she is told what to do, how to act in this or that situation.

- Are you saying that some voice told her that I was required to confess to my wife?!

- No, voices are what crazy people have. In the world with which she is connected, they do not know how to speak our language, but they nevertheless transmit some information. And I think you must be scared right now. Just don't tell me you're not afraid of anything. This must be scary.

Yes, Alexei has been really scared. He has been afraid that he could make a mistake and take for the messenger of the forces of light the one who in reality was an instrument of evil.

"And I still so naively rejoiced at my love, nurtured it, believing that it was from God. How could I have been so deceived in my feelings? I can not believe it! - he continued to doubt.

- But, if she is connected with the light world, and not with the dark one, then she should abandon the idea of calling my wife."

Arriving home, he tried to once again explain to Nadia the baseness of her idea by email:

- I've already had to deal with betrayal, but I didn't expect it to be on your part. What you decided to do is disgusting. Such methods do not achieve good goals.

Nadia resisted.

- If you want me to maintain respect for you, refuse to check, - Alexei wrote again.

- Okay, I won't do that, - she finally agreed. - Well, why don't I have the determination to see everything through to the end? I feel sorry for you, damn it! And I wished you would rather hate me.

Alexei breathed a sigh of relief. "Still, she backed down. Well, if that's the case, I can fulfill the request, - he decided. - I wonder if the higher powers will report to her about the fulfillment?" The prospect of speaking frankly with his wife did not frighten him too much, but he wondered whether Nadia really did not see that it was her relationship with him that could suffer first of all, that they could be deprived of the freedom of communication that they have. It didn't occur to him that she might just try to drive him away forever in such an extravagant way.

Having calmed down a little, he sent her that letter in which he talked about her "great mission." Nadia greeted him the next day with sympathy:

- You are not original. Do you know how many letters like this I received? But I just don't want to be such a miracle, a paranoid kikimora, a chuchundra, as Dmitry called me. I want

to be ordinary, normal and average. And you're probably just going crazy from all the experiences. Go see a psychiatrist. By the way, I have a certificate that I am normal.

“Well, maybe it’s true, I'm going crazy, - Alexei agreed silently. - And Dmitry too! We all probably need to get such certificates.”

III

The short thaw gave way to new quarrels. Nadia constantly bullied Alexei, bombarding him with insulting letters, hyping herself up more and more for no apparent reason, and he, clenching his teeth, endured and remembered the word he had given himself to withstand whatever happens. At some point it seemed to him that everything was over between them. Briefly summarized, the letters he received that day were as follows:

What a piece of shit and whore you thought I was! You didn't need me as a friend. You need me as a mistress, but excuse me. You don't need me as a wife. Perhaps, you need me as a graduate student, but, again, you should have thought earlier. But I wonder if I turned out to be more normal, and everything would be like other people? To what meanness would you sink? What if I fell in love with you madly? What would you do? Would you quietly disappear at the first whiff (difficulty)? A knight, a friend, and in the backyard have veiled thoughts all about the same thing. Well, okay. I will restore the fence around my heart that you accidentally broke so that no bastard will ever break through it again. I don't want to see you anymore.

- This is the end? - Alexei asked, driven to despair.

- The end of what? - Nadia didn't understand.

- Of everything, probably. I'm the bastard you don't want to see. It couldn't be clearer.

But no, Nadia, it turns out, meant something else.

- What - of everything? I'm trying to understand how you position me. All some kind of erotic fantasies. I don't want to be unnecessary, and even more so to be needed for light erotic entertainment.

- Nadia, you're talking about your own thing again! I really need you, there are simply no words! I have already said that my attitude towards you has changed a lot since the summer, that I have learned to value your friendship, which probably no longer exists. I'm afraid to talk about love - you won't believe it anyway. And I don't need any eroticism if there is distrust in your heart!

- No, Alexei. You decide who you really love. Or don't rush words. Two loves cannot live side by side, - Nadia replied and, after thinking, added a little later:

- I'm not capable of any adequate communication yet, so I just don't want to see you. But there is email, there is Skype, after all. Well, maybe I'll stay to study with you, but I'll be a ghost graduate student whom the supervisor never sees. You don't need eye contact in most cases.

Alexei had to agree to maintain only business communication and avoid personal meetings in private. However, it turned out to be easier said than done: they still had to meet one way or another. But trouble doesn't come alone: Nadia's scientific work began to stall. For the last six months they have tried in vain to implement the synthesis options outlined in the work of the Koreans. Knowing from experience how many dishonest or even simply falsified publications are published, Alexei suggested trying alternative methods.

- Let's do everything in a different order, - he said.

They rummaged through the literature again, and Nadia figured out how to implement an approach based on periodic injection of the reagent in small portions.

- I will drip it with a dispenser every fifteen minutes for several hours, - she decided.

Alexei approved, they started trying, but still nothing worked. Nadia, who was in upset feelings, did not have the concentration and accuracy to do such work.

- You need to spank me on the bottom. I failed the synthesis again, - she admitted embarrassedly one day.

- It's my pleasure, - Alexei responded.

- No, it's better to let Dmitry spank me, - she immediately outplayed.

But apparently Dmitry didn't spank her either, because the next time the synthesis failed again. Nadia became more and more upset:

- Well, what kind of assistant am I! Where is all my knowledge? Whereas I was one of the best students! I won't do this myself anymore. Here you need an automatic machine, not a person. Or let the student come and drip.

That's right, - Alexei agreed. - The student also needs to work.

December came, and suddenly it turned out that Nadia still had not submitted her work plan to the graduate school department. "How so?" - Alexei was perplexed, - "I sent her a detailed outline more than a year ago! Does she really need this graduate school, or does she not care at all?"

