

Eva Lanska

FOUR MEN FOR ONE TEACHER

1

The bench sagged obligingly under the weight of the two urchins gutting the *Louis Vuitton* handbag. The shaggy-haired, broody one pulled the items out, and the short-cropped, jaunty one, who kept glancing round, decided their fate.

“A make-up case, innit? Lipstick, mascara ... and what’s this? This crap ’ere?”

“Take it for your ma.”

“And what’ll I tell her? She’ll snitch on me!”

“Nah, she won’t, not if you tell ’er you found it.”

“Oho, a purse! Super-doooper! What’s in it, then? Fuckarooony! Dollars! Twenty, fifty ... And what’s this funny money?”

“Them’s Euros, you bumpkin! Give ’em ’ere!”

“Hey, hey, get yer mitts off. Let me count ’em!”

“Why should you count ’em? I saw the bag on the bench first!”

“And I got it first!”

“And I was the one who said let’s cut through the park! All right, only look sharp, while it’s still quiet! We’ll settle that later!” the jaunty one said reasonably.

“Yahoo! A copy-book. Must be a student! Top of the class. Now then, let’s have a look! Nice neat round writing – a dead cert she’s a swot! So what’s it say on the front? V... S ... Di-ar-ee ...” he said, struggling through the title on the notebook syllable by syllable. “Very Shitty Diarrhoea – is that it?” he laughed.

“Nah, you cretin, why don’t you just sit down and read it? Dump it, will you? What the fuck do you want with someone else’s scribble, when you can’t even figure out your own!” the other boy told him.

“Who can’t?” he snarled, reluctantly flinging his find away.

The notebook rustled along the painted boards of the bench, slammed into the cast-iron end piece and fell open in the middle.

“Ain’t there no phone? Take another look!”

The shaggy-haired one turned the handbag upside down and shook it.

“Nah-ah ... That’s the lot. It’s empty ...”

“Shame! But the mazooma’s great anyway.”

“What do we do with the bag?”

“Nothing! Not gonna walk about with a floozy’s handbag are you?” The jaunty one stuck the handbag under his arm, posed like a young man of unconventional orientation and crooned

with an affected simper: “Get this, it’s you with a handbag – ‘La, la, come and get it, fellahs, I’m all yours!’ ”

“Uhu ... Bloody fantastic! You dumbass! Give it ’ere!” the shaggy-haired one said furiously. He grabbed the handbag off his friend and flung it into the bushes behind the bench.

“Orright, orright, so you can’t take a joke! Let’s scam!”

A few seconds later their voices had dissolved into the autumn air above the path in the small Moscow park.

A ray of sunlight pierced the crown of the old maple that was already turning crimson beside the deserted bench. From high up one stricken leaf like an open palm fell through the air, performing a few death-agony pirouettes before landing on the open notebook with its index finger pointing to the place from which to start reading.

I love the sky in Paris. It’s quite different from in Moscow. It doesn’t have that exorbitant sadness or pensive intensity. It’s spread out wide and free, like a holiday ... Not just a moveable feast, but a daily one. And it starts right there, just above the highest rivet on the Eiffel Tower. The joyful blue of the morning is gradually replaced by the smoky placidity of the afternoon, which merges into the romantic lilac twilight. It’s late evening already. A dark violet evening, backlit by the mysterious glow of the lights.

I’m writing in a hotel room. The French window reaching down to the floor is like an evening dress, revealing the dark crossroads with the huge round flower bed at its centre. The flowers are sleeping, pretending to be shadow-figures of people, or fairytale heroes – it’s impossible to tell which ...

Tomorrow’s a difficult day. The first big day for me. My target number one, Achane Bèjare, has an exhibition in the European House of Photography at 82, rue François Miron. He’s a fashionable photographer. So fashionable that tickets had to be ordered in advance. His exhibitions always sell out. But that’s a good thing. A Russian girl interested in contemporary art won’t arouse any suspicion in an entire crowd of lovers of beauty. Who could ever imagine she might be interested in the artist himself, with his nuclear genes? Achane is French, but Iranian by origin. He’s 48 years old. For the last twenty years he has lived in Paris. He’s married to a Polish woman with the non-confrontational name of Anna. She’s his third wife. She speaks French, Iranian and English, and has probably managed to master a few sibilant Polish words. The exhibition is devoted to Israel. Now there’s a fine example of cosmopolitanism in contemporary art! He has an explosive character, unstable, and his behavioural type is domineering. He adores himself (as an artist) and beautiful women. But then, there’s nothing original in that. All the information about him would have fitted into two lines, if not for his hobby. And that reminds me, I mustn’t forget to put on the red bra with the claret dress. A plunging neckline combined with a red bra strap should manage the black deed rather well ...

And most important of all – the fourteenth of May ...

For me that day remains a problem with four unknowns ... Like a school problem in arithmetic: four cyclists supposedly set off from point A to point B or, rather, to point L, but only one got there. The question is: Who? As Vika would say, which of the price ...

How I miss her being here with me ... The understanding look in her eyes and the supple sway of her wheat-coloured hair, her ironic comments and her smell – the smell of freedom and the sea ...

All right, to start with I need to get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow I have cyclist number one, the Frenchman ... And after that, another three ...

And still to come are Moscow, Venice, New York, and who knows what else ...

Wish me luck, purple god of the Paris night!

2

“Your fellow-countryman and colleague, Henri Cartier-Bresson, once remarked that a good photograph is one you want to look at for more than two minutes. But in front of your works, Achane, time simply stands still!”

The slim, dark-haired young woman in the claret dress with the revealing neckline was clearly profoundly moved by what she had seen at the exhibition and wished to attract his attention.

Achane, already weary of the general attention of the crowd, turned the gaze of his intense black eyes on this girl who spoke with slightly greater enthusiasm than the others. He couldn't really call her a flawless beauty. But those blazing eyes, those small, firm breasts heaving in excitement! It was damnably attractive! Admirers and ecstatic girls could often be too pushy, but moments like this were a soothing balm to the artist's tormented soul.

“Thank you, I find your remark flattering, mademoiselle! I regard Henri as a master of undoubted talent. And which of my works did you find moved you more than the others?” he asked.

“It is the condition of your soul that moves me most of all! The eternal search for the delightful, the amazing, the miraculous, the outrageous ... and the eternal striving for improvement! I bow in homage to your talent!” In her rapturous passion the adoring young woman even blushed slightly. And in her agitation she adjusted an invisible stray lock of hair, although her immaculately coiffured dark tresses needed no help from her elegant fingers. The red bra strap on her shoulder was exposed for a brief moment, then immediately concealed again. But that moment was long enough for Ashan to notice it.

And at that very moment he felt his internal “alarm clock” switch on. That was his own jocular name for the mechanism that could detonate his entire being in the presence of a new woman he found interesting. Exactly what it was about that woman's appearance, glance, voice or smell, what it was that suddenly set the “alarm clock” ticking like a time-bomb planted by a terrorist, was something he himself didn't always understand. Every time it was something all of her own. Possibly on this occasion it was the red strap that had appeared for a split second.

Women's underwear was his secret passion. Especially red bras. At his country house by the seashore he had an entire box full of lingerie that no one else knew about, and red bras were the gems of his collection. Behind every trophy there was a story. Achane could tell everything about a woman from the kind of underwear she preferred. A woman who wore red lingerie to an art exhibition was "his kind" of woman, a woman who bore within her the promise of an entire spectrum of pleasures, from sweet pain to poignant delight – this was a stroke of luck that he couldn't pass up ...

"May I know your name, mademoiselle? And the place from which a bird of such beauty has flown into the *rue François Miron*?"

"My name is Natalya Sitnikova. I'm Russian, from Moscow. I have some modest business affairs to deal with in Paris, but I arranged them specially to coincide with your exhibition, Achane. I'm an old admirer of your art."

"Oh, Nathalie! What a beautiful name. You're Russian! That's wonderful! I speak a little Russian!" Achane's face assumed an expression of serious effort and he forced out a phrase in broken Russian: "For fotohraffer, byooteefool wuman is oxykhen".

"Oxy ... what?" the young woman responded automatically in Russian, with an approving smile.

Achane laughed nonchalantly, realising he must have made some kind of amusing blunder in his Russian, and added in French:

"Nathalie, would you agree to have dinner with me and my very closest friends? We're getting together in the *Concorde* tower on the *Place Général Koenig*. Have you ever been there?"

"No, never ..."

It's one of the tallest buildings in old Paris. With a view over the city like a bird in flight. You absolutely must see it!"

"Of course, Achane, I'd be delighted!"

"Spa-si-bo!" the artist said in Russian, pronouncing the syllables separately in order to get them right, and he kissed his lovely new acquaintance's hand, stroking the tips of her slim fingers ever so gently.

The fashionable photographer spent another couple of hours accepting congratulations from his numerous admirers and listening to flattering speeches about his talent. Natasha kept out of the way. But all that time she saw Achane following her with his eyes.

The huge glass *Concorde* tower seemed to be made entirely of squares of light forcing their way up into the night sky. The restaurant on the twenty-second floor was like a Greek amphitheatre turned inside out and lowered into a transparent flask. Down below, outside the immense, three-storeys-high windows of the flask, lay Paris, scintillating in the lacework sleeve of the Eiffel Tower and the bright veins of its streets that extended to the very feet of the restaurant's guests. The diners perched one above the other on soft light-blue divans, with waiters darting up and down between them.

The table poised above the most radiant abyss was reserved for a party of four. Achane's friends had already taken their seats. A sturdily built man who looked like a New Russian, with short-cropped hair and piercing eyes, had his arm round the shoulders of his lady friend, a thin, introspective artificial blonde with an abstracted air.

"These are my very close friends, André and Jacqueline. And by the way, André is Russian too," Achane remarked as he introduced them to Natasha. But André immediately waved one hand in a gesture of protest:

"What kind of Russian am I, Ash? My grandfather and grandmother brought my father here as an eighteen-month-old baby. I don't even know the language. I remember a few of my old granny's expressions, like "what they don't know will never hurt them", "once you let the goat in the kitchen garden ..." and "sod you, children"." André first pronounced all these *chef d'oeuvres* of folklore in Russian and then translated them. Everyone laughed, even Jacqueline twitched one corner of her rouged mouth.

"But have you been to Russia?" Natasha asked.

"Of course. They even took me for one of their own there, called me 'bro'. And all I had to answer them with was what I learned from my granny. We haven't been there since the late 90s, though. Jacqueline doesn't like Russia. We go to Israel a lot. Jacqueline's studying the history of religion."

"Yes, Ash. Your Israel series is a real success," said Jacqueline, brightening up. "The Negev Desert, the shore of the Dead Sea, the forests of Galilee ... in fact, in almost all the works, a single still picture conveys a more intensely emotional story than a three-hour movie. You can take my word for that." Jacqueline's eyes flashed, and then the spark faded again.

"Thank you, *ma chère!* If YOU say so, then it really is true!" said Achane, returning the compliment, and Jacqueline was clearly flattered by what he said.

"Nobody will tell you the truth. Women adore you, admirers flatter you. The measure of talent is gauged by God, not man," said Jacqueline, leaning back aloofly on the divan and taking out a cigarette.

"Well now, my friends!" said Achane, raising his index finger resolutely. "Today we're not discussing what a genius I am. Even I can't bear to hear any more of that! We're simply going to follow the old French tradition and drink to beautiful women, especially since half of us here today are Russian!"

"Tell me, Achane, what's the difference between French women and Russian women, from the point of view of a subtle connoisseur of the fair sex like yourself?" Natasha asked unexpectedly.

"Oh, what a question, mademoiselle! Such profundity and perception in one so young! I am lost in admiration! And I think I shall try to answer your question, Nathalie," Achane said delightedly. "Russian women are very strong, but at the same time very tender. That is their national characteristic. And it is what distinguishes them from women of other nationalities – they are strong and tender at the same time. They are soulful and affectionate at home, but outside the home, they are quite different. And this is the main problem with Russian women.

When she first meets a man, a Russian woman is strong, beautiful, complicated, austere. But if you undress her, literally and figuratively speaking, she is a lot more vulnerable than women from other countries. Her strength is also a facade. Her external appearance bears no relation to the inner person. But a Russian woman doesn't know how to reveal herself properly. She tries to conceal her weakness behind external strength. And then a man says: 'No, this is too much, this is too complicated for me' – and she is left alone, or falls into the hands of a professional gigolo."

"But with French women, it's just the opposite," André put in. "They attract you with their external elegance, dreaminess and submissiveness, and it's only when you're already in over your head that you realise you've smashed straight into a concrete wall. The wailing wall." He glanced at his female companion, anticipating some reacting to his allusion, but Jacqueline didn't even twitch an eyebrow.

"A dumb stud like you needs to have his head smashed into a wall from time to time," said Achane, interpreting her reaction for the others. "At least you'll think about the eternal verities a little bit while the bump's going down."

"All I ever do just recently is think about the eternal verities," André growled discontentedly.

"And here's another point for you – presents!" said Achane, resuming his monologue. "Presents are very important to Russian women. They have these inviolable, I would even say sacred dates – New Year, the eighth of March, their birthday, the day you first met, and I don't know what else, when they believe a man should give them presents. In Europe all this has a symbolic significance, it's not a manner of money. But a Russian woman always wants a present that costs a lot. And if a man gives her a CD or a book, she can quite easily tell him to take his present and go to hell. At least, that's what a Frenchman thinks. He thinks she wants him to give her the things that she dreams about. And even if the man doesn't play games and really tries to give her those things – within the limits of his financial resources – that's still not enough for a Russian woman. She always wants more and more. And she can lose her man if she behaves like that."

"How should a woman behave in order not to lose her man?" the curious young woman asked, continuing her interview of the artist.

Achane found this game of question and answer increasingly alluring. He already knew that if not today, then tomorrow she would end up in his bed.

"It's complicated," he started to explain. "A man is an aggregate of specific prejudices and convictions that a woman has to take into account. Now, for instance, a man is always certain that a woman behaves in the same way with every partner, and he will be no exception. That is, if she gave herself to him the first time she met, that is how she has acted with all the others. So if a woman wants a man to take her seriously, she mustn't give herself to him before the third evening. And eastern women understand that very well."

"But I don't agree!" André put in again. "It's the Iranian in him who thinks a woman has to count to three, I couldn't hold out until the third evening ..."

Achane merely smiled condescendingly at his friend's comment and went on:

"A man's first kiss with a woman is very important to him. During those first ten seconds the man realises whether he is falling in love or not. A kiss involves three very important organs – the eyes, the lips and the tongue – and, consequently, three distinct sensations: you see, you touch and you taste. Ten seconds, and you determine if this woman is for you or not. So it's very important to have fresh breath for the first kiss."

"And it's also important for the girl not to have oral chlamydia," André butted in again.

"André, from the speed with which you are getting drunk, I really do believe that you're not entirely Russian," Achane remarked.

"So if the man doesn't like the kiss, he won't sleep with the woman?" Natasha enquired naively.

Achane drained his glass and twirled it slowly in his fingers, as if he was testing their suppleness. As he replied, his black eyes glinted under those thick eyebrows that almost ran together.

"He'll still sleep with her anyway, but he'll already know that he's going to leave her."

"Don't the woman's wishes play any part in all this?" Natasha asked playfully.

"A woman who puts on red lingerie for a first date is already prepared to sleep with the man," Achane replied calmly, gazing point-blank at Natasha.

Their dialogue was becoming more and more like full-contact sparring. Not even André's next remark could defuse the mounting tension.

"Be careful with him, Nathalie! Half the women in Paris have been his mistresses. He enjoys playing games."

André got up from the table, swaying slightly, and put his arms round his friend's shoulders in an amiable embrace. Achane drew André's face down towards his own with one hand and whispered something in his ear. André smiled, nodded knowingly and walked away from the table.

Jacqueline seemed to be sunk deep in meditation. She was holding a slim, smoking cigarette in her hands and swinging her head in time to the music with her eyes half-closed.

Achane started talking more quickly and insistently:

"But do you know, Nathalie, what the difference is between a 50-year-old man and a 25-year-old? Say I want to seduce a woman, and a 25-year-old wants to do the same. He will sleep with his woman five days sooner than I will. But I have money and experience. And I know very well how to make use of those five days, how to gauge the timing so that, when I do sleep with her, not only will I get more pleasure out of it, I will also give more."

"Ash! André and I are going to be in Israel in September. Will you be there?" Jacqueline asked suddenly, as if she'd just woken up.

"I don't think so. Probably not," said Achane, reluctantly turning his attention to André's girlfriend. "I was there for six months last year and hardly ever left the place, you know that, from March to August. Remember, you even came to visit me. When was it, now?"

"In the middle of May."

“Really?”

Achane rubbed his forehead, remembering.

“Yes, yes, that’s right ... But this year I’m planning to go to Tibet. I want to do a Tibetan series. I’ve started feeling this attraction to monks just recently,” the artist added with a chuckle.

So, Achane couldn’t have been on the island on the fourteenth of May. He was in Israel. I have witnesses and proof, thought Natasha, noting the significance of what she had just heard.

Achane went back to the conversation that Jacqueline had interrupted, speaking as if what he said was important to him.

“You know, Natasha, Russians and Iranians are alike. Inside the home and outside the home are very different. My father liked red curtains. My mother said: ‘No red curtains, they’ll be pink’. And they were pink. A man must always feel that he is successful outside the home, and a woman must indulge him in this. ‘The man is the head, but the woman is the neck’ – isn’t that the saying you Russians have?”

Jacqueline’s question had reduced the pace of seduction and given Natasha time to catch up.

“Russians have sayings for every occasion in life,” she said. ‘A husband and wife means double the strife’, ‘A chicken’s no bird and a woman’s no human being’, and so on in the same vein. But we’re not talking about marriage now, we’re talking about the game played between a man and a woman. And a game has its own rules, doesn’t it?”

“Oh! You wish to know more about the rules of the game, mademoiselle? By all means! I’ll be glad to tell you. There’s more enjoyment in defeating a partner who does at least know the rules. Then the victory won’t feel like a total whitewash!” Achane laughed harshly, and the sound set Natasha’s teeth on edge.