The denouement came on December 21, the day the Mayan calendar ended and the end of the world, as some esotericists claimed. Nadia asked Alexei about this back in the summer. "Big things are seen from a distance. Most likely, we will not notice anything," - he said then. However, this day was etched in the memory of both.

Nadia, who had been upset since the morning and was intensely expecting some kind of negativity, in front of Alexei's eyes, threw her postgraduate work control book, in which she still did not write down the plan, into the trash. In a state of trance, Alexei left the room and found Dmitry in the mechanical workshop.

- Mitia, I think I'm finally losing Nadia. Tell me what to do?

Dmitry continued to carefully and methodically drill holes in the electronic board. Alexei repeated his question impatiently. Indeed, he can be said to be talking about life, but Dmitry is stuck in the holes! Finally Dmitry stopped and said thoughtfully:

- Fill out her work plan and everything else in this book. Is it worth demanding some papers from a person who lives half in another world!

It seems that nothing else could have been thought of. Alexei listened to the advice, took the control book out of the wastebasket, filled in all the necessary columns, including the plan and report on the work for the year, collected the signatures of the head of their department, the dean of the faculty and the head of the graduate school department, and three days later handed it to Nadia. Strangely, she didn't throw it away again.

- Keep the book with you. You can work quietly for one year, - he said. - But I'm not your knight anymore. Everyone is now for himself.

In the evening, Nadia wrote that she would no longer be able to work with him:

- I can't stand betrayal. To have secrets from your dearest person (I mean your wife) such that, having learned them, he will, at a minimum, stop respecting you - this is betrayal. Yes, I tried to start with a blank slate. Honestly. Through torment. But to do this, as it turned out, I need to step over myself. I can not.

- But there are no secrets, - Alexei answered. - I made a confession to my wife.

- Oh, what happiness! Glory to you, Lord! I hope this is true, but I don't want to know anything. I'll sleep better. That's it, to hell with all nonsense, let's work.

"Yes, apparently they didn't tell her anything about this in her notorious second world. So now trust all sorts of psychics," - thought Alexei.

IV

He was not mistaken when he said that he had tacit consent from his wife to meet with Nadia. Once upon a time, she also experienced a sudden infatuation, but managed to hide it, and therefore understood her husband perfectly. The conversation with her took place some time after she was discharged from the hospital. Alexei decided to tell what worried him most:

- You know, I had the imprudence to make an indecent proposal to Nadia on the hike, and after that our relationship deteriorated greatly.

- It's strange, but it seemed to me that after the hike everything was fine with you, - the wife answered thoughtfully and went to the kitchen to prepare dinner. Thus the topic was exhausted.

- Do you even understand why I demanded a confession from you? - Nadia asked. - This is a psychological trick: to arouse jealousy in your spouse. Sometimes it can be useful. Tell me, how much better have your relationships become now?

- Well, some changes really happened, and, perhaps, my wife began to pay a little more attention to me. But for me this is not such an important topic, everything was fine with us anyway. It would be better if you explained to me what the meaning of life is.

Nadia somehow hung her head very sadly. She clearly expected a different answer. But what did she want him to thank her for all the bullying she caused?

New Year was approaching. Nadia no longer harassed Alexei with her previous accusations, but she didn't really do any work either. Sometimes he found her deep in thought in some strange reclining position: leaning back on one chair, she could put her legs on the seat of another. "She communicates with the second world," - he guessed, admiring her forms. At other times, she again took up moral teaching, but of a slightly different kind than before:

- Everything is rotten in your family. The foundation is all cracked and rot is oozing out of it. That's why you are looking for the meaning of life somewhere away from your wife.

Alexei didn't argue. Who cares what she says! The main thing is that she talks, and he caught moments of joy hearing her voice. His feelings for her have not changed.

On the last working day, before they congratulated each other on the upcoming holiday, Nadia said:

- You once talked about common features in the horoscopes of writers. What if we collected more statistics here? I found horoscopes of one hundred and twenty famous authors on the Internet, we could analyze them.

- Yes, of course, to see for writers how many and which planets fall into a particular astrological house or zodiac sign, to calculate the weight of different houses and signs in points accordingly - that would be very interesting, - Alexei agreed. - Astrologers rarely bother themselves with such statistical analysis, and their critics do not understand at all what and how to check. But are you ready to seriously take on such painstaking work and see it through to the end? If you are not confident in your abilities, then it is better not to undertake it. And besides, I wouldn't want you to do this for my sake.

- No, not for your sake. I would enjoy the process of studying data sets, - Nadia answered, and they decided to coordinate their efforts in this direction.

Immediately after the New Year, Alexei began receiving tables from her with the results of processing horoscopes. Gradually involving more and more writers in the analysis, they reached thirty people. Some patterns began to emerge. For example, it was discovered that planets fall into the signs of the Air element (Gemini, Libra, Aquarius) on average one and a half times more often than into the signs of Water (Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces). The result turned out quite in the spirit of astrological theory. Indeed, the element of Air, which supports communication and exchange of information, should have been native to writers, in contrast to the element of Water, the predominance of which would be expected in the horoscopes of doctors. Alexei had already begun to get excited, rightly believing that for one hundred and twenty people the picture might turn out to be clearer, when he suddenly received a new proposal from Nadia:

- I would like us to do science, astrology, and other things together. So that we would always be together, - she wrote.

- Aren't we together now? Is this offer business or personal? - he became wary.

- It's both business and personal, - Nadia answered. - I really feel good with you. I really believe that together we could do a lot. So what should I call my feelings? Think for yourself.

It was very similar to a declaration of love. For a moment, Alexei felt the delightful joy of satisfied male pride. But this joy was immediately replaced by concern about what exactly Nadia had in mind. To his clarifying questions, he received very vague answers, behind which, however, her desire was more and more clearly visible for him to leave his wife.

- In two days I go to work. Let's discuss everything in person, - he eventually wrote, tired of ambiguities and unsaid statements.

Chapter 2.

Breaking up

I

Alexei went to work, torn by doubts and conflicting feelings. It seemed to him that now he would open the office door, see Nadia, and she would tell him that this was another check. Which, of course, he failed:

- I fooled you good. Fooled you once, fooled you twice. Dreaming about a young girl, you old fuck! Again I need to teach you morals.

But no, everything turned out to be very serious.

- If you want to be with me, make up your mind, - she urged. - I will not leave you. And you are unlikely to have another such chance in your life.

- But why do you need me? Look at me, I'm almost an old man now, - he tried to brush off the intrusive proposal.

- I thought a lot about this topic. I believe that if fate wanted everything to happen this way, then now is the time for it. At exactly that age. For both you and me. And I'll repeat again: even when you become completely old, I won't leave you. Rest assured.

- And what should I do with my wife?

- This question also tormented me very much. But every person goes through some tests in life, so, probably, her turn has come. To each his own. She will survive. And how much does she really need you? Think about it. Sometimes you rate yourself too highly. You think that she loves you, but in reality everything has passed, perhaps a long time ago. And, most importantly, no one demands that you completely break off the relationship. On the contrary, if you always help her in any way you can, then it will be right. By the way, I would leave her everything you have. I don't at all pretend to get either your apartment or summer cottage.

Yes, looking at Nadia, Alexei so longed to be with her, so wanted to possess her, that he was ready to forget about both the house and his wife. "I'll go talk to my parents today," - he decided, hoping that with their support the issue would be resolved more easily.

Alas, his hopes were not destined to be justified. As soon as he mentioned the possibility of leaving his wife, it became clear that his parents were categorically against it. His father, a militant monogamist, considered even the very thought on this topic immoral. The mother did not see anything behind his words except an accidental infatuation with a selfish and flighty girl. And both were terribly afraid of any changes that could disturb their peace in old age. Alexei tried in vain to convince them of his feelings. When he finally went home, exhausted, he felt that he no longer had the strength to talk with his wife. "Okay, I won't rush, - he said to himself. - I'll think about it for a day or two."

After some thought, Alexei formulated answers to the following questions:

- Does he want to be with Nadia? - In principle, yes.

- Is he ready to leave his wife? - Only with her consent. It seemed impossible to him to simply abandon a person with whom he had lived half his life in love and friendship. True, he was almost sure that there would be no consent from her. But maybe he really doesn't know her well, as Nadia assured? Even if the chance of getting consent was negligible, Alexei considered it cowardly to refuse to talk on this topic completely and firmly decided that he needed to talk to his wife.

Meanwhile, after a couple of days, Nadia began to demand an answer from him whether he was leaving his wife or not. "What the hell, - Alexey wondered, - it seems like she herself

gave me time to think until spring, and now it suddenly turns out that I have to decide everything tomorrow! Well, if she wants an immediate answer, she will get it. At the same time, we'll figure out whether I should stay part-time at the Institute of Chemical Technologies.”

By this time, he had already submitted applications to resign from his full-time job and take a job at Lomonosov Moscow State University. The last pre-New Year's meeting of the Department of Physics added to his determination. The head made a statement that, in pursuance of Putin's May decrees¹, their salaries should be increased, but there is no money at the institute, and therefore the administration decided to reduce the organization's staff.

- We were required to reduce our staff by three units. As you know, a well-deserved colleague of ours has just died and one of our part-time employees has quit. So now we need to release another one and a half bets. Think about this topic. If there are no offers, then I will have to make some decisions myself.

The elderly employees looked at each other in silence, stone-faced, mentally assessing which of them might be asked to retire.

II

Nadia's first question, as soon as they saw each other, was about when he would leave his wife. Alexei tried to explain his position and asked if she would continue to work with him.

- How can I work with you? - she answered. - I can only shed tears, and nothing more. - And with sudden bitterness she continued: - Quit! Take all your equipment to MSU². And don't come here again. Otherwise I'll change the locks on the doors!

Alexei's surprise knew no bounds. She is not the owner here to change the locks! And why? After all, he precisely wanted to coordinate his actions with her.

However, it was already clear that it turned out to be a stupid farewell meeting. Alexei lay down on the sofa in the tea room, trying to stretch out the last minutes of his stay in the laboratory. He is still here, but soon he will have to get up and leave forever the place dear to his heart, where he worked for more than ten years. His eyes involuntarily filled with tears as he began to remember the events of recent times.

He wondered if Nadia understood that they might never see each other again? Probably yes, because when he was already at the door, she suddenly asked:

- Is there a chance that you will leave your wife?

- Well, the chance may not be completely zero, but I'll tell you straight: a miracle must happen for this to happen, - Alexei answered.

¹ Decrees of the President of the Russian Federation of May 7, 2012.

² Lomonosov Moscow State University.

In the evening, he told his mother about Nadia's latest prank with a threat to change the locks.

- She's a quarrelsome girl, stay away from her, - she advised.

Yes, Alexei himself doubted whether it was worth exchanging his loving wife for such a scandalous person. Even if she believes that she is doing something for his own good, it is still clear what a worthless rag he is for her. And how long will his strength last to please her if he nevertheless decides to take such a step? But the mind is one thing, and the call of the heart is completely different. He felt that only with Nadia did he truly feel good and calm, and, on the contrary, in her absence he felt anxiety and melancholy. A restful night's sleep was over for him for a long time. Night after night he wet his pillows with tears, alternately saying goodbye to the girl who had deprived him of peace, then to his wife.