That afternoon, when she first saw this man at the exhibition, she had already sensed the danger radiating from him, his ferocity – his unpredictability, perhaps. Yes, it could possibly be a pose, perhaps it was only at first sight that he seemed to be a wild, uncontrollable man, who would never submit to a woman. But most likely he really was like that. After all, his inner substance was in his works, in his photographs. In those old Jewish men, with their eyes withered by wisdom, but still blazing with the unbroken power of youth: the sky above them was proud and eternal, it would never submit to the earth. And those old men, and that sky, and those cities rising up in the desert sands – they were all him, Achane. As a true artist, he depicted only himself, but his talent was so expansive that he could accommodate the whole world, and survey it with the fiery gaze of a conqueror absolutely certain there was not a single woman who would not fall at his feet in submission.

3

Absorbed in her thoughts, Natasha lost track of the conversation without realising it, but the rhythm of the music led her back into Achane’s self-confident monologue.

“... should never talk about her previous men at the first date, and never talk about her problems with previous men. You can be deceptive at the first date, but only show your best

qualities. A genuine seducer is a deceiver sometimes, he will never tell the truth, he will create the illusion of truth all the time. But he will understand everything about you. From your gestures, from your movements, from your appearance and the way you behave. When you've only just met, gestures are especially eloquent. For instance, you mustn't touch your hair too often or cross your arms – a man will think you are too materialistic. When a woman offers me her hand, I touch it palm-to-palm, when I squeeze the tips of her fingers, that means: you interest me. A shielded palm means 'no chance'. If a woman shakes a man's hand quite firmly, it means that he has no chance, but only for today. She wants to carry on with the game."

"The language of gesture is not so very complicated. You can practice it," Natasha objected.

"No, you can't. You're bound to give yourself away somehow. But okay! There is one thing that never sets you wrong."

"What's that?"

"The phone. The mobile phone. I ask my girl to give me her phone for a second and I look into her eyes. And if I see stress, I know there's a problem. A problem, because this woman's entire life is in that phone. If a man wants to have a relationship with a woman, he should never look at her phone. And the same goes for a woman. A text message is always a fantasy. And the person responsible for the fantasy is the one who sent it, not the one who received it. A phone is the easiest way to get caught out. Nowadays eighty per cent of divorces start from someone reading someone else's text messages. So if you're on a date with a man, forget about your phone. The best thing of all is to turn it off and put it away in your handbag, but never, under any circumstances, put it on the table. My woman must never receive any calls or messages after eleven in the evening. It's annoying. And that's a rule. And if a man on a date with a woman starts writing a text message, that means it's over. He probably has someone else, and he's not even trying to hide it."

"And what if he is hiding it? How does the woman know if the man has someone else?"

Oh yes, what a pleasure it is to explain a few basic maxims to a victim before her red bra joins my collection, Achane thought with a sweet tremor. He imagined how he would enter this skinny Russian woman – from behind, roughly, thrusting powerfully towards the scarlet ribbon across that impeccably straight back ... It cost him quite an effort to pull himself together.

"That's quite easy to check, *ma chère Nathalie!*" he said out loud after a brief pause. "For instance, let's say your man has invited you to dinner at 8.30. You call him at 7.45 and say: '*Mon cher*, I can't have dinner with you today. I'll give you a call tomorrow'. Your man has already reserved the restaurant and possibly made provisions for subsequent developments. What does he do? He immediately looks for the other girl. And suddenly at 8.10, you call him again; 'Oh, *mon cher*, I've solved all my problems, I can have dinner with you today after all'. And if he says: 'All right, *ma chère*, I'm delighted' – that means he's your man. But if he says: 'You know, I'm sorry, but I have a meeting with so-and-so' – that means you're not the only one. And it means the other one is important to him too. She's your competitor, and you're on equal terms, because he tries to negotiate with her as well, and he doesn't ditch her straight after your call."

"And how can a woman know if she's really caught a man's interest?"

“When a man invites you go on a trip with him, that’s it, you’ve as good as won. But even here there are hidden pitfalls for a woman. Go easy on the luggage, it has to be light. Never criticise the hotels and everything that happens there. Travel economy class and even say: ‘Oh, economy’s just great, I love that too’. The cheaper the better. But don’t go economy more than twice. That sends the message that you’re a woman with no ambitions. Never agree to take your first trip on a boat. That’s a closed space, and problems will arise immediately. Too many other men and women capable of disrupting your ideal love. And you’re tied to the situation, you can’t change anything. You must say no to any boat. And in general the place, the surroundings in which you find yourself are always important, especially for the first date, or the first few. You must choose a place where you are separated from each other, where the lighting is calm and gentle and you can hide from other people. Best not to choose a luxurious restaurant, but a simple one, where you are slightly isolated, where he can touch you a little bit and no one is looking directly at you. I come back to the subject of the first date for good reason. That is the time, more than any other, when every detail plays a part. And it’s the first date that decides if there will be any ‘afterwards’ and what it will be like. For the first date you absolutely must wear a light dress. A sexy one, of course. Any colour but red! Red is always a specific coded message: ‘I want sex!’ – and all the men there will respond to it. And if you’re not intimate yet, that’s not good ...”

“And will red panties have a disastrous effect on a future relationship if you wear them for the first date?” Natasha asked. She suddenly felt she wanted to divert this man from his serious line of thought and equally serious intentions.

“Red panties will lend your backside an adventurous air, and if you are seeking adventures for it, they’ll be most appropriate – you’re a clever girl,” Achane responded instantly. Natasha bit her lip and raised the subject again:

“What other taboos are there for the first date?”

Achane replied condescendingly:

“You should never wear a lot of expensive jewellery for the first date. A man starts feeling tense and wondering why. Maybe your ex-husband is very rich, but you have problems with him. Your new friend will not be pleased by either of these circumstances. When a man looks at your jewellery, he computes your past, the people you’ve been with. And there’s nothing good about that. If the jewellery is too expensive, he’ll think the man you’re looking for has to give you a lot of presents. That will frighten him. You can’t put your jewellery on until at least the sixth date, you have to show him what you have gradually, let him get used to it. If you come to the first date in expensive jewellery, he’ll still screw you, but he’ll already know that he’s going to leave you. You must never come to a first date in the engagement ring that your last man gave you. Yes, these are clichés, but they are true. For instance, like the cliché that brunettes are more independent and intelligent, and blondes are more inclined to be submissive and are better suited to strong men. Knowing these stereotypes, a woman can play with them, change the colour of her hair – it all depends on the effect she wants to achieve.”

“And in bed?” Natasha asked.

“What about in bed?” Achane responded.

“What’s most important in bed?”

She’s either trying to provoke me or arouse me ... Well, now ... either is pretty good, thought Achane.

“In bed *everything* is most important,” he said loftily. Firstly – the position. He has to be able to see the volume of your backside, your open arms and three-quarters of your face. That’s very important. A woman must look at porn magazines and erotic journals, and she must learn these positions, because they have been tried and tested many times over by photographers, editors and publishers. Everything in these magazines has been honed so that a man gets an erection in twenty seconds, that is, the time it takes him to turn the page. Therefore they know precisely what position to put a woman’s body in, what to show, and what to hide, how to arrange the lighting so that the picture arouses a man as strongly as possible. A woman only has to use the ready-made recipes. And apart from that, the first time you have sex – no silk or satin in the bed. Silk is too cold and slippery, and satin can give you a shock from the static electricity. Smells are immensely important. Never wear scent where you will be kissed during the night. It irritates the tongue, and it will cause annoyance. I say nothing concerning other smells, or the presence of hair on various parts of the female body. That’s a matter of individual taste. But if you haven’t yet clarified your man’s preferences in this regard, a clean, well-groomed body is always a safe choice. Next, accessories: candles always excite, and they always work well. The important thing is to have a lighter ready at hand, because time is very important, and everything must be done quickly. There must always be a CD that plays continuously. Or even better, light the candles and get everything ready beforehand. For a serious person, the details are the most important thing.”

“Is it an absolute rule not to sleep with a man before the third or fourth date? Or can it be sooner? How fundamental an issue is this?”

“It’s not really a rule, more a piece of advice,” Ashan replied. “Sometimes you have to break the rules, otherwise they don’t bring you any satisfaction. You can sleep with a man straight away, but then you mustn’t meet him or have any contact with him for two or three weeks. It’s a game. But you have to play very precisely. If a man is a good player, and that’s the kind we’re talking about, then he’ll notice that you’re playing, and he’ll make the right moves in response – drawing the situation out, for instance. A woman is not capable of being precise for very long, and she loses the game. Therefore the most important thing is to be yourself! Don’t change! This is very important! If you’re a real bitch, then be one. Men who like that type will go for you. If you’re a romantic, then be a romantic. It’s very important to be yourself and look for those men who value your personal qualities most highly. Don’t play the game, because you’ll lose. You can never outplay those men who are successful players. And a successful man means at least two or three hundred women before he get to you. He’ll beat you anyway. If you are both successful, then you’re probably not going to be together. You have to accept that. Two rotten bastards, two wolves don’t live together. The relationship can’t be lasting if you possess equal power. What I seek in a woman is not what I have myself. If I’m a warrior, I don’t want to be

with a warrior. One or the other must dominate. There are exceptions, of course, but they're extremely rare."

"Is it possible to spot a successful man within a few minutes of meeting him?" Natasha asked.

"Of course. And quite easily," the Iranian replied. "If you walk along with him for ten minutes and in that time he has already greeted five or six acquaintances, then you're looking at a successful man – someone who is very difficult to confuse or play against. A successful man must be led to a place where he no longer feels his own strength, and be taken without dragging things out. And you must never pester him or call him. In general, the woman should never call first, especially if everything has already happened. No matter what, don't call him! Wait! As soon as a man feels that a woman has her hand on him, he needs to be very much in love in order to stay with her, and that's a rare occurrence too. Because it's over, she no longer intrigues him. In this case one must resign oneself to fate."

"What bilge you do talk, Ash," Jacqueline put in suddenly, when they had almost forgotten that she was there.

"What do you think is bilge, *ma chère*?" Achane asked with a hint of resentment in his voice.

"All of it ... The idea that a woman can never outplay a successful man and that a successful man and successful woman can never be together ... I don't wish to offend you but, I'm sorry, this is merely the man's view of these matters, and not even simply the man's view, it's the eastern man's view. One viewpoint that has a right to exist, but nothing more than that ..."

"Okay, what does a woman think about all this? A successful woman?" the Iranian asked heatedly.

"Firstly, the successful woman wonders where her drunken companion has got to. Where did you send him off to, Ash? And secondly, in order to avoid a pointless argument, with the help of certain specific techniques, an intelligent woman can get herself any man for any specific purpose, with the possible exception of genuine feeling. That's an entirely different universe, and none of the recipes work there ... Oh! There he is! André, darling, I was missing you already!"

"I miss you the moment I move more than five yards away, *ma chérie*," André boomed in a deep, romantic voice that set everyone laughing.

The glass doors of the hotel swung open to admit the dark-haired guest in a claret dress who had returned so late. The elderly *concierge* behind the desk smiled with drowsy politeness and said: "Goodnight, mademoiselle!"

Natasha opened the door of her room with the plastic card, kicked off her shoes and fell onto the enormous bed with her diary in her hands. She was brimming over with emotions and impressions.

Measuring time in pages is quite different from measuring it in hours. In my diary I'm still living on the same page, but in life an entire long day has gone by. My day in Paris! And now

once again it is a purple night with glowing lights and shadow-figures, but perhaps there is a little less mystery in it than yesterday ...

Achane was kind enough to invite me to take a stroll through the night-time city with him after supper. "Just you, me and Paris ..." he whispered, and his intense black eyes glittered as he squeezed the tips of my fingers.

He was irresistible, this fiery man and artist with a taste for life and its pleasures ... He is sexuality itself, a total extravert, he postures extravagantly, holds nothing back. He believes he is adorable, and his self-assurance is even more appealing. He is truly magnificent and he knows it ... Only he does not know, and will never know, the emotions that his forthright sexuality arouses in me ... He looks at me with those blazing eyes, and I feel cold, he smiles as he takes hold of my hand, and I want to cry, with every movement and expression he says "I want you" – and I want to run away and not look back ... How long is this torment going to last? Is it forever now? Am I an incurable freak? And from the outside I look so secure, with my straight back and graceful movements ... I'm strong, I've taught my body to move beautifully, I've remoulded my personality, I've forced my thoughts to obey my will ... But why can't I force my own memory to forget a single word – "rape"? It's more than three years now, and that word is still there, still living inside me ... A word filled with a choking scream of humiliation, hairy knees forcing my closed legs apart and drunken, bestial lust that is deaf to anything but itself. And the indifferent ringing of the telephone, the endless waiting by a closed door, where the rag on the doorstep has more dignity than me, a woman ... The mockery in his eyes, that seemed so transparent to me only yesterday, but are cold-blooded and treacherous today, my murdered child's pounding heart ... I laboriously tie a stone to the thin neck of this word, between the "r" and the "a", and drown it deep, deep inside myself, but any chance detail, gesture or word can snag the rope and it surfaces again, like some repulsive bubble of swamp gas rising in my throat ...

Yet even so, today Achane achieved the near-impossible! He revived my maimed sexual fantasy ... he could have been proud of himself, if only he had only known the scenes I started imagining towards the end of our interview on "sexual education". I imagined this raging beast making love to me, tearing me apart and feasting his eyes on the torn flesh. I felt ashamed, but the shame only made it all the sweeter ... Possibly my imagination came back to life, because it was completely unthreatened by reality. And possibly the entire thrust of the Iranian's assault is exhausted before bed, and in sex he is egoistical, unimaginative and boring, like a domesticated ox ... I'll never find out. And that's for the best. I shall never be just another trophy in his collection. I shall never be a trophy in anyone's collection again. And that's one more little triumph for me ...

But the Paris night will wait for me! I believe that! It will wait for me to return with my beloved! If that is still possible at all ...

Meanwhile I have my first result – the first assignment out of four has been completed successfully. I was simply lucky. It was all too easy. The information I needed surfaced on its own without any effort from me.

The law of beginner's luck applies here too. I mustn't relax. "You must never, never, never relax," says Vika ... I hope I'll be able to tell her about all this soon. She'll smile, and her eyes will engulf me in a wave of tender blue. I miss her smile so badly ...

4

The delicate blue morning of Paris came drifting into the room as a delicious aroma of freshly brewed coffee and crusty, browned bread rolls. Natasha's things were already packed, in half an hour the taxi would arrive and then it was off to the airport. The next point on her itinerary was Moscow ... Natasha stood at the hotel window and watched the shadow of the buildings slowly creeping off the huge round flowerbed in the centre of the crossroads. Liberated from the shadow, the flowers lit up like electric light bulbs – yellow, purple, scarlet, cornflower-blue. *Flowers grow where beauty is appreciated, or beauty and harmony flourish where there are lots of flowers*, she thought and smiled at the childish absurdity of the observation. This momentary return to childhood, these magnificent flowers and the retreating shadows reminded her of a completely different day in her life, a day left behind long ago in ... Where? Where did the days gone by live? If only she knew.

Natasha was transported back to that long-ago day, as if it had been waiting just outside the door of her hotel room, and not many years ago and thousands of miles away from this sunny city of burred r's with its welter of flowers and aromas.

She was 14 or 15 years old then ... That day was just as sunny, but it still had the coolness of spring, for it took spring a long time to warm up in her cold little town. As she walked along the dreary row of five-storey, grey apartment building Natasha watched her shadow briskly trying to overtake its owner. The houses were set higgledypiggledy, like a row of new conscripts who have confused the commands "about face" and "dress left". It was the first time she had been in this neighbourhood, but it was almost identical with the other districts of the town. Workers' Street, number 11, 13, 15 ... she needed number 37. Her mother, as usual, had tapped one of her friends for money before payday and sent her to repay the debt – a few banknotes rather badly mangled by life. This time she was looking for a person called Elena Nikolaevna Smolyaninova, who lived at that address: 37 Workers' Street. The heels of Natasha's shoes clattered hollowly on the battered asphalt – there was almost no one else walking along the street. The regular sound of her steps carried her thoughts away from her own shadow playing games with her on the shabby walls of the buildings. She pondered on the way that any name revealed the life history of its owner. It made no difference if the owner was animate or not. The image rose up in your mind like a picture as soon as you pronounced the name, either out loud or to yourself. For instance, in Russian the name of the town Khabarovsk immediately summoned up a picture of huts ("khibary") and barns ("ambary"), and you heard the sound of a dashing gentleman laughing ("kha-kha-kha") because a cruel destiny had landed him there, and you could feel a chilly breeze

...

It was the same with people's names. When their teacher announced that a new boy called Anton Telyshchev was being moved to their class, Natasha immediately imagined him from the word "telyonok" – a calf: a sluggish youth with downy fluff above his plump lip and a bulbous nose who squeezed his spots, and liked watching films "about war" and being at the factory with his mother. What did the factory have to do with anything? Nothing really, he just happened to like it. The "swot" Telyshchev was just as Natasha had imagined him. Or there was that time recently when her mother asked the neighbour: "How's Klavdia Vasilievna's health?" – and the very sounds of the name had sketched a picture of a plump woman in a bright flowery housecoat (from "vasilki" – cornflowers). She made jam, terribly sweet, "so it wouldn't go sour", wrote down recipes from the television, boiled underwear in a saucepan, applied burdock leaves to her gout and drove everyone round the bend with advice on how to treat gout and make jam. It would have been interesting to check all that.

The name "Elena Nikolaevna Smolyaninova" had a whiff of aristocratic nobility about it. Natasha couldn't have explained what "aristocratic nobility" meant, she only had a vague impression: a clear, intent gaze, a straight back, good manners, education, neat dressing habits. She wondered if her "picture" matched the real person she was going to see. And what about her own name? What did it say? Right now, all it said was that she was striding out along the street: "Na-ta-sha-na-ta-sha".

The five-storey concrete boxes gave way to low wooden ones, with vegetable gardens and tumbledown fences. The hazy sunlight flowed over the houses, flooding into the lacework of dried clay in the worn rut of the road. The door was opened by an elderly woman who looked like a teacher. Those radiant, young eyes seemed out of place with the smoothly combed grey hair. When Natasha said hello and explained the reason for her visit, the woman replied in a pleasant voice:

"Please come in. Stay with me for a while, Natashenka, if you're not in any hurry. Today's a special anniversary, a day of remembrance for my father, Nikolai Nikolaevich Smolyaninov. There were four of us children. And now there's no one else left ..."

She showed her visitor through into the sitting room, picked up a teapot off the table – it was copper, with a monogram on the lid – and went out to the kitchen. A straight back, a smooth, gliding walk, an immaculately ironed dress with a snow-white collar. The room was bright and very clean. The old furniture seemed to be keeping a secret, priding itself on its many years of silence. Natasha hadn't seen furniture like that at the homes of many people she knew. The corner was occupied by the chief keeper of secrets – a grand piano. It was too big for the small room. When she came back, Elena Nikolaevna walked over to the instrument, sat down smoothly on the high stool and turned towards her visitor:

"Natasha, do you like classical music?"

"I don't know. Yes, I suppose so ..."

Her hostess smiled faintly at some thought of her own, drew herself erect, straightened the folds of her dress gracefully, threw her slim hands up in the air and started to play.

Natasha couldn't decide what it was that she was enjoying so much – the sound of the music or the sight of this magnificent woman.

When the final chord rang out, Elena Nikolaevna slowly lowered her hands onto her knees and announced: “That’s an étude by Grechaninov. Papa liked to play it when we were children.”

Then they drank tea with strawberry jam, fishing the berries out of the transparent syrup with little silver spoons. All the strawberries were whole, every last one – that was the kind of jam that once used to be served in the Smolyaninovs’ household. Elena Nikolaevna had preserved the recipe and a few small spoons – slim and elegant, with an edge that felt pleasant to the tongue and a complicated floral design under your fingers. Noticing Natasha examining the design, her hostess explained:

“The letter ‘S’ in the centre stands for the family silver of the Smolyaninovs. I remember the pattern from my early childhood, when we still had all the cutlery. Then some of it disappeared, some of it was sold, and now the little spoons are all I have ... My grandmother was very fond of them. She was a wise woman, who kept her majestic deportment and youthful spirit to the very end of her life, in spite everything. My grandmother always used to say that in 1917 the bourgeoisie and the merchants shot themselves because they had lost their money and property, which were the most important things in their lives, but we survived because inner riches are impossible to confiscate ... I’ve had a hard life, and now I understand what she meant. In the concentration camps only two types of people retained their individuality – believers and aristocrats ...”

Elena Nikolaevna asked Natasha about her school and her preferences in literature and music. Natasha realised that she was separated by vast gulf from the “countess”, as she called her new acquaintance in her own mind. But she didn’t feel that gulf at all, she only felt the benevolent attitude and cordial hospitality of her hostess.

She didn’t want to leave, there was no one was waiting for her at home. Elena Nikolaevna guessed her visitor’s mood and made a suggestion.

“Natashenka, would you like me to show you my little pets before they go to sleep?”

“Of course I would!”

Elena Nikolaevna threw an old coat across her shoulders and led Natasha to the spot beside the house that was used by other residents in the area used for planting “relishes” – onions, radishes and garlic. But beside her low, tidy fence there were flowers growing – blue, yellow, white, dark red, light blue. They looked like the gaping jaws of fairytale lions with their tongues hanging out from the heat. Natasha gasped:

“Oh wow! They’re so unusual! What are they called?”

“These are irises. And perfectly ordinary ones. In Latin that’s what they’re called, *iris vulgaris*, meaning ‘ordinary iris’.”

“Vulgaris?” Natasha remembered her mother saying something about someone: “She dresses so vulgarly” or “she behaves so vulgarly”. She hadn’t thought about the meaning of the word, but she had realised that it was something wrong and being vulgar was bad. “But being vulgar is bad, surely?”

“Yes, of course, you’re right. To be vulgar means to demonstrate certain natural human needs too forthrightly. The literal meaning of ‘vulgaris’ is ‘accessible to the masses’. The translation of the Bible from Latin into a language people could understand was called ‘the vulgate’ too. Comprehensible to the people – that’s the original meaning of the word, and it’s by no means negative. It’s only now, in our modern language, that it has acquired a negative connotation.”

“I see,” said Natasha, and started thinking again about the gulf between her and the “countess”. She looked admiringly at the flowers again. “But they’re not ordinary at all! I’ve never seen flowers like them at anyone else’s house!”

“It just that they like listening to good music,” Elena Nikolaevna said with a smile.

5

Natasha’s phone rang in the new *Louis Vuitton* handbag that she’d bought recently in a boutique on the Champs Elysées.

“NatalEEya SitnikOva?” a pleasant baritone voice asked, struggling with the Russian name.

“Yes, yes.”

“*Bonjour*. The taxi for Charles de Gaulle airport is at the hotel entrance. A silver Peugeot, number ...”

“Thank you.”

The taxi driver, a lean man of about thirty-five with dark hair, opened the door of the car for her and asked with a smile:

“How do you like Paris?”

“It’s magnificent!” Natasha said, smiling back at him, got into the car and demonstratively turned to face the window. She was in a rush to get back to the cosy reminiscences interrupted by the phone call. Buildings, people and advertisement hoardings drifted by outside the window. One hoarding showed a large purple flower with the words: “French Society for the Protection of ...” either flora against fauna, or fauna against flora, or both of them against some third party – Natasha didn’t have time to make out the text. But the door into the past had already opened.

A poster of a purple iris in her university hostel room: Natasha wouldn’t have spotted it straight away among the other posters of suntanned torsos and fashionable singers, if she hadn’t flopped full length onto the creaking divan, clutching in her hands a long-anticipated trophy – a student ID card with the sweet smell of a dream come true. She opened the cover with a pleasant crunching sound, feeling terribly pleased with herself, and read it once again: “M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University; Student Ticket No. 0200021/17, Natalia Evgenievna Sitnikova, Faculty of philology, Full-time study, Date of issue, First year, Signature of the dean ...

The thick ink of the fresh seal covered half her face. She had gathered her long dark hair into a ponytail especially for the photograph and pressed her lips tightly together to make herself look

more severe. But the person gazing out at her from the photo was still a clueless provincial girl, trying with all her might to look serious, with thin, threadlike lips and only one ear left.

The student Sitnikova crossed one leg over the other, setting the springs of the bed creaking, and stuck the big toe of one foot into the heart of the purple *iris vulgaris*. Why hadn't she noticed it before? Natasha ran her toe round the flower and remembered Elena Nikolaevna. After that first meeting she went to see the "countess" again and again. To return books, to listen to her demure voice, to see her slim fingers touching the keys of the piano in that graceful manner of hers. And simply to pick a strawberry out of the transparent jam with a little silver spoon decorated with the monogrammed "S". The "countess" was always welcoming and hospitable and somehow, at the same time, out of reach, but after these visits Natasha could feel something slowly changing in her soul. Changing irrevocably: the furniture in their apartment at home irritated her, and so did the apartment itself, so cramped and cluttered, the empty-headed conversations of her mother's friends and her mother's constant preoccupation with petty everyday problems.

She lost interest in spending time with her friends, and replaced them with books. She even abandoned her Kostik, who everyone thought was an absolute dreamboat

It simply happened somehow, just before she left for Moscow. They were out walking. Natasha was feeling sick at heart. Kostik had stuck his lower lip out resentfully and he was talking himself up, the way he'd been doing all the time just recently, boasting that Lenka Sidorova kept showering him with love letters, and Galka Tarakanova lay in wait for him near his entrance and made broad hints about having sex when she caught him. But like a fool, he trailed around after Natasha, waiting for her to condescend to give him a date. And he said his mother had gone away again for a week to earn a bit of money, and they could screw like they used to do before – they'd had a good time, hadn't they? – but she wouldn't even call round. The word "screw" jarred harshly on Natasha's ears, but she maintained a stubborn silence. The pauses kept getting longer. Kostik suggested they should sit somewhere for a while. After standing in a rather long queue to get into "somewhere", they found themselves sitting at a table by the wall, facing each other. He'd been going to sit beside her, but Natasha had stopped him. Kostik clasped her hand greedily between his palms and looked into her eyes as he said:

"Natashka, I just can't live without you. I realised that ages ago. I don't want anyone else but you. I'd marry you. Honest I would."

Natasha didn't pull her hand away and took her time before she answered, searching for the right words. But Kostik tried to pressure her:

"You used to say you loved me, remember? Or doesn't that mean anything to you anymore? What's changed? Tell me, Natasha!"

Natasha freed her hand without saying anything.

Kostik decided he'd pushed too hard and started trying to justify himself:

"Imagine, we can get married and live at my place. Just the two of us! My mother's away half the year in any case. I'll get a job, and you'll take our little kid for walks in the public garden. That's what all the girls dream about ..."

“You know, I’m not all the girls,” she said, finally breaking her silence. “And it’s not anything to do with you, Kostya. It’s to do with the kid.”

“What d’you mean, the kid? What’s wrong, Natash? I only meant it for the best ... if you don’t want to, you don’t have to ...”

“But I’m serious. It’s about my baby, the child that I’ll have someday. I want him to eat his porridge with a silver spoon that has the crest of his ancient family on it, and I want the same crest to be on the gates of the house where he’s going to live. Do you understand?”

“No. I don’t understand. Are you ill or something, Sitnikova? What does it matter what’s written on the spoon? Never mind the fence.”

“The gates.”

“All right, the gates, what difference does it make?”

“A big one.”

“I don’t get it ... the gates are more important to you than me? You don’t want to? You don’t want to marry me?”

“I don’t want to marry anyone at all for the time being. Including you.”

“A-a-ah, now I get it,” Kostik drawled resentfully. “Read too many fairytales, is that it? Going to wait for your prince? Go on then. Good luck! But I think your head’s swollen up like a pumpkin with all this trash! And you don’t realise what you’ve just done! You’ve destroyed everything with your own hands. Bloody Cinderella! But there’s no way back, you know! Do you hear me?”

Natasha looked at him and couldn’t understand what she’d seen in him back then, only a year ago.

The iris on the wall shuddered – someone was hammering on the door. Without waiting to be invited, one of the other girls from Natasha’s floor stuck her head of shaggy, bleached hair in through the opening.

“Hi, are you Natashka Sitnikova from philfac?”

“Yes, why?”

“They’ve eaten that chicken on the stove. It was you frying it, wasn’t it? But don’t you get upset, okay? Come and join us in 52. We’ve got potatoes. Come right now.”

“Thank you.”

The head disappeared. Natasha knew there was no way she could live in the hostel and avoid her neighbours’ company. She ought to go and get to know them. And she was hungry. *And Elena Nikolaevna would never lie about with her legs up, like I’m doing now*, Natasha thought suddenly, and she immediately got up and straightened her clothes. She took a look at herself in the mirror and combed her hair. Through all its blotches and scratches the mirror, weary of the stream of constantly changing faces, reflected a skinny young woman with dark hair, not a real beauty, but quite cute and satisfied with herself. Only very hungry.

Room 52 was filled with spontaneous girlish merriment and the stench of burnt potatoes, mingled with the sharp odour of miscellaneous perfumes. There were clothes dangling off the

beds and bags lying in a heap in the corner. The girls were jostling round two stools that had been set together to take the place of a table. Natasha introduced herself to everyone, trying to remember their names the first time round – Lena, Sveta, Nadya, Olya, Suliye, Oxana ... The carefree chatter never stopped for a moment. They talked about everything at once: about their studies, their lecturers, guys, shops, clothes ... Although the potatoes had clearly been cooked “student-style” – they looked burnt, but were raw on the inside – they were soon finished, and Natasha started studying her new friends.

Suliye had beautiful, precisely defined cheekbones and thick black hair, and a pretty good figure too. But her eyes, with those swollen eyelids, and broad Asiatic nose gave her face a look that was too “ethnic”. Nadya’s smooth back, classy backside and long legs made her a genuine beauty, but only from behind. Her doughy skin, short neck and overbite rapidly corrected the initial impression. And in addition, her dull, peroxide-bleached hair with those treacherous black roots gave her an air of vulgarity – meaning “accessibility to the masses”, as Natasha now knew. She was the one who had announced the untimely demise of the fried chicken. Of course, Natasha regretted the loss of the chicken, and half-cremated potatoes were hardly adequate consolation for her bitter loss. She smiled to herself at the happy linguistic discovery of “cremated potatoes” and continued with her observations. Lenka had classy eyes, huge and green, with long, thick eyelashes, and her nose wasn’t too bad, but her lips were characterless, her legs were short and crooked and she had a low, heavy “suitcase” backside. Everything about Olya was too much: her mouth was too big, her voice was too off-putting, her legs were too thin. She talked too much and she tried too hard to make everyone like her. So she was the one that nobody liked very much. There was nothing at all memorable about Oxana. Her parents ought to have called her Isolde or Evelyn, so that she could at least have been remembered by contrast with her name. Svetka was probably the only contender for the cardboard crown of “Miss Room 52”. She was put together so very neatly ... Fair-skin and light hair ... A genuine blonde. A little bit taller and she’d almost be a princess.

Natasha liked looking at girls. She’d noticed that about herself a long time ago. She liked studying, or rather, admiring the beautiful little fragments of the way other girls looked. And it gave her a thrill that was like ... arousal. Yes, that was the right name for the warm feeling that spread out below her stomach, accompanied by the pleasant sensation of ants running up and down her spine. They might not be as big and cloven-hoofed as the ants she got from boys, but there was no point in being mealy-mouthed about things. *And what of it? Does it mean that I’m a ... you know ... a what’s-its-name? Oh, no-o-o!* She refused to pronounce that word, even to herself, and tried to find arguments in her own defence. She found one: women’s breasts didn’t attract her in the slightest! Well, if they were there, that was a good thing, and it was even better if they were beautifully shaped and the right size, but in themselves, they didn’t make her feel anything. So she was a proper, normal girl after all, and she could get all these stupid ideas out of her head!

Absorbed in analysing her own subconscious, Natasha had lost the thread of the general conversation. The girls were discussing someone called Evgenia Borisovna. She immediately

imagined a large backside with a skirt stretched across it so that the tight drawers showed through, a neckline that was too explicit by half and lifeless hair of an indeterminate colour, set in a tight perm. She started feeling bored. A five-year-old boy had settled down in the corner beside the heap of plastic bags and handbags – he was the son of Nadya’s sister, Galka, who’d got stuck in the shops. He was busy with his game and nobody was taking any notice of him. Natasha sat down beside the little boy.

“What are you playing?”

“He’s been doing jigsaws all day long,” Nadya answered for her nephew. “Galka bought them for him yesterday in Children’s World, so there’s no damn tearing him away from them now. Well, thank God for that, it keeps him out of the way, and he doesn’t make a sound. I wish it was always like that.”

Natasha edged a bit closer.

“Can I have a look at how you put them together?”

“Only don’t you dare help me! I’ll do it myself!” the kid insisted without looking up from his game.

“Of course you’ll do it,” Natasha said with a smile. “I don’t even know how.”

“Look,” the little boy explained condescendingly. “This has to go here, and this goes here, ah, no, over here. See, the car hasn’t got any bumper.” Natasha became absorbed in examining the almost completed picture. A ready-made picture that someone had cunningly cut up into lots of little pieces. The player’s task was to put it back together to form a complete whole. One person would do it in a few minutes, someone else might take a day or a week. It wouldn’t make any difference to the picture. The whole point of the game was the process, the outcome was totally predetermined. No matter what you tried, these little pieces would only add up to a car, and there was no way it could suddenly turn out to be anything else, like a carriage or an aeroplane. What was so interesting about that? But what if you could change the game? Put together a person – a girl, for instance? *I almost just did that already with the material available here, she answered herself. Lenka’s eyes, Olga’s mouth – with Suliye’s Asiatic cheekbones it wouldn’t look so big – Nadya’s “rear view”, Sveta’s nose and hair – no, better if the hair was black, like Suliye’s. And what from Oxana? Well, modesty, if it really does adorn a woman. So now I’ve made the whole thing up ... and what did I get? The same game, only for young schoolgirls. Live jigsaw puzzles are no better than cardboard ones.*

But what if the jigsaw I have to put together is the picture of my life, and all the parts of the picture that come later depend on how I insert today’s little puzzle? And if I change the little pieces, one by one, I can change my life? Then I have to start changing right now! The picture of a life is put together every day, every day another little jigsaw slips into place. If you don’t change it now, you can never change it, it will carry on into the future as a tatty little room in a hostel, with clothes hanging all over the place and a smell of burnt potatoes. And then you can never pry it out of there again! Never!

“Girls, is there a decent jeweller’s shop anywhere near here?” Natasha asked.

“What do you want to know for? Want to find yourself a ring, do you?” Olya enquired in a tone of scathing concern.

“It’s not for me, it’s for the next chicken, so it won’t fly off the frying pan,” Natasha joked.

The girls burst into laughter.

“I’ll tell you, Natash. Seryozha and me are looking at rings right now,” said inconspicuous Oxana.

The next day Natasha bought a silver knife and fork. And she had a monogrammed letter “S” engraved on them – to match the little spoon that Elena Nikolaevna had given her before she left. Of course, the items of cutlery she bought were different from the one the “countess” had given her and, what was more, following this purchase Natasha would be dining for a whole month on royal lunches of two dishes – raw cabbage and boiled cabbage. But the first correct jigsaw had been inserted into the picture of her life! The monogram “S” didn’t just stand for “Smolyaninov”, it stood for “Sitnikova” too.

6

A gust of wind blew the five-fingered maple leaf off the notebook lying open on the bench at page forty-nine. The leaf glided down onto the ground, blending into the yellow deathbed melancholy of its fellows, and the wind started ruffling the diary’s pages, like a naughty schoolboy leafing through a magazine when the teacher’s out of the classroom: 47 ... 42 ... 39. Page 38 presented its calligraphic cheek to the autumn sun ...

I shall love you. Subtly. Tenderly. Passionately ... Envelop you in my love ... Slipping through your veins. Flowing into every cell. Into every millimetre of you. Spreading through your body in a sweet, tremorous thrill and playing wild, crazy games under your skin.

I shall study you. Without hurrying ... cautiously ... slowly ... Enjoying it, simply observing the way you smell, breathe, move ... I shall drown in this time, in this timelessness ... An hour, a day, a minute, a year, until, while ... I shall love you ...

I shall enter in ... and explode, so run ... hide.

Let me in, whisper, shout. Change ...

Break away ... disappear .. float away ...

Be me, be higher ... astonish me ...

Natashka! This is for you! Almost prose and almost verse.

From Vika, the genius

The handwriting was completely different, sharp and impetuous, sloping strongly to the right. Mute leaves fell and settled in the empty alley and sparrows fought over a piece of mouldy

white bread beside the bench. What did they care who Vika was and what she meant in the life of someone called Natasha ...