First of all, he told his wife that he would no longer work with Nadia.

- Why? You won't be working together anymore? - she was surprised.

- It turned out that she only needs me, - Alexei answered. The wife understood everything.

III

Nadia was returning to the dorm from the institute. The mood was bad, worse than ever. The promised increase in employee salaries once again did not materialize. People gradually began to flee from the library. The premises were littered with textbooks, which students returned at the end of the session. There was no one to help drag the piles of books. She couldn't help but imagine Alexei carrying books onto the shelf and smiling at her. Ugh, what an obsession!

The image of Alexei haunted her all these days. She lost sleep and appetite, tormented by the question whether he would follow her call to leave his wife or not. Although she suspected not. What miracle did he mention? What does he lack for a decisive step? Maybe she did something wrong? What good did she do for him anyway? She didn't do anything, although she tried very hard. She hasn't even completed the list of writers. She is a worthless creature. She just ruined everything.

Here is the room. The furnishings are Spartan: bed, chair, bedside table, refrigerator. TV on the refrigerator. A niche in the wall near the door with clothes hangers. Little clothing: only the most necessary things.

It seems that in the bustle of the library she forgot to have lunch. Looking into the refrigerator, she was convinced that there was nothing there. As they say, "the mouse hanged itself." She sat down on the bed and wondered if she should go to the store. What difference does

it make whether she is full or not, why should anyone care. And in general, she doesn't feel like eating, she feels nauseous even without food.

Her unhappy stomach began to whine and she felt even more nauseous. Alexei, come, help me! Everything began to jump, spin and blur before her eyes. She leaned over, hit her head on the metal handle of the bedside table and, losing consciousness, fell.

When she came to her senses, she couldn't stand up for a long time. The room was slowly getting dark. "Where is the knight I imagined? As no one needed me, I remained so. Stupid," - sad thoughts floated through her head. Finally, she somehow lay back on the bed and fell asleep.

In the morning she discovered that she had wounded her head. All her hair, pillow and carpet were smeared with blood. Everything had to be washed, but the wound turned out to be small. "I'll have to go to the first aid station just in case," - Nadia decided. She cleaned herself up and went to work.

That same evening, Alexei, feeling vaguely uneasy, literally could not find a place for himself. It had long been necessary to talk to his wife Tania and find out whether she could let him go, but the conditions for conversation still did not work out. And now she came home from work late in the evening and immediately went to take a nap in her daughter's room, who had gone on a party. Something from the depths of the subconscious pushed Alexei and said that today there must be a conversation on this topic, or otherwise it will never happen again.

What to talk about? How to choose words so that it would be clear that he is only interested in her reaction to the possibility of his leaving? Unable to restrain himself any longer, he opened the door and began to wake up his wife:

- Tania, wake up, I need your help!

The wife opened her eyes in bewilderment, fighting sleep and trying to understand what her husband wanted from her. With a feeling as if he was throwing himself off a cliff, he gathered his strength and said with difficulty:

- I'm confused. Nadia wants me to leave for her, and I just can't resolve this situation for myself. Please tell me if you can let me go. I want to understand this.

Tania silently sat on the edge of the bed. Alexei repeated his question. It seems that sleep has finally left his wife. She stood up and, still silently, without looking at her husband, went to rattle pots in the kitchen. Alexei trudged after her. Finally she said:

- If you leave, I will hang myself.

It was said quietly, but with such inner strength and determination, with such pain in the look thrown at him, that Alexei was taken aback. "No, to hell with such experiments. I stay with my wife and put an end. But at least I now know the answer to the question," - he decided.

The next day Alexei wrote to Dmitry:

- Mitia, I can't help Nadia anymore. Help if you can.

- I'll try to do something, somehow put her in order, - the friend responded and told about the episode with her fall.

IV

On a pale February day, Alexei was doing laps on a ski track in the park. It's been more than a month since he and Nadia broke up. It became known that he and his Chinese partners won a joint scientific grant. With future money it would be possible to pay for a rented apartment for two. Actually, the project was written for Nadia and for her scientific work. And now what is it for? There is, however, also a first-year student, but she, too, was hired to work with Nadia. Where is Nadia's promise to help her with the coursework now? He'll have to figure it out himself. It's not a problem, of course, but he's not a chemist... True, he managed to learn something from what Nadia showed and told him. Will this be enough for successful work? Of course not. She threw him like one throws a child into the water to teach him to swim. So what, will he swim now or sink? Must swim out. He's not a loser either. He has his own ideas and experience in scientific work. It's not the first day that he's been standing at the fume hood, gritting his teeth, trying to implement a new plan of experiments. And if it fails, what then? What he will look like! And he will let the poor first-year girl down.

There is silence all around, only the snow creaks under the skis. He can focus on his inner feelings. As Nadia taught him: "You need to have peace and light inside." Heart aches. Is he doing everything right? It is necessary to drive away everything superficial, leaving only good, bright feelings. Lord, tell me! So the answer came: "Help Nadia, but do not renounce your wife." That's strange. Not to renounce his wife is understandable, but how and how else can he help Nadia? Isn't their relationship already over? True, a week ago he received a strange letter from her, in which she asked him to send her to hell as rudely as possible. She suffers, poor girl, just like himself. But this doesn't mean anything yet! Or will something else happen?