The literature test had been scheduled in a dingy, unfamiliar auditorium with desks that had been scribbled all over. The lecturer who had been scheduled was unfamiliar as well – E. B. Tomeiko. But student Sitnikova didn't care who she would be examined by. Her bag was weighed down heavily by a report on the works of Lev Tolstoy and a thick wad of quotations – the exam was pretty much a cinch. Natasha took the desk furthest away by a window and dumped her heavy load on it. After she sat down, she straightened her back and raised her head. She deliberately made herself do that. Sometimes, of course, she forgot, but when she saw someone else's hunched shoulders or her own reflection in mirrors and shop windows, her shoulders instantly straightened up of their own accord. Aristocratic ladies didn't have curved spines and double chins, or abrupt, clumsy movements either. So she had to incline her head smoothly and elegantly.

Listening to her inner voice, Natasha tried lowering her head slowly and gracefully, and in the centre of the desk she saw a drawing of a fantastic flower, or rather, a ravenous pair of gaping jaws with a protruding tongue, patiently lying in wait for their victim, disguised as an innocent plant. All the details had been drawn in meticulously. Natasha looked a bit closer. The long central petal, jutting upwards together with a pair of shorter, rounded petals, formed a different composition that wasn't obvious at first glance – an image of the male sexual organs. And that threw a completely different light on the mood of the artist, if he had transformed a penis into a hybrid of a plant and ravenous jaws. Natasha felt embarrassed. Had anyone else seen this? Maybe she should move to another desk? She glanced round. All the tables by the three windows were occupied already. And she liked the feeling of the diffuse February sunshine on her cheek so much. Natasha covered the masterpiece of tabletop pictorial art with a masterpiece of *belles lettres* – a volume of Tolstoy – the former still peeped out frivolously from beneath the latter here and there.

After everyone had taken their seats, the lecturer entered the room – a woman of about forty-five, with a plunging neckline, a short skirt that hugged her thighs and a “crow's nest” hairdo on her head.

“Good morning. My name is Evgenia Borisovna. I'll be taking your test instead of Sophia Alexandrovna, who is unwell,” she explained, and the crow's nest swayed to and fro in time with her movements.

What if there were eggs in that nest? She ought to be more careful, Natasha thought anxiously, not surprised to find that the new lecturer's appearance was already familiar.

The students stood up in alphabetic order and mumbled their reports. The others pretended to be listening. Evgenia Borisovna swayed her crow's nest in time to their answers, separating one mumble from another with the phrase: “Good, now let's have your record book,” or “That will do, let's have your record book”.

The suggestive jaws peeped out from under the book again. Natasha blushed as if she had just drawn them herself. She opened the book at random, increasing the area of coverage over the indecent drawing. Her eyes slipped along the familiar lines:

“I am no commoner, as Pushkin stated proudly, I also state boldly that I am an aristocrat by birth and by habit and by position. I am an aristocrat because not only does remembering my ancestors – fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers – not make me feel ashamed, it makes me particularly happy. I am an aristocrat because I was raised from childhood in love and respect for the refined and the elegant, expressed not only in Homer, Bach and Raphael, but also in all the small things of life: in a love of clean hands, of beautiful clothes, of an elegant table and carriage. I am an aristocrat because I have been so fortunate that neither I nor my father nor my grandfather have ever known want or the struggle between conscience and want, have never had any need to envy anyone or cringe, have never known the need to educate ourselves for the sake of money and position in society and other such trials to which people in want are subjected. I can see that this is a great good fortune and I thank God for it, but if this good fortune does not belong to everyone, I do not see in this any reason to reject it and not to profit from it ... I am an aristocrat because I cannot believe in the sublime intellect, refined taste and immense integrity of a man who picks his nose with his finger and whose soul converses with God ...”

Natasha’s stomach rumbled as if it had chosen the moment deliberately. “Oh yes, according to Tolstoy, I’m very far from being an aristocratic,” the girl thought. “I don’t know my ancestors any further back than my grandmother, I’m getting an education out of need, and my stomach rumbles.”

She looked out of the window: the sunlight was barely peeping through the dirty glass. Someone was mumbling monotonously about Fonvizin: “... exposes the system of serfdom as the root of all the country’s ills, mocks at the gentry system of upbringing and education ...”

That’s interesting too, thought Natasha, *the German aristocrat Von Wieszin exposed the faults of the Russian nobility’s education, the Russian Tsar Peter tried to change Russians into Germans by force, and the German Princess Catherine was enchanted by everything “Russian”.*

Absorbed in her own thoughts, Natasha must have been the last one to notice the stir in the auditorium caused by the arrival of a new girl student. The unfamiliar girl skirted the desks, striding elegantly along the row, as if she was walking across a podium. She was very beautiful, but she seemed to consist entirely of contradictions: a light stride and heavy, golden-wheat-coloured hair; dark jeans and light-coloured suede shoes with low heels: a man’s shirt unbuttoned at the chest, a wide bracelet on a slim wrist.

“You should pay your debts when they’re due, student Shatskaya! And come to the exam at the same time as everyone else, not whenever the fancy takes you!” The lecturer’s voice rang out angrily from beneath the crow’s nest.

“I’m sorry,” the girl sang in an ingratiating voice, still walking.

“Sit down and join in with the work,” the lecturer told her in a gentler voice. “Continue, Voronkov.”

But thick-lipped Voronkov couldn't continue. His eyes and everyone else's were riveted on this late arrival, the student Shatskaya, as if she hadn't come on her own, but arrived with a dozen unbridled elementals in tow. The first to burst in were agitation, excitement and curiosity. The others followed close on their heels.

"What's wrong, Voronkov, have you gone deaf? We're all listening very attentively."

"Eh? Ah, yes ..."

The literary mumbling was reluctantly resumed, but in a rather agitated voice.

The late arrival Shatskaya took a free place beside Natasha. *Probably it's not done here to ask "May I come in?" or even "May I sit beside you?"*, Natasha thought to herself, disagreeably surprised. And just at that moment, her new neighbour turned towards her. The weighty golden tresses repeated the movement of her beautiful head with a short delay, like a slow-motion shot in a film. She smiled, looking straight into Natasha's eyes, held out her hand like a man and whispered:

"Hi. I'm Vika."

Natasha reached out and touched the dry, firm hand clumsily.

"Natasha."

"You have beautiful eyes, Natasha! Have you already said your piece? Funky drawing!" Vika was already examining the lower, meaty part of the "flower", after moving aside the volume by the champion of morality. It was apparently perfectly natural for her to utter entirely unconnected phrases and do several things at the same time.

This student Shatskaya is some kind of natural catastrophe, Natasha thought and replied.

"No, not yet. I come under 'S', near the end of the list. What's so funky about it?"

"Firstly, the fact that a penis is disguised as a flower, and secondly, the fact that it was drawn by a girl."

Natasha started.

"Why do you think it was a girl?"

"Why, it's obvious. The attempt to hint at something, without saying it straight out, the shame at feeling natural desires, the secondary details that have been drawn in and the excessive attention to all sorts of little flourishes – those are all typical female features. A man would have drawn the penis more simply, without concealing it hypocritically in floral decoration. After all, a man is subconsciously afraid of this 'alter ego' of his, because science has still not determined which of them is actually in control. So there's no doubt that the drawing was done by a woman, or a girl. And it was a girl who recently separated from her young man. He dumped her, and she's taking the parting very badly. It was the most unforgettable affair in her life. And he was her best lover, by the way. But she had the wrong attitude to men and sex. That's why he dumped her."

"You think a poor abandoned girl ruined the desk in a fit of grief and love?"

"No, it wasn't drawn out of grief. Or out of love, either. There's no love left. There's resentment, dependency, anger with herself and him. When she drew this she was trying, on the

one hand, to free herself from dependency, because desire constrains a woman's inner freedom, it takes away her self-control. She was striving to purge her soul of lust." Vika raised her index finger and started speaking in a preacher's voice, rounding out her "O's" and drawing out the words.

"For it was not the corruptible flesh that rendered the soul sinful, but the sinful soul that rendered the flesh corruptible!"

Natasha smiled, noting Vika's ability to switch roles in an instant. In her mind's eye she could almost see the tedious minister of religion with his cassock and beard.

"And on the other hand?" she prompted, already engaged in the conversation.

"On the other hand, through this act of vandalism she was attempting to humiliate her former boyfriend by exposing, even covertly, what men usually conceal. After all, supposedly woman is body, feeling, nature, and man is the opposite – spirit, intellect, reason! This is his major merit. But in actual fact, she humiliated herself by confirming her secondary status as a human individual in this world. Drawing genitalia on desks and fences is an indication of the artist's weakness and immaturity. Mature personalities use canvas, paper, film and international public opinion for that. Do you like paintings?"

Natasha was embarrassed.

"Who do you like?" she asked

"What I like is not 'who', but 'how'. The precision of Malevich, the sophistication of Modigliani, the mystique of Magritte, the cool aplomb of Warhol, the yellow of Van Gogh ..."

"Did they all draw genitalia too?"

"Well, of course not. Not only." Vika gave Natasha a cunning look from under her long dark eyelashes. "But you're right, in the sense that it is a subject of vital interest to any artist, and any normal human being. At all the most important moments of life – birth, the sexual act, death – a human being is naked. Laying bare is a means of self-revelation, a sign of trust in the world. Do you know that in ancient Israel a man swearing an oath had to put his hand on his genitals or the genitals of the man he was swearing to ..."

"Right! You girls by the window! Did you come here to gossip?" The voice of the mistress of the crow's nest brought the two students back down to boring reality.

"Have you got a book report, by the way?" Vika asked in a very low voice.

"Yes. How about you?"

"Na-ah ..."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Sitnikova ... Natalya? If you please, we're listening. "The crow's nest swung menacingly around its axis to face Natasha. Two round, dreary eyes stared directly at her. Natasha stood up.

"Evgenia Borisovna, I haven't got my report with me today, I forgot it. But I'm prepared to present it, if you'll allow me to. I remember it, and I have the quotations with me."

"Very well, try. I see you have no missed classes." The lecturer ran her red nail along a line in the class register and then tapped on the table with it to call for silence. "Come on now, boys and girls, listen attentively!"

Several texts surfaced simultaneously in front of Natasha's eyes and she actually had a choice of which one to recite. She thought for a minute and began:

"... In his long life Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy several times repudiated what he had written previously. But four years before his death he wrote in his diary: 'Even as I am dying I still think and write in the same vein ... The mystery is that at any moment I am different and yet still the same ...'" Natasha felt Vika looking at her and wondering what was going on, A complete book report, signed with the name Sitnikova, was lying on the edge of the table. Natasha herself was not yet really aware of why she'd done what she had. She'd simply felt she wanted to do it. She knew the material almost off by heart. She had an excellent memory for text, the ability to express her thoughts elegantly and logically, and could speak in any situation as if she was reading the words. These abilities had unexpectedly demonstrated themselves spontaneously during her conversations with Elena Nikolaevna. Natasha heard her own measured, even voice, speaking as if it belonged to someone else:

"... Dostoevsky regarded *Anna Karenina* as one of the finest Russian of novels ... And Nekrasov even wrote an epigram:

*Tolstoy, with your forbearing talent you have taught
A woman should not dissipate her life
With aides de camp and gentlemen of court
When she is both a mother and a wife ..."*

Vika began to realise who Natasha was trying to help by demonstrating her literary poise like this. Sensing her surprise, Natasha cast a quick glance at her, and a warm blue wave of gratitude surged out from Vika's lovely eyes. The contact when their eyes met was so exciting ... Searing heat flooded across Natasha's belly.

Natasha picked up the wad of quotations to read out a few. Vika leaned over the exposed drawing on the desk and glanced playfully at her friend as she slowly ran her hand along the upper petal. The wheaten tresses of her hair slid reluctantly off her shoulders, a ray of sunlight lit up her dusky cheekbone and her lips, half-parted in a smile. Completely without lipstick. Slightly chapped. Natasha felt herself blushing and she blurted out the quotations she'd chosen at double speed ...

"All right, all right, that will do, let's have your record book. But don't forget to hand in the work," the lecturer's voice said eventually, and Natasha sat down, feeling relieved. She put her report down in front of Vika and whispered in her ear:

"Change the name and hand it in."

Vika looked at Natasha in delight and admiration and purred melodically:

"Thanks, sweetie, you saved my skin. I owe you one."

They walked out of the auditorium as friends. But after that their paths parted. Vika was from a different group, a year older. They agreed to "get together some time", exchanged friendly hugs and kisses, and then carried on standing there, gazing at each other.

“I told you, you have very beautiful eyes,” said Vika.

“Thank you.”

“It’s true.”

“Why did you sit beside me?” Natasha asked, in order not to blurt out the whole bundle of reciprocal compliments that were already on the tip of her tongue.

“I like girls,” said Vika and paused ambiguously before adding with a cunning smile: “With straight backs. Be seeing you, sweetie!”

Natasha watched as Vika’s head of golden hair disappeared into the motley crowd, and suddenly felt she wanted to go back to their decorated desk in the auditorium and make sense of the feelings that had engulfed her. In the back rows the last few students who had failed the test were figuring out what they should have done to prepare. “Their desk” with the flower-jaws was free. Natasha gazed at the drawing. All she saw in it now was a penis. Defiantly explicit, disgusting. For the first time lately she dared to remember all the horror and shame associated with this “object”. And she could dare to do it, because now she wasn’t alone with her nightmare. A person had appeared in her life who would understand and not condemn, who had explained logically and simply: “She had the wrong attitude to men and sex.. There’s no love left. There’s resentment, dependency, anger with herself and him. She was trying to free herself from dependency, she was striving to purge her soul of lust ...”

Natasha had met Kirill in the same jewellery shop that she went to in order to buy her silver cutlery. When she gave way to temptation and tried on a very beautiful ring, she heard a voice say behind her back:

“You have very beautiful fingers, young lady ... You must be a pianist, right?”

“No, I can’t play.” She was about to turn round, but the voice said.

“Don’t turn round, please. I want to guess the colour of your eyes. I think they’re grey ...”

Natasha’s eyes really were grey, and she really didn’t know how to play this game. He met her after lectures, always holding a red rose, well-groomed, with a condescending half-smile on his precisely-formed lips “Sitnikova, where did you pick up a guy like that? You’ve got nothing but wenches in the faculty of philology!” The girls in the hostel found the injustice of it hard to stomach.

It had been going on for just over a month. Films, museums, walks, stories about his family: “We trace our family tree back to the Menshikovs”, “In our family everybody addresses each other formally, the way the Russian nobility used to”. Tender caresses on the hand and timid, almost childish kisses. He was well-mannered and well-spoken, and he seemed to look through her rather than at her, but she never thought about that ... And then he invited her to his birthday. Natasha borrowed a dress from Lena, her room-mate. Lena had bought it the day before in GUM and hadn’t even worn it yet ...

What happened after that was too shameful and terrifying to remember. Screaming and shouting for help seemed pointless and stupid, Natasha was alone in a huge apartment in the centre of Moscow, with just Kirill and his friends. And she had come there of her own free will,

in a new dress, with a present, nobody had forced her ... She never could understand how a girl like her, who was far from stupid, could have ended up in such an absolutely clichéd situation – after all, hadn't she seen it all again and again in the cinema, read about it, heard about it from other girls ... That only made it even more painful and shameful ...

Two weeks after the “party”, Natasha realised she was pregnant ... She called Kirill, but no one answered the phone. She went to his home, but no one opened the door. One day she sat by the entrance until the evening, and waited until he came. But she didn't hear anything new. “What makes you think it's mine? We were drunk, even you can't remember how many of the guys had you, why come running to me?”, “Why are you trying to play the virgin?”, “What fucking doctor? It's your problem!”, “You stupid provincial bitch, did you think once you got to Moscow, life would be a fairytale? Get lost, I never want to see your sour puss again, I'm sick of the sight of you ...”

Natasha was numb with humiliation and pain, she couldn't remember how she got back to her squeaky divan in the hostel. She wanted to cry all the time, she was permeated through and through with hate for the world and herself. The purple iris gazed at her in helpless sympathy with its yellow stamens ...

“In the concentration camp only two types of people preserved their identity – believers and aristocrats,” – Natasha recalled Elena Nikolaevna's words. And Elena Nikolaevna must surely have gone through worse times and situations than this. But she'd come through. With a straight back and a smile ... There was only one thing Natasha could do – she had to carry on living. Natasha wiped away her tears, stood up, straightened her shoulders, tidied herself up and went to find out where the women's health clinic was ...

All these thoughts ran rapidly across her skin like frost, like the wind from an open door in winter ... The failed students in the auditorium were gradually being replaced by young guys from another group, who walked in, flung their bags onto the desks in slovenly style and started yacking away, taking no notice of the dark-haired girl sitting motionless by the window.

No, she would never tell anyone what had happened. The secret would die with her! But she wasn't so scared and lonely any more ... She had Vika now ...

Natasha stood up and winked at the fat penis on the desk, as if she was flirting with her own fear, and she seemed to see it wink back at her with its single eye ...

The Air France flight from Paris to Moscow was delayed. Natasha turned her eyes away from the terminal building. This was what she most hated most of all – when you didn't know how long you would be waiting. She settled herself more comfortably in the plastic chair near her gate – 14C – and took out a notebook with the inscription “V. S. DIARY” on the cover. The best way to pass the time was to do a bit of thinking. Colonel Isaev-Stirlitz had made that discovery a long time back, in the film *Seventeen Moments of Spring*. And Natasha had something she could do a bit of thinking about. Waiting for her in Moscow was target number

two: Andrei Alexandrovich Proshkov, a Russian businessman. And this challenge was a bit more complicated than a photographer with a weakness for flattery and women in red lingerie ... What did she know about him? Almost nothing, but still enough to understand that she had to prepare seriously for this. She remembered the photographs of him that Vitalii Arkadievich had shown her at the briefing. Well-built, suntanned, with piercing eyes and a captivating, expensive, snow-white smile. The secretive, complicated kind of self-made man who let no one get too close to him ... Natasha opened the diary at a blank page, carefully numbered it as 53 and wrote:

Andrei P. Age 37. Businessman. Head of a major investment fund. Secretive and unapproachable. The only known detail of his personal life is that he was divorced about five years ago. His son Ivan, age 11, lives with P's former wife in America.

P. is wary and suspicious. Frequently changes his secretaries and members of staff. Olga has been his secretary for the last 18 months. This is a record, no one else has ever lasted so long. I wonder why?

Known for his extravagant behaviour, rarely appears in public alone, prefers to surround himself with "friends", makes a show of his wealth.

Probably the best way to approach him is through his secretary, Olga.

Planes taking off really are a fantastic sight!

People keep on inventing new improvements on the basic cart, but they never think about changing themselves.

And there's the boarding announcement! At last!

The flight attendant, who spoke all her languages with a strong Ukrainian accent, moved her mouth and arms like a clockwork doll as she explained how to use the life jacket. Natasha tried to avoid thinking about the imminent take-off, in order not to awaken the fear of flying drowning in her subconscious. She tried to distract herself by concentrating on some other problem that was bothering her. Unable to focus on the flight attendant's voice, she just followed the movement of her lifeless, dyed hair. When the attendant turned her head, her hair made the same movement that Natasha loved so much when Vika's golden tresses made it. Of course, the slow surge of Vika's golden wheat, which set Natasha's pulse racing so fast, was beyond all comparison with the flight attendant's bleached locks. But even so, there was enough of a similarity to wring Natasha's heart sweetly and plunge her back into reminiscences ...

A month and a half had passed since she and Vika met at the desk with the drawing. Natasha hadn't even noticed the weeks flying by – all her time had been devoted to her studies, as well as reading English newspapers and magazines, and books in French, and poring over the memoirs of well-known individuals from aristocratic circles. She had even noted down a few points for herself, revealing little details like: "... at meal times, children in aristocratic families were forced to hold books under their armpits in order to teach them not to leave their elbows jutting out ..."

or “... in the 19th century aristocratic women did not use makeup, because then their faces would no longer be natural. Rouge and lipstick were a privilege of the merchant class ...”

She and Vika ran into each other in a corridor at the university. Natasha had been detained at an English class and she was almost running to her next session, cursing herself for the clumsy haste of her movements. Vika was walking calmly towards her. She caught her running friend in both arms and exclaimed joyfully:

“Natashka! Hi! What are you running for? If you’re late, don’t hurry!

Natasha immediately recognised Vika’s thick stook of golden wheat and her exciting smell – the way the sea smells in August. She stopped dead and started making excuses:

“Hi, Vika. I got held up at English. A slight difference of opinion with the English lecturer.”

“She wouldn’t agree that ‘London is the capital of Grey Britain’?”

“Well, something like that ...” Natasha said with a smile.

“And would you believe it, I just *knew* I was going to meet you today. I’ve been trying to force myself to come to class since first thing this morning. My conscience and I didn’t get up in time for the first two sessions, but we’re going to the third. It’s almost feels like it’s my birthday!”

“And if I hadn’t got delayed just now, we’d have missed each other ...” Natasha mused.

“Yes ... Listen, this calls for a celebration. These days exceptions to the daily grind are really something special. Let’s meet at the way out after the morning classes, it’s time to get you out and about a bit. The ways things are, you never even see the light – apart from the light of learning, that is!”

Outside the doors of the university the two friends ran straight into a bombardment of blinding sunlight. The sun is only like that in spring – totally crazed with its own newly awoken desires. Natasha even stopped for a second – the brightness felt so strange to her eyes after the dim interior

“Oh! Spri-i-ing ...” she exclaimed, drawing out the sounds, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath.

Vika cast a critical glance over Natasha in the clear light and said briskly:

“Let’s go to my place and you can get changed.”

“What for? Am I badly dressed, or something?”

“Oh, not at all ... You’re outfit’s just wonderful! You’ve got ‘future first-class degree, philology faculty, Moscow State University’ written all over you! Really! Those “Miss Reading Room” shoes simply cry out that you study like a demented maniac. And that shiny bulge in the back of your skirt bawls out its message in a delightful contralto – all about how your last boyfriend was in the fifth class at school.”

“Tenth,” Natasha corrected her.

“Okay. Tenth class, sorry ... Here’s my little car. Get in.”

“This is your car? You’ve got a car?”

“Yes, I do. And you will too. Buckle up.”

Vika lived in a new apartment building with a *conciierge*, who nodded her sleepy head in her booth and let the friends through to the lift. Natasha's startled reflection stepped towards her – there was a mirror in the lift. Then it reflected both girls – one a very beautiful, tall blonde and the other, with her dark hair gathered into a ponytail, gazing at her girlfriend with lovelorn eyes.

“We look good together,” the blonde stated positively, tossing back her blonde shock of hair. “Although you'd be shorter than me without those library shoes of yours. You must be size thirty-nine, right?”

“Thirty-eight and a half.”

“Well that's great. You'll feel right at home in my ballet shoes.”

“What do I need ballet shoes for? Are we going to audition for the Bolshoi Theatre?” asked Natasha, beginning to feel rather annoyed with Vika for this constant criticism of her appearance.

“All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players!” Vika laughed and put her arms round her friend's neck, leaving one finger lingering in the little hollow where there was a delicate curl that hadn't yet grown long enough to reach the ponytail.

Natasha's resentment evaporated instantly, and she seemed to feel a hot iron slide slowly down her back ...

“An original thought ...” was all she managed to blurt out.

The two-room apartment that Vika rented didn't suit her at all. An abundance of little flowers, flourishes and frills indicated that the owner was a sentimental lady in the prime of senile dementia.

“Take no notice of all this perverted nonsense,” Vika said in response to the question in Natasha's eyes. “I don't like it either. I took this apartment for two reasons. Madam is gaga already and she's totally clueless about prices. A pad like this in Moscow costs twice as much. And secondly – look!” Vika walked over to an immense cupboard and opened it. It was crammed full of clothes.

“Is all that yours?” Natasha asked in amazement.

“Don't be silly ... But that's not all. There's another cupboard like it in the bedroom as well. Even so, it's still not enough for me! I think a few rooms full of clothes and a couple of floors of shoes would just about satisfy my modest requirements for the present!” Vika smiled and Natasha felt confused – was she joking or being serious?

“And you wear all this?” Natasha asked, still feeling amazed.

“In France, women spend more on clothes than the state does on the army. And you know, the country's none the worse for that! I'm a woman! And that says it all!”

After Vika had worked on her for half an hour, Natasha was unrecognisable. Vika arranged her friend's hair, straightening it out and getting rid of the kink left by the tight rubber band, dressed Natasha in her own *Chanel* jacket and jeans, chose her a pair of ballet shoes and a handbag.

“But why ballet shoes and not high heels, Vik? Especially with the jacket? It adds up to a strange kind of style.”

“Ballet shoes, because they indicate that the girl hasn’t come to get picked up, just to get a cup of coffee. But even so, she’s wearing a jacket that emphasises her waistline and the presence of a pair of beautiful breasts, i.e. she has a certain degree of quality. And the strange style is called ‘light casual’. Learn that lesson, you swot!” Vika said with a wink and disappeared into her immense cupboard again.

While Natasha examined her new self in the huge mirror in the hallway, Vika got changed. “How does she always manage to look a hundred per cent all the time?” Natasha wondered as she looked at her friend.

“A woman should always look like a thousand dollars a minute,” Vika remarked, replying to Natasha’s thoughts again, and smiled. “Even if she doesn’t happen to have that thousand just at the moment, she has to look like she does! Then the thousand will turn up.”

8

At that time of day there was almost no one in the cafe when the two girls walked in. The office slaves had already disappeared, bearing away the remains of their business lunch on toothpicks, and the evening crush was still a long way off. Squares of light sprawled lazily across the floor of the half-empty space. The geometrical pattern defined by the sunlight and windows was broken only by the rustling trapezoids of aprons and arrow-swift feet of scurrying waiters.

“They have a very cosy veranda here,” Vika announced. “Let’s go out there. I don’t think we’ll be too cold.”

They settled down at a table on the open veranda, from where they had a good view of the main hall of the cafe through the huge windows. Natasha watched, entranced, as a heavy tress of golden hair slid reluctantly off Vika’s shoulder, shimmering in the sunlight, every time she lowered her head, and floated smoothly above her shoulder whenever she turned her head to one side. It felt so good to sit there facing her, to see her blue eyes, her slightly chapped lips, the little mole on her collarbone, the slim dusky ankle above the ballet shoe that she was swaying in time to the quiet music and the sounds of the street, as if they were the rhythm of some different life.

“I love this place,” said Vika. “Everything’s so homey here, but it’s still got dignity and it’s not vulgar. And the food’s quite decent. Not hungry, are you, by the way?”

The word “vulgar” brought Natasha to her senses, like some kind of secret password. Of course she was feeling hungry. But she didn’t have any money or, rather, it was all strictly portioned out by the day. And lunch in a restaurant today meant three days on tea with tea afterwards. She felt that to admit this to Vika right now would be even more vulgar. So she lied:

“No, I’m not hungry. I had a bun in the buffet.” And then she embroidered on her lie: “A marzipan roll.”

“Mmmm, marzipan! I bet that was good! But I’m a simple country girl, you know. And I like simple Italian country food: lobsters, cacciucco, Tuscan white truffle soup, Chianti from the barrel ... But all those foreign delicacies: bananas, egg plants, marzipan buns – I don’t like that stuff!”

Vika smiled conspiratorially at her friend as she spoke, and she was already beckoning the waiter.

“Bring us the menu, young man. We’ll tamp that marzipan roll down with something.”

As she sipped the thick, aromatic coffee from the little cup and savoured the pleasant sensation of fullness in her stomach, Natasha felt like a sophisticated lady sitting at a table in an expensive restaurant with one of her friends. This really was “quality”, as Vika would have put it. The picture was quite wonderful. The only thing missing, she supposed, was a long cigarette smoking elegantly in her slim fingers. Natasha had some cigarettes with her – she smoked sometimes with the girls in the university. She took one out and offered it to Vika. Vika’s face changed:

“What’s this?”

“A cigarette? Like one?”

“You mean you smoke?”

“Well, yes ... sometimes ...”

“Well then, sweetie, I hope that will be your last cigarette. A woman should never smoke. Ne-ver e-ver! In the first place, that makes her different from a man, and that’s very important. In the second place, smoking spoils her aroma – the aroma of her skin, her hair, her lips – not to mention the smell from her mouth afterwards. And in the third place, it’s simply horrible! But in any case, the first two points are quite enough.”

Natasha put out her cigarette, feeling awkward because such simple and correct arguments had not occurred to her.

“All right. I won’t smoke But can I at least have a drink?” she asked, trying to turn the conversation into a joke, But Vika remained serious.

“No. Alcohol distorts your perception of the world and weakens your will. And willpower is the most important weapon of anyone striving for a goal. It’s like war: lose your weapon and you’re dead. I never drink.”

Natasha had collected quite a lot of flicks on the nose today, like a schoolgirl! But this comment about alcohol was strange. You didn’t have to drink until you didn’t know where you were any longer. If it was good wine or champagne, why not have a drink occasionally if you felt like it? But no, Vika was right, of course. Right about everything! That was the way she was. That slow, dignified turn of the head, emphasising the sway of that golden hair as it flowed across her bottomless eyes, and then the way she adjusted it. An entire ceremonial rite. Natasha wanted to gaze at it endlessly, like the flames of a fire or the waves rushing in to the shore.

“Hello girls, I see you’re feeling bored. Mind if a lively young fellow joins you?” For Natasha, the brazen impudence of the young guy who had approached them was more than compensated by the way he looked. She sized him up with a quick glance from the feet to the head: narrow hips in jeans, good abs under a close-fitting tee-shirt, a nice suntan, lovely lips and a confident look in his light-coloured eyes.

The young guy had already pulled out a chair for himself and sat down, pleased with the impression he'd made on the dark-haired one. That was a pretty good start.

"I'm Lyosha. What are you called? I bet the blonde one's Natasha and you must be Katya, you cutie!" The young guy smiled, confident that his initiative would be successful, and somehow his offhanded approach really didn't seem to matter in the light of his attractive appearance.

"What do you want, lively young fellow?" Vika replied.

"I just want to get acquainted. Such beautiful girls, especially you." The young guy gazed point-blank at Vika with a well-practiced killer stare.

"You can get acquainted. Only there are a few things you ought to know about me. So remember this or, better still, write it down," Vicky said with an amiable smile, as if she was preparing to dictate her phone number, home address and the number of her bank account.

"Ah, that's my girl! Just dictate it, I'll remember!"

"Well, okay, remember it. I'll set our first date for the *Hermès* boutique, where I've got my eye on a nice little handbag. At the sales register, I'll suddenly remember that I left my purse at home, get terribly upset, and you'll have to pay. If you don't, that will be the end of your date. Then we'll go on to a cosy little restaurant. I'll order a glass of expensive wine, get drunk straightaway and spend the whole evening telling you about my previous men. Then I'll suddenly recall some sad episode from my life and start bawling, and you'll start comforting me, wiping away my salty tears with your mighty sleeve. Eventually you'll get fed up with the whole business, and you'll drag my sobbing little carcass off home. So why am I telling you all this? Ah, yes! So you'll know that you won't get any action on the first evening. Or afterwards either, so there's no point in hanging out the dried prunes. Well, then? Will you remember all that, lively young fellow? Maybe I should repeat it, more slowly?"

The young guy stared with a dazed expression at the crazy blonde and the brunette he thought had taken a fancy to him. Then he got up and from the table, muttered "Excuse me" and walked off.

Natasha watched his pumped-up back and his backside in the tight-fitting pants as they moved away.

"I would have got acquainted with him. He's so good-looking ..."

"What for?" Vika asked severely.

"I don't know, I just would. He holds his head up. He has this confidence, strength ..."

"So what? Big deal, he's learned how to hold his head! He's got the wrong kind of strength, Natash! He's just a common iron-pumper. Guzzles protein cocktails, measures his biceps with a tape measure, gets up on the scales three times a day, never goes far from a mirror and regards women as exercise machines for the muscles of his prick – they don't have any of those in the gym. You can find any number of men like that. A man like that will never solve your problems. He'll solve his own at your expense. Do you understand the difference?"

"Does someone else have to solve my problems?"

"He doesn't have to, but he can and he will, if you want him to ..."

“Who, for instance?”

Instead of answering, Vika took Natasha’s face between her firm palms and turned it deliberately to the right, towards the main hall of the cafe.

“You see that gent over there, in the corner, the inconspicuous-looking one?”

“Where?”

“That one, over there, the skinny one, in glasses! Sitting there so quiet and unassuming, reading his newspaper, *The Kommersant Daily*, or whatever.”

“Well, I can see him. But what am I supposed to do with him?”

“He’ll do it all himself. And you’ll just enjoy life. Only you have to know how to control men like him.”

“Enjoy life at his expense?” Natasha asked, puzzled.

“At his expense? Ha! What a silly little girl you are ... When did you last watch *The World of Animals* on TV?”

“I watched it when I was a kid. Why?”

“And what lessons did you learn from it?”

“That nature should be protected. All those hares and rabbits and tigers. And that the most ferocious animal of all is man.”

“That’s all true, of course ... Only it’s not what I mean right now.”

“What do you mean, then?”

“That we can and should learn from nature! She is the wisest teacher, who has answers for all the questions, even the ones she hasn’t been asked yet. And of course, the question of who enjoys life at whose expense in the relations between the sexes was cleared up a very long time ago. Just remember the away animals’ love play is organised.”

“It’s very well organised. Everything done on schedule. Along comes spring – and they mate.” Natasha genuinely didn’t understand what *The World of Animals* had to do with anything.

“I don’t mean the formal organization of the process, I’m talking about the psychological and physical roles involved! Remember! The tiger pursues his tigress, the lion pursues his lioness, the wolf pursues his she-wolf, and never the other way round! As soon as the tigress starts running after the tiger, that’s it, the race of tigers is doomed. He won’t get an erection, he won’t be able to impregnate her, and tigers will die out! So he runs after her, and she runs away! But how, exactly? Keeping in mind the male’s sporting prowess, so to speak, she runs at exactly the right speed to leave him with enough strength for everything else. Of course, she could get away from him, if she wanted to. But she runs to make sure he’s in good shape and she looks elegant and seductive in the process. She runs for the sake of running, not in order to get away. And even when she chooses a suitable place for mating, and he catches up with her, she doesn’t fall into his embraces, she starts growling and resisting, they spar playfully with their paws, prolonging the moment of struggle. The copulation only starts after they’ve fought for a bit. And having the male chase the female like that is nature’s big trick, the secret of the continuation of the race, the survival of the species and all the rest of it. The whole secret of life is in all that racing about. They gave us the right TV shows to watch when we were kids, Natashka ...”

Vika's face changed several times as she spoke, imitating the aroused tiger or his wise playmate. Natasha felt as if she was on safari in the savannah.

Vika was interrupted in mid-word by a phone ringing inside her handbag. Vika's very stylish handbag. She rummaged around inside it for a moment and remarked in annoyance to Natasha:

"I'd forgotten all about him ..."

And then, with an angelic smile on her face, she cooed into the phone;

"Yes, my tiger! I've been missing you too! Well, I don't know, I'm busy today ... You really want to? That much? Well, I'll think about it ..."

Vika purred a few more phrases of the same kind, glancing slyly at her girlfriend, then put the phone away and explained.

"My latest darling fiancé. Let him pine for a while, and sharpen his claws on his wallet. The girl is very, very busy today." Vika stuck her lips out like a wilful five-year-old girl and batted her eyelashes. It made her beautiful face look like a funny doll's.

"And what's the difference between the tiger from *The World of Animals* and this tiger-fiancé of yours?" Natasha asked.

"There isn't any," Vika replied simply, brushing back her golden tresses with her hand. "As long as either of them is running after his female, thinking of nothing but whether he'll get her or not, it'll never even enter his mind to say to her: 'You're enjoying life at my expense, you mercenary bitch'. Because just at that moment he feels like a genuine king of the animals – important, powerful, strong, on the most important mission of his life. And in order to repeat that sensation, to experience that rush again, he'll bring the entire collective farm herd, complete with the chairman, and lay it at her feet. The clever female's goal, or rather instinct, is to give him that feeling. So what's the difference? The only difference is in the abilities and the requirements of the females. Well, we wouldn't really want a tough, tasteless, old chairman? Would we now, poppet?"

The two friends laughed and Vika made a suggestion.

"Stay with me today, sweetie."

"Should I answer: 'I'll think about it'?" Natasha quipped.

"You should buy a toothbrush," Vika replied calmly.

Natasha blushed at this calm confidence and the desire that instantly flared up inside her.

9

Natasha had been following Olga, Andrei Proshkov's secretary, for several days, figuring out the routes she followed on a regular basis. The simplest place to get to know her turned out to be the fitness club, where Olga had a corporate membership.