And indeed, a few days later a new letter arrived from her, in which she asked for a meeting and promised not to raise the issue of his leaving his wife. Alexei agreed and they spent a couple of hours together in the park. Both were satisfied and agreed to continue meetings. Nadia, however, said that she will no longer avoid the question of the future of their relationship. Moreover, she demanded that by March 21 he decide whether to leave his wife or not. Alexei did not have enough determination to refuse such conditions. He, by and large, did not understand at all why they should not meet. Why can't they restore cooperation and communicate as they used

to? Be that as it may, they again began to walk around the city, visiting parks, museums and cafes.

One day, on another walk, Nadia, out of the blue, suddenly asked:

- Alex, tell me, have you ever been truly ashamed? Not just ashamed, but truly?

- Very rarely. And what?

- Do you remember the episode on Lake Zhizhitskoe? I'm so ashamed of it now!

- Why would that be?

- I told Sasha, my friend, classmate, about it. He was so outraged and scolded me so much!

- Why?

- He is our moral theorist. He is very interested in such questions. Reads all sorts of books on this topic. He says, for example, that women should not wear skirts that go above the knee. And all sorts of minis and shorts - this is generally only appropriate for prostitutes.

- He's a fool. He is not a theorist, but a Pharisee!

- Well, why a Pharisee?

- Yes, because only a Pharisee, having not yet experienced anything himself, can teach morality to others. To crap all the best that we had is not much work! Do you remember where we were standing then? Very close to the Mussorgsky monument.

- So what?

- And the fact that, according to legend, this monument was erected on Bald Mountain, on which witches in the old days held their Sabbath. There, all the surroundings are saturated with the witch spirit. So figure out what's what.

- By the way, I recently asked you to analyze the horoscopes of Sasha and another guy, Vova from Yekaterinburg. They both proposed marriage to me. Have you looked?

Yes, he made a comparison of both these horoscopes with Nadia's horoscope. For Sasha, the result was not very interesting. "He's not my competition," - he thought. Vova is a different matter. If earlier Alexei was amazed at how closely his and Nadia's horoscopes were connected, now he was convinced that Nadia's connection with Vova's horoscope was no less strong. "Why did she ask me about this? Does she want to annoy, cause jealousy, or is she actually choosing a groom among them?" - he reflected.

Seeing Alexei's confusion, Nadia continued:

- When I asked Sasha why he wanted to marry me, he didn't know what to answer. Isn't it strange?

- Well, don't marry him until he finds the answer to this question. Here's my advice.

- Should I marry Vova?
- Well, he's probably just very far away, - Alexei finally found something to say. - How did you meet him?
- At role-playing games. He reminded me a little of Kolchuga in some way.
- Your Mars coincides with his Sun. This means that he is your type.
- Yes, I think I already understand what it is.
- If you get married, he will expect a child from you.
- Yes, I already know that too, - Nadia agreed.

For a long time afterwards, Alexei wondered why this whole conversation was started in the first place.

V

Winter ended very quickly. The bright spring sun cheerfully and decisively began to melt the snow. The date appointed by Nadia was approaching, and every day she tormented Alexei with the question of when he would leave his wife. Alexei, in turn, took the risk of talking with Tania again in the hope that maybe she had thought and changed her mind on this issue. Now, without any beating around the bush, he directly told her that he would like to leave her and go to Nadia. Her reaction, however, was just as horrifying as the first time. And again he retreated.

"There is no point in asking permission this way. I need to either just do it and leave, and then explain it to my wife, or give up on this idea altogether," - he reflected. Dmitry also reproaches why he tortures two women at once. It's strange, wasn't he the one who told him all the time that he had to be extremely honest? But for some reason, when he honestly told one woman that he also loved another, it only became worse.

But what does March 21 have to do with it?! Why does Nadia always set some conditions, and even in the form of an ultimatum? Alexei took out the ephemeris¹, delved into the study of the tables and discovered that in June there would be wonderful aspects to his Sun. "Under such aspects it will be impossible to make a wrong decision," - he thought and wrote to Nadia about this. Nadia agreed. Now he had three months to sort out his confusing situation.

First of all, he wanted to understand how strong his feelings for Nadia were. Will he be able to give up comfortable and familiar living conditions for her? He really liked the apartment in which he lived with his wife and daughter, and his native area, to which he was attached since childhood. The area was truly beautiful: between the modern blocks, here and there, buildings of magnificent architecture from past centuries were discovered, surrounded by quiet parks and squares. What will he feel in a new place?

¹ Ephemeris - astrological tables. (*Author's note*)

To find out, he decided to use a trick. His daughter was preparing for the wedding and was looking for rental housing for herself and her future husband. Alexey decided to go with her to see one of the options. The area was remote and difficult to access, but the house was quite good; the apartment was clean and even well furnished: for the first time, it had all the necessary furniture, including a quite decent bed. A spacious loggia overlooked the park. There will be space for walking and cycling, as well as storage for bicycles. Alexei imagined how he would live here with Nadia, and felt that he could very well be happy. “Well, it’s clear about an apartment. What to do with the summer cottage? Should I give it up completely or negotiate on sharing?” - a new question to which he could not find an answer bothered him.

Tania tried in vain to distract him by arranging trips to the cinema and other entertainments; he imagined only Nadia everywhere. Meanwhile, she herself behaved strangely. Alexei did not hear a word about love from her, but, like a broken record, day after day she continued to torment him with the question of when he would leave his wife, as if there had been no agreement regarding June. Only once did she ask if he wanted to be with her in principle. “Yes, - Alexei answered, - I want to,” - and noted to himself that this answer was radically different from what he said less than six months ago. Nadia calmed down for one day, only to return to her constant question the next.