In the evening the small hall was too packed to elbow your way through. Or at least it looked that way, because the mirrors on the walls had nothing better to do than reflect beautiful people taking care of themselves and keeping a jealous eye on each other as they did it. Natasha

spotted Olga straight away: a skinny, unattractive blonde with blue veins below her knees and a sharp little nose. She was diligently turning the pedals on an exercise bike, dressed in an outfit from “Nike”: brief shorts and singlet, a sweat band round her forehead under her hair and new training shoes. *She really took her preparations seriously, must have spent half her salary on her kit*, Natasha thought. *What does she do it for? She doesn't need to lose weight, and pumped-up muscles wouldn't suit the way she looks. So what's the point?*”

Natasha took a seat on the next training bike and started observing as she massaged the inner surface of her thigh. The answer to the question of what the weedy secretary was doing there arrived in the shape of her personal trainer, Max – the square shape of Max, in shorts, with muscles bulging out like suntanned clouds from both sides of the singlet that was almost lost on his body. He came straight across to Olga.

“Hey! Look who's here! Hi! Where did you get to, Olya?”

“Hello, Max. Did you really notice I wasn't here for two days?” the young woman asked flirtatiously.

“Why, of course! That's my job.”

He laid his spade-like hand on her back.

“Straighten your back up, Olya. And lean forward a little bit more. That's more efficient,” he advised her in a voice with erotic undertones, keeping his hand on her back slightly longer than necessary for a friendly chat.

Just a second, but long enough for Natasha to spot the way the modest secretary's eyes clouded over with desire and not a single muscle even flinched in Maxim's chiselled features.

Natasha already knew what to do next. She waited until Olga was resting with a plastic cup of water in her hand, greedily devouring Max's steel figure with her eyes. Natasha glanced in the same direction, as if by chance, and said:

“Max is super! He's a real God!”

Olga swung round in fright and embarrassment.

“Bodybuilders are my weakness,” Natasha explained with a smile. “But they're a special kind of men. They're easy to get, if you just know one secret.”

“Yes?” the secretary gasped eagerly.

“Of course. What's your name?”

“Olga. What's yours?”

“Natasha.”

“Have you been coming here long? I haven't seen you before,” Olga asked suspiciously.

“I used to go to a different club. But there was a Max there too, only he was called Igor, he simply wouldn't leave me alone. I had to look for another place to work out.”

Olga looked at her rather mistrustfully.

“It's not that important what you look like. What matters is the secret!” Natasha replied to her unasked question.

Olga's eyes lit up with interest:

“Maybe you could let me in on it?”

“On what?” asked Natasha, playing her along.

“Well, the secret.”

“A-a-ah. Sure, no problem. After the session. Definitely. Don’t ever let anyone say there’s no such thing as feminine solidarity,” Natasha said with a sympathetic smile.

“Have you got a car?” she asked Olga when they walked out of the club.

“Not yet,” the secretary replied after a brief pause.

“Well, I only learned to drive quite recently too. Can I give you a lift?”

“Thanks.”

“Only I have to call in somewhere on the way. Is that okay? Do you have time?”

“I’m completely free until Friday,” Olga joked.

As they jostled in the Moscow traffic jams, Natasha carried on chatting about a sports diet and how tough it was for a girl to drive. “So what was that about the bodybuilders?” asked Olga, unable to hold out any longer.

“A-ah, well it’s all very simple,” Natasha declared indifferently. “To get an iron-pumper to fall in love with you, all you need to do is master a simple algorithm involving several actions. First, carefully find out who his idol is. Every iron-pumper has an idol, some bodybuilder even cooler than him. His idol’s photo hangs over his bed in the corner reserved for icons, separate from the naked girls, because he really respects his idol, wants to be like him and every day before he goes to sleep, he tells him about his achievements. Secondly: tell him casually, in passing, that his deltoids are better developed than his idol’s. Or his triceps, or his biceps. When you do it, you have to mention his idol by name, in the same breath as his name, like this for instance: ‘You know, Max, your lats are better defined than Schwarz’s’. That will really impress him and give him a pleasant shock. It’s called the crow syndrome, you know, like in the fable. And he’ll start taking a serious interest in you. He’ll realize you both love the same thing – he loves his body, and you love his body. And nothing brings people so close as shared tastes and interests.”

Olga looked at Natasha admiringly

“Yes, it isn’t complicated at all, and it’s entirely logical. Can you figure out any man like that?” she asked.

“Of course not. Unfortunately ... A straightforward iron-pumper is a fairly basic product. But there are some trick locks that can really get you racking your brains. Secretive, unapproachable, self-contained, riddled with complexes. Most successful men are that kind, by the way.”

“You know, I’ve been working in this company for a year and a half,” said Olga, getting very confidential, “as the manager’s PA, and he’s the owner too. And I’m terribly afraid of him. I’m afraid, because I have absolutely no idea how to behave with him. I work myself to a frazzle, trying to carry out all his instructions, and he’s not satisfied. He doesn’t talk to me, or he’s rude, or even shouts. Then, when I’m on the brink of a nervous breakdown and convinced that he’s

called me in to fire me, he suddenly comes over all gracious, hands me a bonus in an envelope and starts praising me extravagantly. It's simply driving me crazy. I can't carry on like this ... I know he doesn't keep anyone in the company for long. He doesn't trust anyone. But I like my job. Maybe you can suggest some way I could sort all this out?"

"Yes, the inscrutable type ... But what is it you actually want?" asked Natasha.

Olga got embarrassed, and the answer she gave obviously wasn't the full truth:

"Nothing, really ... I just want to understand what's going on. And I need this job. It's really tough like this."

"Okay, let's give it a try," Natasha answered. "I need as much information about him as possible. Facts, history, rumours, slanders – the works!"

"I don't really know much. He suppresses any leaks of real information about himself. He doesn't allow journalists in, everything goes through the PR managers. I don't have any real facts, apart from the cars he uses and where he lives. I know he's divorced and he sends his former wife money to look after their son. That goes through me. He often flies off somewhere for a couple of days' break. Mostly at the weekends. I book the tickets for two – for him and a girl, a new one every time. But he doesn't usually book a hotel. I haven't got a clue who these girls are. What else? I don't really know ..."

"But what do they say about him in the company? Maybe there are stories, rumours?" Natasha said, trying to encourage the secretary.

"Yes, they do talk about him quite a lot. But it's more like legends and myths than anything else. I don't really believe in them. Sometimes I even get the impression he encourages them himself. The best place to start from is that my boss is interested in numerology and horoscopes. He even selects his employees with the signs that suit him, he always looks through the applications himself, paying special attention to the date of birth. My boss seriously believes in all that stuff, and he has a special affinity for anyone born on the same day as him. As if they're his equal, someone who has to go through the same things of things in life as him, some special sign of destiny. He spends his own birthday at different places in the world every year, he has a whole team of palm-readers and astrologers on some island in the Indian ocean for that, and they draw up his route according to the movements of the planets. He flies to the city that has the highest energy level for him on that day. This year I think it was Machu Picchu. Some people have even said he practices black magic. How on earth can you find a way to approach someone as screwed up as that, Natash?"

"Your boss is a real mystery man, no doubt about it," Natasha agreed. "But there's one piece of advice I can give you, Olya, you'll have to be patient. Take your mind off it, focus on something else. Start working on Max, for instance, use him to heal your nerves. The more passion there is in life, the better. And try not to take your complicated boss's amusements so much to heart, I think he's got a whole stack of complexes." *Only it looks like the whole point is that if you do stop taking it all to heart, that's the day you'll be sacked,* Natasha thought to herself, but she didn't tell the frightened secretary that.

"Thanks, I'll think about what you said. Will you come to the gym tomorrow?" Olga asked.

“I don’t know yet. I’ll give you a call. But in any case, say hello to Max for me!” Natasha smiled and held her cheek out for a goodnight kiss.

Olga leaned down to Natasha, and for a fleeting instant the faint, slightly bitter smell of her perfume that had faded over the day reminded Natasha of a quite different aroma – the intoxicating aroma of time standing still ... of freedom ... the sea ... love ... Vika’s smell.

Late that evening Natasha finished writing the fifty-third page of her diary:

Andrei Proshkov must experience a keen thrill of pleasure when he stresses his employees out simply by appearing in the office. And the only reason he does it is because it gives him another serving of fresh emotions. He is simply a collector of emotions! That’s his main secret and the key to his castle! A strange and dangerous man! But now I have a weapon against him, a weapon and bait. Unpredictability!

It’s so strange that poor Olga’s smell reminded me of Vika’s ... Or is it just that I imagine it everywhere I go now?

How I wish I could live through our first three days together again! When it was the first time for everything ...

How wonderful that would be!

Natasha stretched out on the huge bed in her pink bedroom and closed her eyes. She lay there quite still, and her memory stealthily carried her back to those three wonderful days, like the sympathetic sea bearing a boat lost in the night safely home to shore.

10

She and Vika forgot all about that toothbrush Natasha was supposed to buy. They forgot about everything, all they saw was each other. In those three days and nights with Vika, Natasha matured by an entire lifetime. Vika’s lifetime. They laughed and chatted, breaking off for caresses and kisses that grew bolder and bolder. Vika was tender and insistent, and Natasha gradually dissolved in that sea of wheaten-gold, blue-eyed pleasure, in the scent of her desire, the enchantment of her freedom, the music of her voice. They talked, kissed, drifted away into sleep with their arms round each other and when they woke up they kissed and talked again.

Vika was four years older. She was born in a soldier’s family, so she’d moved home and changed schools a lot, and had lots of friends. Her father was strict and morose, and her mother, who had dreamed all her life of having her own home that wasn’t government issue, threw herself into creating a cosy nest in every new place, hoping it would be the last. But then they moved away again. She had no emotional strength left over for the children – Vika and her elder brother, Victor. They grew up by themselves, arguing and competing with each other. When their father retired and the children were already grown up, the family finally settled down in a small three-room apartment in the area outside Moscow. Victor left home to work in Moscow,

and Vika married a lieutenant-colonel fifteen years older than her. She was eighteen. Why did she do it? She didn't understand that herself. It was family tradition, youth, foolishness, the yearning for an adult life or something else. After six months she'd already had enough of "intrafamilial operations", including the making of love in strictly regulation fashion, and they got divorced. Her husband in retirement whinged for another couple of months, and made feeble attempts at a new assault, but his ex-wife was no longer interested in military exercises on the approaches to Moscow. The lieutenant-colonel capitulated. After that marriage, Vika was left with an apartment in the military town that had been transferred into her name and the classic speech therapy sentence: "Six months caressing a colonel's carcass is crasser than crunching crackers on a cruise ship".

After she made the move to Moscow, Vika put her energy into visiting venues where admirers of female beauty congregated en masse – movie studios, sets and auditions. But beauty alone isn't enough, you have to know how to make use of it. You have to know how to play the game. Vika understood that very well. She threw herself into a raging vortex of new acquaintances and new games, games with men, which gave her a special thrill of pleasure and excitement. She loved to play. For her, the very process of lining up a relationship with a man was a game that she enjoyed just as much as having sex with him – another of her passions. She couldn't live without sex. It was the very air breathed by her self-confidence and self-esteem, her awareness of her own unique individuality ... Sex and money – that was all she wanted from a man. Lots of sex and lots of money.

Men ruled the world, so a woman who ruled men was the equal of a goddess. Vika quickly learned to control Man, that imperfect but complex mechanism with two heads, a large one and a small one, which had difficulty coming to any agreement with each other.

The stories Vika told were full of irony and optimism. Her first victim, who looked like a rabbit, was a well-padded assistant director from one of the Moscow film studios. The rabbit was over forty years old. When she remembered him, Vika used to joke that he could still manage his carrot quite well and he had plenty of cabbage. Thanks to him she rented an apartment and bought a car. There was no shortage of "animals" with a weakness for beauty and a good dress sense, but Vika had no intention of resting on her laurels at this stage. After a couple of years, she decided to acquire a decent education and got a place at Moscow State University – not without a little help from one of her "friends" – and that was where she met Natasha at the literature test. Her natural bisexuality broke through the dam of mercenary calculation in her soul, and her heart, which was accustomed to working so smoothly and regularly, faltered for one sweet moment and started beating to a new rhythm. She sensed something in this fragile, dark-haired girl who had recklessly sacrificed her literature report to save her friend – a latent natural strength, a drowsing volcano of will-power, a subversive charm, the blinding light of a sun that hadn't risen yet. Yes, that was exactly how it was. Vika loved vivid metaphors and she could pick strong and unusual people out from the common crowd. Natasha's straight back and movements full of dignity and grace, her fanatical application to her course work and intensive

study of foreign language, the strict demands she made on herself and her relentless efforts at self-improvement – all this showed that she was a person born to pursue great goals.

It was all so attractive and fascinating. *She'll make something of herself, this serious brunette*, thought Vika. She was certain of it. And that made it all the more gratifying to inflame the passion that was still sleeping in Natasha's skinny, immature body. Vika felt like a musician setting her fingers on a unique instrument for the first time and thrilling to the power and depth of the sounds that she drew from it. The body and the soul of her beloved now lay in the power of her hands, her desires. And she wanted to be as honest with her as possible, more honest than she had ever been with anyone before, she wanted to tell Natasha all about herself, and about the laws governing the relationships between people that she had discovered for herself, the subtle details she had noticed, how she had learned to control men ... After all, Vika wasn't the harlot that straight-laced Natasha might have taken her for at first. Her relationships with men were partnerships – she gave them the feelings they wanted to have – a sense of their own strength and importance, the thrill of soaring and falling, the possession of beauty and humiliation by beauty, access to the mystery of a woman and the appearance of having debunked that mystery. And for that, all she took was money. Pieces of paper invented by men to satisfy their own vanity and attract women. It was a closed circle – men needed money to attract women, and women needed money to attract other men. To attract as many men as possible, in order to select one who was worthy. But you had to be a match for a worthy man, you yourself had to be a worthy woman, one who knew her own worth, but would never state it openly to a man. Vika liked to repeat the maxim: "Men don't throw diamonds at the feet of a prostitute, no matter what she can do. A man will only consider it an honour to give away everything he has to a goddess."

Natasha tried to follow everything attentively, as far as a happy woman can be attentive. Sex with a woman proved to be fundamentally different from sex with a man. With a man, it was a race – a sprint or a long-distance run, depending on the runner's stamina. There had to be a warm-up, a start and a climax at the finishing line, where all the competitors collapsed. For the next race, you had to go back to the start. Sex with a woman wasn't even remotely like sport, not even rhythmic gymnastics or figure skating. It was elemental, like the sea ... A sea of pleasure, and at any moment you could emerge from the all-enveloping moisture, lounge on the hot sand for a while, then plunge back into a wave of delight that thrilled you and set you trembling, or soothed you with the warmth of its caresses ...

On Sunday morning they opened their eyes at the same time, as if it wasn't two girls who had woken up, but one, reflected in a mirror. They were so alike now – sleepy, dishevelled, happy. They laughed at this coincidence, wound their hands together and nestled snugly against each other.

"Shall we get up?" Vika asked.

"Ne-ah," Natasha drawled capriciously, pulling the blanket up over her nose. "I don't wanna."

“Arise, countess, great deeds await you!” Vika had already flung a black kimono-style robe over her flawless body. Watching the body disappear, Natasha caught herself thinking that she would never grow tired of touching that dusky, silky marvel ...

She heard the sound of flowing water from the bathroom.

“Sleepyhead, come here!” Vika shouted, and Natasha instantly jumped up off the bed.

Vika’s wet hair, heavier and darker from the water, flowed and rippled across her shoulders. Natasha ran her hand over it and said admiringly:

“It’s golden ...”

“Natashka, you’re absolutely insatiable,” Vika purred in satisfaction and turned on the cold water.

Natasha felt goose pimples run down her arms and her legs.

“The water’s freezing cold, Vik!”

“It’s time we got back to reality,” Vika laughed and wrapped Natasha in a huge fluffy towel. “I have to explain something to you.”

They had a leisurely breakfast of freshly squeezed carrot juice, coffee with milk and hot toast with strawberry jam. The jam was thick and a rich-deep red colour with, with loads of tiny yellow seeds.

“You know, I once tried strawberry jam at the house of someone I knew, and all the strawberries were whole, every last one of them. And the transparent syrup clung to the spoon ... that was a long time ago, I wasn’t much more than a kid,” Natasha reminisced.

“I only ever tried home-made jam at other people’s house too. My mother didn’t have time to lay in supplies for winter, she spent her whole life packing suitcases. But can you remember what used to surprise you most of all when you were little?” Vika asked.

“Most of all? Probably the fact that I thought I was grown up, but the grown-ups treated me as if I was a child. I was always surprised they couldn’t see I understood everything too. I remember one day I expressed what seemed to me like a very serious thought, and they all suddenly burst out laughing: mum, granny, the neighbour. I was hurt. When I grew up and asked what they were laughing at, granny said that when I was two and a half years old I couldn’t pronounce some letters, and everything I said then was very funny. But from the inside, I remembered that I formulated the phrase quiet correctly. The surprise of it has grown up with me. I’m still convinced that a child is an individual from the moment it’s born.”

“I agree with you. I remember when I was little carrying out psychological experiments on my brother, and it seemed to me that I understood everything and I was no more stupid than the grown-ups ... but, you know, what surprised me most of all, and still surprises me, is the difference between the psychology of a man and a woman.”

“It was that way, even when I was a little kid. For instance, why is it only boys who are always interested in the way a girl is made? They peep through cracks, look up skirts, tell each other about what they’ve seen. But girls don’t show the same interest. Although you’d think it ought to be the other way round. They have to use that stuff all their life! And later, when people

fall in love for the first time. If the boy calls the girl a hundred times a day, she's happy, she boasts about it to her friends, but if the girl behaves like that, he'll regard it as an infringement of his freedom and independence. And there are lots of contradictions like that. That's what they should teach in the schools, not the way pistils and stamens are made! As a boy and a girl grow up, the number of incomprehensible things just grows along with them. And there's no way you can understand most of them without the proper training. Take the situation my brother Vitiush got into just recently – he's set himself up very well here in the capital of our great homeland, you know. Six months ago he was pissed off with his latest sweetheart, because she kept asking him for money. He came whinging to me that when he was with her he felt like a walking wallet. Eventually he split up with her and found someone else. His eyes blazed so brightly as he told me how wonderful she was, how saintly and unselfish! But his new flame soon turned to be the same kind of materialist predator as the one before her. She takes my brother for the same kind of strolls round the fur salons and jewellery boutiques. But this time Vitiusha's perfectly happy about it. I tell him: 'Vit, you've stepped on your favourite money-grubbing rake again!' And he says to me; 'This one! She can suck me dry if she wants!' Now why is that? How do you solve a little puzzle like that?"