- Listen, I’m ready to do anything with you, even take care of old people in the hospital, if you want, - he told her one day, but received the same answer as always:

- First leave your wife, and then everything else will happen. You can even imagine in advance what places you will kiss me, just leave her.

At times she even almost threatened him:

- You will lose me, you will lose your wife, you will lose Dmitry and all your other friends. There will be no one to go hiking with anymore. And you will die in some ditch hugging a bottle.

Alexei had never experienced such psychological pressure before in his life. They almost quarreled on this basis, but this quarrel ended with Nadia deciding to change tactics and unexpectedly inviting him to play bride and groom until June, as if everything had already been decided between them.

And the game started. They met, Alexei courted her, gave her flowers, and Nadia accepted his advances. Walks have become more interesting and varied, with visits to different attractions. A particularly memorable meeting was when they took a ride on an excursion boat along the Moscow River to the Novospassky Bridge, visited a nearby monastery, then crossed the road and found the ancient residence of the Sarsky and Podonsky bishops, called the Krutitsky Metochion, on the restoration of which a lot of effort was spent back in Soviet times.

Alexei acted here as a guide. He talked about the features of the national Moscow architecture of the 17th century and showed all the details of the historical complex, which included the church of that time, the Metropolitan's chambers, the magnificent Gate chamber with carved platbands made of white stone, with columns intricately entwined with vines carved from the same stone, and with many tiles by Stepan Polubes¹, as well as a number of other buildings. Then he walked Nadia to the hostel. They didn't want to leave, so they walked for another half hour around the neighborhood. As it turned out later, this was their penultimate meeting.

VI

Due to some circumstances, at the end of May, Alexei spent a couple of days off alone at the summer cottage. At that time, he had the opportunity to focus on his inner state again and ask himself and God once again what he should do next. "Just don't renounce your wife," - came the answer again, and Alexei realized that he would most likely stay with Tania. Just the day before he had written playful messages to Nadia, but now asked Dmitry:

- Nadia and I started a certain game, but please tell her that I can no longer continue it.

A few hours later the answer came:

- Well, you offended the girl.

But Alexei still didn't believe himself and didn't know what he would do tomorrow or the day after.

- I can leave you at any time without warning, - he suddenly said to Tania a few days later.

- Just don't think that you can come back later, - she answered him.

They did not speak again for the rest of the day; at night, in tense anticipation, both did not sleep. "I have to endure this night. I just have to break free, and there will be another life, and everything that happens will immediately appear in a different light," - he thought to himself.

The next morning he asked Nadia for a meeting. They decided to go to the zoo. After wandering absentmindedly from enclosure to enclosure for a while, they sat down on a bench. Alexei stroked Nadia and hugged her, pressing his whole body against her, not risking kissing her tender, beautifully outlined lips, around which wandered a mysterious smile that drove him crazy.

- I'll come to you soon. I'll just explain myself to my wife today and then I'll come, - he said, and at the same time he was afraid that, in fact, they would never meet again, and he continued to hug her, trying to grab her waist more tightly and hold her as long as possible, as if before death.

¹ Stepan Ivanov (Polubes) is a famous master of glazed tiles of the 17th century. (*Author's note*)



Krutitsky Metochion (2017)

Towards evening he began to wait, sitting at home, for Tania to return from work. The wait dragged on. He imagined her wandering somewhere, miserable and lost, not daring to return home. Finally he couldn't stand it any longer and dialed the phone number. No one answered.

Alexei felt uneasy. Along with pity came the realization of the impossibility of betraying the close person. "I can't make two women happy at once, but I can at least not spoil the life of one of them. I will stay with my wife and will do everything in my power to make her feel comfortable with me," - he promised himself.

So, for two days, he rushed from one extreme to another, but now he firmly decided to put an end to this, and the longer he waited, the stronger this determination strengthened in him.

- Please forgive me for all my stupidities and for the pain that I caused you, - he said to Tania immediately, as soon as she appeared at the door.

- God will forgive, - the wife answered.

Exhausted Alexei slept peacefully that night for the first time in six months. And in the morning he wrote a farewell letter to Nadia:

"I realized that I am no good for you. I lack the intensity of love that you would like to see. And, most importantly: I said that I would leave only if there were no doubts. And I have enough of them now. I'm afraid I'm not right for you. I'm afraid that I will miss both my wife and my old life (I thought I could handle this issue, but now I'm not sure). I realized that the love that was there before was no longer there. Otherwise I would have run away without looking back at the first opportunity. It began to collapse in December. The day you threw away the work plan, something broke in me, and my dreams of success in our joint activities faded.

You wrote correctly that everyone gets what they deserve. I deserve only my wife, not you.

Forgive me for everything once again. You remain for me a bird of happiness that I could not reach.

Farewell.

Yours, Alexei."

VII

A few days later, the daughter's wedding was celebrated. Alexei and his entire family were immersed in the hustle and bustle. The exciting wedding ceremony is over, it's time to greet guests at the restaurant. The newlyweds had chosen this restaurant, located in the grove of Ostankino Park next to the pond, in advance after a long search and detailed discussions. The waiters were busily setting the tables. Alexei pulled a huge cake out of the car and handed it to

the toastmaster. Little by little, all the guests arrived. The only ones missing were the heroes of the occasion. But the newlyweds were in no hurry to appear. It was their holiday, and they were not shy about giving free rein to their feelings, desires and fantasies.

“Look, they're coming!” - someone suddenly shouted, and the bride and groom appeared between the trees, riding on white horses that had turned up by chance. It turned out that they were riding in the park. A photographer immediately jumped up and the newlyweds were surrounded by guests.

The feast began, toasts, congratulations. When Alexei made his speech and sat down, he involuntarily thought: how would he feel here now if he did leave his wife? It would probably be very uncomfortable for him.

Meanwhile, the newlyweds with happy faces began to waltz. It was delightful to watch how confidently they formed a harmonious dance pattern from simple movements. When did the groom learn to do this? He didn't seem to like dancing! It must have been his daughter's insistence. With the last chords she ran up, jumped, gracefully flew up and, straightening up like a swallow, froze in his hands above her head. The hall exploded with applause.

Then there were new congratulations, jokes, pranks, dancing and songs with a guitar. When they finally started to disperse, Alexei volunteered to walk his mother-in-law to the bus stop. On the way, she asked:

- Do you think everything will be okay with them?
- I think that at first – yes. But love till death doesn't happen anyway.

The mother-in-law didn't argue.

VIII

For two weeks Nadia did not make herself known, apparently waiting for some more action from Alexei, and then suddenly she burst out with a stream of letters, ten per day. And in each one she constantly repeated the question, when will he finally leave his wife. Alexei was perplexed: wasn't it she who insisted that he make a choice? Why is she waving her fists now that the fight is over? He is not so weak-willed as to start all over again. For some time he tried to answer, but the longer it went on, the harder it became for him, and when it became completely unbearable, he wrote to Nadia that he didn't love her anymore. The letters stopped immediately.

Alexei now had to somehow put himself in order. To fill himself with tasks without rest, to suppress the heartache that tormented every minute when he was left alone with his thoughts. Luckily, partners from China came for a couple of weeks. After finishing the negotiations, he had fun with them as best he could. He happily dragged them around all the sights of Moscow,

and in the end he even took them by car to Suzdal for three days. During this period, they examined the small town to the last alley, and Alexei, at least for a short time, forgot himself.

Then Tania took a vacation, and they were able to go on holiday to the sea in Bulgaria for a couple of weeks. After all the experiences, they tried to restore the former warmth of their relationship, and they partly succeeded. The trip left the best impressions. And they liked the country too. They remember its ancient cities, rich history, warm attitude towards Russians.

Upon his return, Alexei lived at the summer cottage for some time, and at the end of August he went to a scientific conference in Crimea, which was then still Ukrainian.

Crimea was his love since childhood. In recent years, he visited it often, and each time he noted that the peninsula leaves the impression of a kind of fragment of the Soviet past, in which little has changed since those times. And now, having arrived in Sudak, he saw an old bus station, from which, as before, small buses transported residents to all areas of the city. There was still a huge sanatorium on the outskirts, surrounded by a wall. And on the territory of the sanatorium, still just as green and well-kept, with the same old buildings, it seemed that nothing had changed either. He registered and went to check into the farthest small building. The concierge, a pretty girl, escorted him to the door of his room with a smile.

Having settled in and changed his clothes, he decided to walk around the sanatorium. Having walked around it, he ended up in the Uyutnoe district, and only now discovered that a lot had changed here after all. Almost nothing remains of the old village with wooden houses and garden plots. Entire streets disappeared. In their place, large, small and very small mansions of new construction stood in chaotic disarray. The intricately decorated facades of private hotels caught the eye.

Alexei went to the seaside embankment. Some changes were felt here too, although he couldn't say exactly what they were. He just either recognized the old places or not. It seemed as if the embankment had acquired a more civilized appearance and had become longer, extending further away from the city to a private boat dock that had not been there before. Along the embankment there was a chain of all kinds of cafes and souvenir shops. Although the peak season had passed, many vacationers were still strolling along the coast, sunbathing on the beach, splashing in the warm sea under the still bright and hot southern sun.

In the evening, a buffet was given to the conference participants. Alexei was thoughtfully drinking a glass of wine, standing in the middle of the hall filled with a crowd of guests, when suddenly a middle-aged woman approached him and offered to drink for the meeting. In response to his surprised look, she explained that she was a local, from the Taurida University, and remembered him several years ago at one of the previous conferences that took place here in Crimea.

Not knowing what to do with his new acquaintance, Alexei tried to explain that his heart was one continuous bleeding wound, and therefore he would like to be left alone.

- I fell in love with a girl, my graduate student, but she left me, - he told her sadly.

The woman nodded understandingly and smiled.

- You can have any other girl you want, - she said mysteriously and disappeared into the crowd.

"It's strange, - Alexei thought, trying to digest what she said. - If that's so, then why am I so unhappy?"

And could it be that she is actually right? How to check it? Take today's concierge, for example. She looks like a student. She probably earns money here during the summer months. Can I get her? Interesting to try."

No sooner said than done. Alexei bought a bag of candies at the kiosk and headed to his building. The concierge greeted him with the same sweet smile. He smiled at her too and handed her a couple of candies:

- Please, help yourself.

Having made sure that the girl had accepted the gift, he continued without any beating around the bush:

- Would you mind coming to my room for some tea?

The girl lowered her eyes and blushed with embarrassment.

- Our majordomo strictly forbade us to communicate with the guests, - she whispered.

Alexei had to take the keys and go up to the room alone. But he was satisfied with the experiment. It was clear that the girl, dying of boredom, was ready to go with him anywhere.

IX

The next day, the section in which Alexei's report was announced began to work. Opening the meeting, the chairman, a professor from Kharkov, said a few words in English for the sake of order, and then addressed those present in Russian:

- Let's not pretend, everyone here is ours. I don't like English, I like Russian. I suggest continuing the section in Russian.

Indeed, English-speaking citizens were somehow not visible at the meeting. However, the reports themselves were still delivered in English, but everyone understood that you can always ask a question in Russian. It was for this homely atmosphere that Alexei loved Ukrainian conferences. Especially if they were held in Crimea.