"I don't know. Maybe he's fallen in love?" Natasha suggested.

"Oh of course, he's fallen in love! No one parts with money unless feelings are involved!" Vika exclaimed with a sarcastic ring to her voice.

"He hasn't? What is it then?"

"He thinks he's fallen in love. Or rather, she's made him think he has. She's made him love her, so she can squeeze money and presents out of him. She wouldn't get anything if she didn't. It may sound strange, but I think she doesn't even feel guilty, and subconsciously she explains everything by concern for her future offspring. A man who takes good care of her will take care of her children in the same way. Women have been racking their brains over all this from time immemorial. Just remember Cleopatra. You see, making a man fall in love with you is the most difficult thing, but love is blind, as everyone knows. To someone in love, faults seem like virtues, and insolent demands seem like endearing requests," Vika explained.

"I think making someone love you so that you can squeeze money and presents out of them is mean and shabby, using love as a bait is like frying potatoes on a sacred flame."

"That's not quite the way it is, Natash. Heaps of people fry their potatoes on sacred flames. It's an entire field of learning and I'm going to teach you it bit by bit. You're a capable student, you'll master it all right."

"Me? But what for?"

"Because even a food processor comes with instructions. Without them you can't figure out what does what. And a man, especially a successful, complex, self-sufficient man, is more complicated than a food processor! And you won't catch him just by hopping up and down in front of him in one shoe."

Vika stood up, took a notebook out of the bottom drawer of the desk and held it out to Natasha.

“Here, take it. It’s for you.”

“What is it?”

“My life – ‘Or did I simply dream you!’ as Esenin said. It’s all written in there. You can carry on with it. If you feel the need to.”

Natasha took hold of the notebook. On the cover it said in block capital letters: “V. S. DIARY”.

“This is your diary? V. S. – Vika Shatskaya ... but that’s personal!”

“It’s a notebook of experience and knowledge. And you can take V.S. to mean Very Serious,” Vika laughed. “Think of it as a fifth-class student giving her exercise book to a third-class student. All the problems in it have already been solved. And not just solved, there’s a detailed explanation of every step. I’m sure you’ll find it useful. I want you to take it.”

11

Natasha fell asleep without realising it. Her memory immersed her so rapidly in those first days with Vika that she even felt the touch of Vika’s hand, her cool, silky skin. She instantly opened her eyes and looked at her own hand. The edge of the silk blanket was lying across her open palm. It was already morning. The night had flown by in a single breath. But that breath had been full of Vika! There was still a full hour to go until the alarm clock’s morning summons, but she wouldn’t get back to sleep now. She recalled the previous day’s conversation with Proshkov’s secretary and started wondering how to get close to this second target of hers – a man who collected emotions. She thought she’d read something relevant in the diary. A strange kind of essay in dialogue form. At the time she’d been surprised and wondered who Vika had written it about – and who for.

Natasha reached out to the little table beside the bed, picked up the diary and leafed back through the notebook. Somewhere here ... Ah, there it was, page 23:

He said: “I like many women and I can’t be just with you”. She smiled in reply. He said: “I’m self-sufficient, I’m free and I don’t owe anybody anything”. She lowered her eyes. He said: “I like women who understand me and appreciate the importance of my freedom.” She grinned and walked over to the window. He said: “Let’s have a good time, I really like you”. She glanced round and looked into his eyes. He realised that She didn’t object. He asked: “I suppose you’ve had a lot of men?” She put her arms round him and pressed herself against him more tightly. He said: “Do you feel good with me?” She closed her eyes and kissed him ...

As He left in the morning, He said: “Everything was great, but let’s keep it to ourselves, shall we?” She reached out one hand and brushed an invisible speck of dust off his shoulder. He said: “I’ll give you a call sometime”. She nodded and slammed the door. He rang that evening. She wasn’t home. He didn’t manage to catch her until late at night. She only allowed him to come round a week later. She smiled and offered him coffee. He phoned her almost every day. She almost never answered. He came to see her when she allowed him to. She didn’t explain why

the invitations were so infrequent. He realised that He only wanted to be with her. He felt nervous when she didn't answer his calls. He flew off the handle whenever he heard She had been seen with someone else. He started wanting everybody to know about their relationship. She was against it. He wanted her to be his alone ... One day he came to see her with a glorious bunch of roses. She accepted the flowers, but asked him not to come again without being invited. He wanted to ask her to be his wife, he walked up and put his arms round her ... She understood everything from his eyes and said: "Don't ... I'm self-sufficient..." he lit a cigarette. His hands were shaking ... She said: "I'm free ..." He suddenly felt cold ... She said: "I don't owe anybody anything ..." He felt as if his heart had stopped beating ... She said: "And I don't intend to change a thing ..."

Natasha tore her eyes away from Vika's dynamic handwriting and smiled at a ray of sunlight caressing the twilight of the bedroom through the crack in the curtains. "Everything is as old as the world," she thought. "And collectors of emotions are no exception."

Natasha devoted the entire day to shopping. She bought a dark-blue formal dress from *Diane von Furstenberg*, lacquered shoes with high heels and a colourful rucksack, the kind that children usually take to the zoo or the park, big enough to hold all the presents begged from their parents.

That evening she dialled the secretary Olga's number and spoke in a deliberately frivolous voice:

"Hi, Olechka, this is Natasha here."

"Hi, Natasha, glad to hear you!" said Olga, genuinely delighted.

"How are you? Coming to the gym today?"

"I don't know, I'm still at work."

"At this late hour? How come?"

"The boss has got me slaving away again. He's gone to a meeting, and he asked me to stay at my desk until he's finished. I might suddenly be needed. So I'm sitting here. Only there's no telling how long that meeting will go on."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't fancy your job. Listen, I need your advice. I've picked up an admirer here, the kind who thinks he's mister big in person – and he told me: You choose the restaurant you want me to invite you to. Maybe you can suggest where I ought to invite myself? What place does your boss prefer? He probably won't go just anywhere."

"No, he's very choosy about that. But he keeps changing all the time. Sometimes he likes French cuisine, then suddenly it's Indian. He never goes to the same place more than two or three times. Today, for instance, he's at the 'Bolshoi'."

"I don't know that one. Where is it?"

"I'll just check. I think it's on Petrovka Street."

"Thanks, you're a real friend! How are things going with Max?" Natasha asked, following the rule that says it's always the last idea mentioned that sticks in the memory.

“Oh, everything’s going according to your plan!” Olga gabbled delightedly. “He phoned me here about my work-outs and I asked him casually about his idol. He went on and on, telling me all about him and his dazzling sporting career. I didn’t know he knew so many words!”

“Well, that’s just great! Only don’t get the deltoids mixed up with the biceps in point two of the plan, or you’ll be caught out, like Professor Pleischner in *Seventeen Moments of Spring*,” said Natasha, picking up on Natasha’s facetious tone, and both girls laughed.

When Natasha entered the room, Andrei Alexandrovich Proshkov was sitting in the far corner in the company of two men, with his back to Natasha and his head lowered as he listened to what one of them was saying. The live music in the room was rather loud. She saw short-clipped hair on the back of his head, a light-grey suit, broad shoulders, a straight back – the bearing of a man who knows what he wants from life.

“Good evening! I’m sorry, the only places we have left are in the smokers’ section. Will that be all right?” The skinny hostess forced a smile, trying hard to seem welcoming.

“Perfectly.”

“Would you like a table for two?”

“If you could.”

Natasha ordered a coffee and started figuring out how to approach Proshkov so as to trigger the emotions that would linger the longest in his memory. Accidentally spill her cappuccino over him? Sit beside him, put her arms round him and ask why her Volodka shaved off his moustache? Shout: “Whose car just exploded?” and mention the number of his Mercedes?

She felt like laughing at her own inexhaustible fantasies. Controlling her fit of nervous merriment, she got up, hitched on her rucksack, straightened her shoulders and walked into the next room, making straight for the table where Proshkov was sitting.

“Excuse me, gentlemen, I hope I won’t bother you too much,” Natasha said self-consciously, sitting down on the fourth chair, which was empty. “Hello!”

“Hello!” Andrei answered for all of them – the others simply turned their bewildered faces towards her. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“I saw you in a dream today,” Natasha replied, looking into Andrei’s eyes. “You were getting into an aeroplane holding a boy by the hand.”

“Do I know you?”

“No, no. It’s just that I saw you in a dream today, and when I spotted you here in the restaurant, I recognised you. Just imagine, what a coincidence!” Natasha exclaimed gleefully.

“Are you insane?”

“No, I’m a teacher. From Podolsk. I work in a grammar school. I teach Russian language and literature. My aunt’s fallen ill. She lives in Moscow, and I came to visit her. And then I dropped in here.”

“Why of course. One of Moscow’s most expensive restaurants. And you just dropped in. A teacher. And they say teachers are poorly paid.” The expression on Andrei’s face promised

trouble ahead, but his tone of voice wasn't merely irritated, there was another, different note in it too.

"I work in an elite grammar school. And I give private lessons, and tuition for exams. I'm not hard up, I can afford a cup of coffee," Natasha explained resentfully. "Pardon me for presuming to interrupt you." She stood up abruptly, but Andrei stopped her:

"I didn't mean to offend. What's your name?"

"Natalia Evgenievna."

"Well then, Natalia Evgenievna, here's my card. Call me tomorrow at five. You can tell me what happened in that plane. But I'm rather busy at the moment, in case you hadn't noticed."

Natasha studied the business card without answering, lowered herself pensively onto her chair, put the rucksack on her knees and started rummaging in it intently, as if she was looking for something very important. The three men followed her movements closely. The pause dragged on. The man on Andrei's left, a fat individual with an unhealthy red face spilling over onto his light-coloured shirt, glanced at his watch nervously and turned to Andrei.

"Maybe we should call security?" he suggested.

"No need for that. Natalia Evgenievna is leaving now," Andrei said crisply.

Natasha ignored this exchange and eventually found what she was looking for in the rucksack. A small notepad. She flicked through a few pages slowly and deliberately, read what was written on the next one and declared:

"I can't call you at five tomorrow, Andrei Alexandrovich."

Andrei raised one eyebrow in surprise.

"Oh, really! You're that busy? What on earth with?"

"That's none of your business. You've only insinuated yourself into my dream, not my life."

"Okay, call me between five and half past, even at six if you, like. I hope you can find a single minute for me in a whole hour?"

"Possibly ..." Natasha replied vaguely. "Goodbye then."

"I'll be expecting your call," Andrei Proshkov said in a loud voice, swinging round bodily towards Natasha as she walked away. The three men watched her slim figure in the formal dress as it moved away, with that freaky rucksack on its back.

"A cute little schoolmarm. A pity she's touched," the third partner commented eventually.

"And how!" the red-faced one agreed.

"Oh no ..." Andrei protested. "She's an interesting girl."

"Going to make something of it?" the third man enquired with a grin.

"That's none of your business. You've only insinuated yourself into my pocket, not my life," said Andrei, giving a very life-like imitation of the teacher. "That is, you're trying to insinuate yourselves. But I'm not letting you do it. And *that's* the question we'll consider now ..."

The baby buggy trundled drearily over the gravel on the path. The little tot wiggled his huge yellow rubber dummy between his pink cheeks in his sleep. The young mum was tired. It was harder pushing the buggy over gravel than over asphalt. And it was still too early to go home, they'd only been out walking for forty minutes. She didn't want to anyway – her mother-in-law had probably filled the kitchen with smoke, frying up “her little boy's” favourite meat rissoles, as if the “boy” had been on a diet of kefir and nettles since he got married. But that was okay. What could you do about it? She wasn't doing any harm. So she'd clutch her thirty-year-old baby to her breast for a while and then leave. It was no great disaster. *Thank God we don't live with her. But when this tot here gets married, I'm not going to interfere in his life,* the woman thought confidently. *Jeepers, is that really going to happen someday? I can't believe it. But in the meantime what's needed is a steady routine and no hassle. If I could just sit down somewhere for a moment ...”*

The empty bench standing round the corner under the huge, colourful maple seemed to be waiting especially for her. She sat down, delighted and relieved, parking the buggy beside her. The sparrows who had scattered at the sound of the rustling wheels flew back to start tearing at their piece of bread again. Glimpsed through the leaves of the maple, the Moscow sky, weary now of the dusty summer, was a murky greyish-blue. The notebook lying on the edge of the bench came into the woman's field of vision. She grabbed one corner, pulled it towards herself and read the printed capitals on the cover: “V. S. DIARY”.

“I wonder what this V. S. is? Or who it is? Probably a girl ... some Valya Shapkina or other ...” She settled herself more comfortably, opened the diary at the very beginning and read this:

I'm not starting a diary to share my sufferings with the pages and smear my lovelorn snivel all over them, the way lots of girls do.

I'm different. And that's not what my diary's for. It's a textbook that I'm going to write myself. My first textbook, and all the exercises in it will be completed ...

Perhaps it will contain mistakes, and not just in the spelling ...

But I hope there won't be too many of them, because “passion”, “pleasure”, “manipulation” and “man” are words I can spell without any mistakes ...

And this is the goal I have to strive for:

I WANT TO FIND THE MAN OF MY DREAMS ...

I KNOW I WANT THE IMPOSSIBLE ...

The handwriting was sharp and impulsive, with a strong forward slope. The precise letters of the final two phrases, circled numerous times in pen, looked like an exercise or an incantation.

Next there was a poem:

Now I am ready and collected.

Prepared. I want to understand myself.

Over my soul, my body is adjusted,

*To fit as closely as a skin-tight dress.
It suits me. I'm quite sure of that.
And now it goes to meet its destiny ...
Conscience? – Simply keep that stomach flat
Honour? – Simply hold those shoulders high*

And then:

*'It's impossible,' said the Cause
'It's foolhardy,' remarked Experience
'It's pointless,' snapped out Pride
'Give it a try ...' whispered the Dream.*

A strange start for a diary, the woman thought. She remembered that she started writing a diary too, when she was 13. And it was full of tears cried over the boy she took such a liking to at the disco, who dated a different girl afterwards, or over the treachery of a girlfriend. But this ... Maybe this V.S. wasn't a girl at all?

Page 3 started indignantly.

I read a book all about psychology. I won't say who the author is, because it should have been Me, and only Me! Tell me, where's the justice in this life? Every idea is a treasure-trove that I've already dug up!

*All the thoughts are mine, only formulated differently!
Does this mean that I'm a genius? Absolutely!
And I'll write down those thoughts the way I thought them!*

Then there was a text divided into clauses, like a contract.

Crazy nonsense ... the young woman thought. Point 1, point 2, point thirty-five ... like instructions for exterminating cockroaches. All these targets and seducers. If a man and a woman love each other, they don't need any points and clauses. When you feel that this is your man, your other half, what do you need all these games and rules for? You don't. My husband and I are happy, and I know it will always be like that! We'll always be together, I'll never cheat on him, and he won't cheat on me either, I'm certain of it, he loves me, doesn't he? And my mother-in-law coming visiting with her meat rissoles – that's no great disaster. If only I knew where to find instructions on how to explain to her that we have our own family, and her experience in the development of a basic socio-economic unit is no use to anyone. She shouldn't have undermined her own family unit, she should have made sure her husband didn't drink and go running after skirts ... I wonder if this strange Diary is all like this? Maybe there's something

else to read further on, apart from instructions? The woman opened the notebook in the middle, on page 54, and started reading:

Hoorah! I've hooked Proshkov! I called him at 5.49 and I could tell from his voice that he hadn't forgotten our meeting in the restaurant, in fact he'd been waiting for the call and was trying not to show it. All that nonsense like "Ah, so it's you, Natalia ermmm, I don't recall your patronymic ... Well, what was it you wanted to tell me about?"

I behaved like an idiot, but that only seemed to make him even more interested in me. Here's just one incident that happened today: over dinner (in the same restaurant, by the way) I spun the yarn I'd promised him about the dream, but he didn't seem to be interested in that at all. A beautiful girl paraded past the table. Not as mind-blowing as Vika, but still ... I would have enjoyed looking her over slowly myself. Andrei cast an interested glance in her direction too, but it was only casual, he turned back to me again and carried on from the word he'd stopped on, looking straight into my eyes. What was he hoping to read in them? Uncertainty? The uncertainty that would definitely have appeared in the eyes of an inexperienced girl – What's happening? He looked at another girl! So I don't deserve his attention? That was exactly what he wanted. He would have collected the emotion and earned himself a point. But I didn't give him the pleasure. When I did the same thing – gave the man at the next table an interested look – he put on an offended expression and turned away. I immediately started pouting and said it was time I was going. And then he trained his lovely grey eyes on me again, and I could read the surprise in them quite clearly: "Holy shit! She's quite happy to leave while I'm still here and I haven't made a decision yet!" This emotional skirmish lasted a few seconds, but it only served to confirm my hypothesis that he was a collector of emotions and the behavioural strategy I had developed was correct. It's still not absolutely certain, though ... He's not as simple as I'd like him to be. In order to conquer him, I have to create the impression that he's the one conquering me. And on no account must I give any hints that I'm capable of doing that.

By the way, on the subject of conquests ... Proshkov hinted that he wouldn't mind spending one of the weekends coming up with me. When I told him I'd never been abroad and I'd have to think about it, he remarked that "journeying beyond the borders of the permitted is far more exciting than taking trips to other countries ..." and he smiled mysteriously ... Yes, he really is more complicated and spooky than he would like to appear ...

There was a quiet grunt and the buggy with the baby in it started shaking – her little tot must have had woken up. The young woman dropped the notebook and went dashing to her child. Sure enough, he was red with heaving and straining, and from the way he looked, it was obvious that something terrible had happened to him: he was soaking wet and hungry, and he'd lost his yellow rubber dummy, and that was quite enough reason for him to start bawling and tell the whole world about it. He was right. He should have been home half an hour ago – changed, fed and dry. The young mum glanced at her watch and guilt for neglecting her son stabbed at her heart. She rushed off home at top speed, leaving the Diary of V.S. to the wind.

“Natashenka, could you grant two of my very greatest wishes?” asked Andrei Proshkov, pouring two glasses of wine and looking into the eyes of the woman facing him.

“Help you brush up on your Russian language and literature?” she asked seriously.

“That would be good. But that will be wish number three. A little bit later.” He smiled at her seriousness.

“And are you sure I’ll find the first two so easy to manage?”

“Natasha, I want to hear you say the word ‘yes’. Just ‘yes’.”