It cannot be said that his report aroused any particular interest, but judging by the number of listeners and the questions asked, it was still quite successful. After this, Alexei felt freer and

at the end of the day went to cool off on the beach. What could be more pleasant after hard work than warm salty waves caressing the body?

The section worked actively for two days, and by noon on the third the conference program had exhausted itself. The organizers set tables for the banquet in the open air and put out a couple of kegs of local Massandra wine. Communication became free and relaxed.

Most of those present were Ukrainians. Quite a few participants came from Russia and Belarus. There were representatives from other CIS countries. From far abroad – only a few. There were both scientific discussions and conversations about life.

- How much does your apartment in Moscow cost? - one Belarusian asked Alexei.

Drunk, Alexei, converting rubles into dollars, added an extra zero, and the result was a staggering sum.

- Hey, you're all millionaires there! - the amazed guy exclaimed. - Why don't you sell such an apartment?

- Where will I live then? - Alexei was surprised.

- But you can buy it much cheaper in Minsk. And how much money will be left after that!
- the Belarusian did not calm down.

- Why do I need Minsk? - Alexei disagreed. - I was born and raised in Moscow. My ancestors' graves are there. I don't want to go anywhere.

After the banquet, having changed his shirt and trousers for a T-shirt and shorts, Alexei went to inspect the nearest mountain, located across the street behind the fence of the sanatorium. The mountain, about the height of a fifteen-story building, beckoned him with its proud peak, ending in a sheer cliff. The height of the cliff was about fifteen meters. Having climbed the mountain and walked around the cliff, he discovered that on the opposite side it was not at all so steep. Without much effort, Alexei climbed onto it and walked around the top. From the steep edge there was a beautiful panorama: the mountainside covered with grass and sparse bushes, the path leading up, the deserted street, the sanatorium, the pile of houses behind it and the majestic sea to the horizon. To the right, the sea was blocked by mountains. From the foot of the neighboring mountain, the walls of an ancient Genoese fortress rose up the slope. After taking a few pictures with his mobile phone, he went back down and again approached the steep side of the cliff. Upon careful examination, it turned out that its surface, although it seemed smooth from a distance, was in fact replete with cracks and protrusions. Alexei involuntarily wondered if it was possible, using them, to climb to the top right from here. He mentally selected a series of protrusions and cracks, imagined how, by successively rearranging his arms and legs, he could climb up them, and immediately did so without difficulty, finding himself at a height of

about two meters. A couple of climbers were training nearby with hooks and ropes, while Alexei had nothing but sandals on his feet. Should he continue? The top is still very far away. What if he falls?

Alexei imagined himself falling from a terrible height. His body is found and delivered to Moscow. Buried. Two beloved women come to the fresh grave in tears, and here they finally meet and look into each other's eyes. What fools they were, they brought the man to such a state! Was it really impossible to meet earlier and somehow come to an agreement? But no, each wanted to be only number one, and nothing else. Some kind of female egoism. True, it must be admitted that the wife still had more rights to this. Alexei spat and resolutely climbed up. The alcohol, which had not yet worn off, gave him courage.

He climbed confidently until he placed his arms outstretched in different directions on a wide horizontal ledge about two meters from the top, and here he was forced to stop again. There was no way to move forward, observing the golden rule of climbers: to have at least three points of support. What to do? Go back down? Alexei looked down. Horror. Better not to look. He no longer remembered the path he had taken up. He would have certainly made a mistake on the way down and most likely fallen. It's better to climb up. At least it's not far to the top.

He began to pull himself up on his elbows. For some time, both legs dangled in the air until he managed to place his right toe on a predetermined small and, frankly, unreliable protrusion. Using this dubious support, he managed to rearrange his hands on the ledge. Next was the push-up. Now he was leaning on the ledge with his arms fully extended. He tried to lift himself up a little more and stand on his fingers. He finally caught something with the toe of his left foot and pulled his right leg up. Just don't lose balance, don't deviate from the rock, otherwise it's the end! Alexei moved his torso further from the edge and pulled his other leg up. That's it!

He lay for a while on the ledge of the rock to catch his breath. Then he carefully rose first to his knees and then to his full height. The steep climb was over, the rock began to quickly round out. There were enough cracks. All he had to do was not to fuss, to act carefully. "Everything will be fine," - he thought, crawled on his belly and soon stood triumphantly at the very top. He had managed to do it! He had won!

Having once again admired the panorama of the city, he came down from the other side and headed towards the sanatorium with a feeling of extraordinary lightness, euphoria, and a sense of limitless possibilities. He enjoyed the adventure so much that he gladly told his tablemate, the same Belarusian, about it at dinner, ending the story with an offer to make a bet of one thousand hryvnia that he would climb the rock again the following morning. The Belarusian, however, refused.



Uyutnoe. Sudak. Crimea (2013)

In the evening before going to bed, Alexei went to the embankment to look at the sea and the southern sky rich with bright stars. Suddenly, one star began to fall rapidly. "Lord, enlighten me, guide me to the true path!" - he barely had time to utter a wish.

The next morning he woke up more alert than ever. Putting on only his swimming trunks, he ran out of the building barefoot with his pass in his hands, ran to the beach, handed the pass to the guard and took a running plunge into the cool morning sea. Then, also running, he returned to the room. The melancholy that had been possessing him lately seemed to have let go.

After lunch, Alexey left the sanatorium, and by evening he was already on a train heading to Moscow. He took with him the most tender and enthusiastic memories of the wonderful region and hospitable people.

Translation is in progress. Please read this novel in Russian.