“Yes,” she replied distinctly. “Did you hear that?”

“Excellent. I’ll take you at your word. And now for the wishes. First, speak to me a bit less formally, and second, spend next weekend with me. The plane leaves on Friday.”

“What do I need to bring? Do you know what the weather’s going to be like?” she asked, granting both of his wishes at once with an entirely innocent air.

“Nothing. Nothing excessive. But aren’t you curious about where we’re going?” Andrei asked, coughing at the abruptness of it.

“Of course! But please don’t tell me anything! Let it be a surprise. I’ve never been anywhere before, I want the first time to be romantic. Only, you know, there is just one ‘but’. I only fly very occasionally, I’m really terribly afraid of flying. It’s a genuine phobia with me.”

“I promise you unforgettable romance,” Proshkov replied with a smile – he liked to keep questions and answers in their logical sequence. “And as for your phobia, look at me. You see before you a man who spends more time in aeroplanes than he does in bed. And I must confess that sometimes far more dangerous things happen in bed. Do you agree with me?”

“Yes,” Natasha replied submissively.

From first thing on Friday morning Proshkov simply couldn’t conceal what a wonderful mood he was in. He was feeling really smug as he anticipated the exquisite pleasure he’d lined up for himself. That afternoon he dialled Natasha’s number:

“Hi there, sweetheart. Are you packing?”

“I’m not going anywhere in a plane,” was the answer he heard.

“Why not?”

“I’m so afraid of flying! Of course, I’ve been struggling with myself, but I can’t do it, I can’t force myself, there’s just no way.”

“Now listen, I’m sure we can come up with something. And anyway, you’ll be absolutely fine with me, I’ll support you. I promise you won’t feel afraid at all while I’m there.”

“No, Andrei, I’ve already decided,” Natasha replied firmly.

“All right. I respect your decision. Let’s try it this way. I’ll send my car for you and I’ll wait for you in the VIP lounge at Sheremetievo 2 until the flight leaves. If you still feel uncertain,

we'll call the whole thing off. Agreed? I really want you to be with me and have a good time. I really do! Do you hear me?"

"I'll try ..." Natasha replied timidly.

"There's a clever girl ..." Proshkov said with a sigh of relief.

Natasha wasn't simply pretending about the phobia so that she could refuse to fly and keep Proshkov in suspense. It was all absolutely for real. She'd simply slightly exaggerated the emotions she was feeling, knowing it was impossible to pretend with someone like Proshkov.

Natasha arrived at the airport first, checked in her baggage and settled down in the VIP lounge with her little handbag. She leafed through a magazine, regretting that she hadn't brought the diary with her. She couldn't take the risk. Proshkov was quite capable of searching her property in pursuit of another helping of emotions. She wasn't in the least surprised when she didn't find her prospective travelling companion where he should have been. Of course, he would arrive after everyone else, just before check-in closed. He had to set her nerves on edge.

But the agitation was even worse than she'd been expecting. Check-in had already closed and boarding had been announced long ago, but Andrei still wasn't there. There was no more time left. It looked like he'd dumped her. She should have guessed this entire performance was only needed to test her self-control. Yes, he'd won, the score was 1:0 to him.

She grabbed her handbag and ran out of there, heading for the exit from the airport. And she literally ran into him right in the doorway! Strolling along as if there was no need to hurry, as if the whole world only existed in order to wait for him. He looked extremely surprised when he saw Natasha.

"Where are you going?"

She instantly reined in her agitation and tried to answer as frivolously, even offhandedly as possible.

"Me? I only just got here."

"What? As late as this? How could you?"

"Well, you know, I couldn't manage it any earlier."

"And where's your luggage? You've only got a handbag!"

"Yes, that's all I brought. You, the sea, the sun, me in my jeans and tee-shirt. That's all I need," she replied.

There was no time for him to react. Andrei looked at her, totally bemused, grabbed hold of her hand, and they ran. As they were running he asked her:

"What about checking in?"

"Already done," she replied.

"Thank God," he gasped

"What about you?"

"Me too."

"When did you manage it?"

"By phone ..."

From the way he smiled as he answered, she realised the score in this round was 1:0 in his favour again. But the game had only just begun. He had contrived the whole thing and he was controlling every step she took. He had come late on purpose. Not that he'd made a special effort, though. That was just the way he was, "light life" was his style. He couldn't care less. The whole world would wait for him. He was certain everybody would wait for him, that was how he lived his life. And the whole world *did* wait. He was so used to this that he could only be put off his stride by a woman who wasn't a part of his world. And *she* had to be that woman. It was the only way she could turn the situation to her advantage. But she mustn't try to pretend. He had the keen intuition of a wolf.

In the plane the fear that Natasha constantly felt made her extremely restless. She kept hold of her companion's hand all the time, squeezing it convulsively every time the plane jolted, gazing at him with eyes full of tears and every now and then declaring: "Darling, I'm so glad you're here with me. I really do feel that it gives me strength". He enjoyed her gratitude, but he still made an attempt to explain that, statistically speaking, aeroplanes were the safest form of transport. She stopped him: "Just don't talk to me about aeroplanes! Don't even say that word!" And as soon as he started talking about abstract subjects, she immediately asked him to shut up. Then the plane jolted again, she cringed against his shoulder and put her arms round him without any warning and he, naturally, responded to her movement and wanted to kiss her, but she gazed at him with eyes full of horror: "How can you? I'm suffering so much! Darling, forgive me, I can't!" She pulled away from him, but then squeezed his hand hard again, torn between fear and gratitude. It went on like that for the whole flight. He was under constant strain. He didn't know what to do. Sometimes she needed him and grabbed at him in a panic, and it seemed as if the tears were about to start flowing, sometimes she withdrew into herself and forgot that he even existed. But the objective was achieved – he was under pressure, and he was intrigued by this woman.

14

The flight was nearing its end. The plane banked in a smooth turn above the azure surface of the sea, and through the scraps of clouds the sandy curves of beaches and regular squares of well-tended foreign land appeared, with bright glints of sunlight forwarded by the little toy cars and houses. As Natasha gradually recovered, she tried to banish from her memory the terror she had just suffered. She remembered having read somewhere that the most effective way of dealing with attacks of aerophobia was to focus your attention on something else through an effort of will and self-suggestion. She had to try to distract herself. Once she was back in the present moment, in her own mind Natasha assessed the flight as "good". And then she started preparing herself for the next round. What would be waiting for her here? No doubt a driver and a heap of bodyguards – in that situation it would be difficult to keep his attention under control. One sudden final judder as they landed and Natasha's eyes were filled with those uncontrollable tears again. They had arrived at last! The plane had landed on the *Côte d'Azur*.

When Natasha's suitcase appeared, Andrei wasn't at all surprised – it had been collected by the nondescript man with a suntan who met them. He handed over a set of car keys and disappeared, without saying a word. Waiting for them in the airport car park was a magnificent Aston Martin – a grey convertible with a red leather interior. *So it's going to be just the two of us*, Natasha concluded and froze for a moment in admiration of the picture that presented itself to her mind's eye: a handsome, self-confident man behind the wheel of a powerful car, the French sky that she loved so much, a languid sun basking in that youthful expanse of blue. It would make a great photograph for the cover of a fashionable magazine ...

They set off along a winding road running up to somewhere in the mountains: on the left were the snow-covered peaks, on the right a sheer drop into the endless sea, the endless summer ... A warm wind fondled her hair like the fingers of a lover ... There was no one anywhere to be seen ... Andrei's eyes turned as cornflower-blue as the sky and as deep as the sea at the bottom of the cliff. He said he'd taken the keys to a nice villa from a friend and that would be the first pleasant surprise of their journey.

Soon an old garden of palm trees came into sight round one of the bends, surrounding a magnificent sun-drenched villa. The grove of grey-haired palms parted to leave space for the well-tended flower beds by the walls of the house with white shutters and doors. They looked like gigantic fronds of seaweed, frozen in the act of swaying around a sunken ship. The interior decor followed the maritime theme closely too. A bright, cosy drawing room, a white fireplace, comfortable sofas, old mirrors in white frames, paintings, a light-coloured stone floor, a sea view ... Everything was light and transparent ... it was like the sea air, tender passion, life itself. There were large candlesticks with candles that would burn all night long, standing on a low table ... And despite its lightness and airiness, the house was equipped with all the latest technology – satellite TV, air conditioners, a jacuzzi ... In Natasha's place any other girl could only have gasped happily – “Ah!” – and put off all her business until some distant “later”, which didn't look as if it would ever arrive here ... Any other girl, but not Natasha. Her cool reason could withstand the most fantastic temptations, she was intent on her goal. After arranging her things in the spacious wardrobe, she sorted through her dresses thoughtfully, anticipating dinner in a chic restaurant. Which one should she put on? A light-coloured one, a black one, perhaps the claret one, with red lingerie, as she did for Achane? No, she shouldn't repeat herself. The same lucky charm never worked twice. When she had almost reached an agreement with herself and decided on a light-grey dress in the style of the house and the garden of palm-trees, there was a polite knock at the door.

“Darling, what do you think of the idea of going to the supermarket and buying something for our dinner?” Andrei's cheerful voice enquired.

Oh Lord! What a good job I didn't go out in the dress! What an idiot I would have looked! I let my guard down after all, forgot that he's a player and he does things other people don't expect. I have to be more careful! Natasha thought to herself and immediately replied:

“Wonderful! Of course, darling! Let's go!”

She wriggled back into the tee-shirt and jeans that she'd already taken off and went out to join her mysterious friend with a smile on her face.

The Aston Martin rampaged along the road. Andrei clearly derived tremendous pleasure from driving the car at such immense speed. But Natasha wasn't afraid. At times the murmur of the sea retreated, and then came crashing back over them in a wave of sound that mingled with the incredible smells only to be found in the mountains. The air was intoxicating, infused with a mysterious silence in which even chance passers-by seemed like characters out of a fairy tale. The magic was amplified by a sky flooded with the light of stars that had fallen into the sea ... She was high on the air and the speed, and because he kissed her every time the car stopped. Kissed her gently. They couldn't indulge in a deep kiss. This was a game. For an instant the entire world seemed to belong only to the two of them. But only for an instant. They were both thinking about what lay ahead. She was trying to understand how she could avoid falling in love with this man and still complete her mission. And he was trying to figure out how to possess her in a way he hadn't tried before, doing things that no one had ever done to her before.

After an hour and a half Natasha was feeling terribly hungry. And still no supermarket had turned up. The absence of civilisation was strange for the south of France ... Natasha started looking around more carefully, and she realised they were going round in a circle! On a magnificent road, travelling at immense speed, but still in a circle. When the velvet of the sky turned completely black, Andrei slowed down, cast a guilty glance at his watch and said:

"We're too late ... Everything here closes at ten. The French are real sticklers for routine, this isn't Moscow ... We'll have to go back home ..."

"That's just great," Natasha replied, "I never dine later than ten. Thanks for a glorious outing, darling."

He smiled, satisfied with her response, and put his foot down again.

Braking to a halt near their villa, he pointed to a snug little castle that looked like the home of a race of hard-working dwarfs and their good king. The chateau was decorated with little lights and flowers intertwined so artfully, it was hard to tell if the clusters of blossom were glowing or the vivid, colourful lights were blossoming.

"Look over there, that's probably where Snow White and her dwarfs lived," Andrei said as he pointed to the castle.

"How lovely! I want to go there!"

He parked the car and they walked in through a gateway entwined with roses. The smell of a fairytale hung in the air of the cosy little yard in front of the entrance, which had a sign that read "*Hôtel de Charme*". When they knocked, a man as shaggy and informal as the garden beside the castle came out and they got talking. He was Jean, the owner of the hotel. The castle had belonged to his ancestors, and fifteen years ago he and his wife had set up a small hotel in it, so that they could maintain the family relic and pay the servants. He was delighted to have visitors from Russia, especially such charming ones.

Andrei spoke French with a distinct accent, but his smile was still as enchanting as ever, and his easy, open manner was just as infectious. Jean soon felt amicably inclined and invited his visitors inside. He showed them through to the cellar, a storehouse of magnificent cheeses and magical wine and mouth-watering dry spaghetti and other delicious provisions. Andrei and Natasha emerged with a basket full of food. And Jean added a sprig of basil as a gesture from himself, picking it right there in the yard, and then watched them leave with a broad smile that lingered on his face for a long time ...

At home Andrei tied a towel round his hips like a genuine chef and declared:

“Darling, I expect you were all set to go to a restaurant today, weren’t you? Everything will be ready in just a moment! Sit down and don’t move!”

Hungry Natasha made herself comfortable on a sofa in the drawing room, from where she could hear the sounds of dinner being prepared in the kitchen. But before even five minutes had gone by, the self-appointed chef appeared in the doorway, with a bewildered expression on his face.

“You know,” he said, “I really would like to cook something for you, but I’ve just remembered that I don’t know a single recipe. Maybe you could sit with me and suggest something?”

“Of course, darling. I’ll just get changed. I’m tired of these jeans.”

Natasha came back down to the kitchen in a light dress, not much more than a simple household wraparound, and stood behind Andrei. His body smelled of evening sunlight entering into the blissful salty coolness of the sea. An exciting smell ... He turned round towards her, instantly appraising her dusky, exposed shoulders and small, firm breasts. He kissed her on the cheek, just barely touching her, and said:

“Well then, go on ...”

Tears glinted in her eyes. There were pathetic little lakes right in the corners, ready to overflow their banks at any moment.

“I have to tell you something,” she said agitatedly, and one little lake gave way and overflowed after all.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, turning round again, with a knife in one hand.

“When I saw you for the first time in my life – not in a dream, but that time in the restaurant, you remember – I realised that ... I’d lived all my life for the sake of that day. You’re the man I’ve been waiting for all my life! I want to tell you that ...”

“What?”

He’d gone tense. This wasn’t at all what he’d been expecting and not at all what he wanted. *I couldn’t have been that wrong! She can’t possibly want to spoil everything with a fatuous declaration!* He thought to himself indignantly.

“... that ... that ... no, I can’t tell you that! When you look at me, I feel completely lost, I’ve written it all down for you in a letter.”

She held out a piece of paper folded in four. He took it slowly and twirled it in his fingers, postponing the disappointment. She looked at him with her moist grey eyes, waiting for the

verdict ... *Oh, Lord* ... he thought in disgust and opened the paper. The smooth, rounded handwriting of a chronic A-student. The first phrase was underlined. The note read: "Pasta with basil. Ingredients: 100 grams dry spaghetti, 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh green basil, 2 tablespoons olive oil, 1/8 teaspoon salt, a pinch of pepper, 1/3 cup grated parmesan cheese ..."

For a few seconds he was totally perplexed.

"Darling, I saw so many emotions on your face just now, I *knew* I'd made the right choice! This is exactly the recipe we need!" Natasha said, and laughed happily.

The evening continued as if nothing unusual had happened. The pasta could be regarded as a success, despite the replacement of several essential ingredients by gifts from the *Hôtel de Charme*. Andrei asked her to set the table. She did it perfectly, but couldn't find any napkins and had to lay the cutlery directly on the glass table top. Noticing that there were no napkins, he brought some from somewhere and set them under the cutlery. She felt embarrassed, she wasn't used to having simple mistakes like that pointed out to her, but he gave no sign of having collected her embarrassment.

They ate dinner, talked about something or other, watched television, and from the outside they looked like a man and a woman intending to enjoy a whole day and two whole nights together. They looked like a man and a woman, but they were two predators, and one of them had to become the other's prey. And what was more, the man had no doubt that she would be the prey, although the woman was certain of the opposite. There was still a long way to go before the outcome of the battle was decided.

"I want to drink to you," Andrei declared. "To the *terra incognita* that you are for me at this moment. To that thrilling feeling of the explorer that drives every man crazy."

"Are you certain that I'm *terra*? Perhaps I'm paradise lost? Or a black hole?"

"A hole? Well, to some extent ..." Andrei laughed. "No, I think you are precisely *land*. Unexplored, alluring, lush and blossoming, with a wealth of mineral resources and pleasant surprises for the experienced traveller. The springtime country of a dream ..."

"And how many countries have you already been to?" Natasha asked slyly.

"Women in general are like countries or cities ... There are some like Moscow – a price tag with genitals; there are Singapores – very beautiful, but no substance at all. There are some like Toronto – quiet and calm, but oh, so boring. I was almost arrested in the airport at Toronto, by the way! And my behaviour was quite exemplary too! The Goa type of woman gets you so smashed, you can't be bothered. Nothing rises to the occasion ... Croatia is tranquillity. Germany is strictly into bed at 22.00 – that's not for me. Routine is not for me in general. Cuba is a child of nature – like Abkhazia too, as a matter of fact ... Switzerland, the Alps – the mountains have their own magic, like the ocean. You have to love it. In Spain I understood why the men waged war so much – even war's better than looking at those women. Egypt is consumer trinkets, pieces of coral, little fish, all too accessible and vulgar. The Austria-woman is sumptuous, Portugal is sad, with that depressing music of theirs ... I love the ones who are like France, with charm and drive, or like Italy, with emotions, temperament and a past, and I like you a lot ... I still haven't

worked out what country you are, but I really do want to enter you very much. I really do!” said Andrei, raising his glass and looking into Natasha’s eyes.

That look made her feel hot and cold at the same time. She felt that a few more minutes beside this man would be enough, her will would refuse to obey her.

“Darling, you know, today has completely worn me out. And that plane ... If you hadn’t held my hand, I would have lost my mind. I’m very tired today. I feel dizzy ...” she said in a feeble voice and gave him such a mournful look that he, naturally, replied:

“Of course, darling, go and rest.”

She deliberately didn’t say “I’m going to bed” because at the crucial point she remembered a rule from Vika’s diary: “It’s very important not to say things yourself, but make your partner speak the words you want him to say”.

The mind-blowingly transparent negligée looked quite enchanting on Natasha. After twirling round one last time in front of the mirror in the bedroom, she went downstairs to wish her dear heart goodnight. Proshkov was sitting on a sofa in the drawing room, holding a glass of wine in one hand and violently abusing the TV remote control with the other. When he saw Natasha, he got up to meet her with a curious expression on his face.

“I didn’t say goodnight and I forgot to get a glass of water,” she said affectionately, walking past him towards the kitchen.

Her little robe parted at just the right spot to expose her svelte thigh under the lacy negligée. She immediately pulled it closed, but he had already responded to that unambiguous signal and stepped towards her. She recoiled in horror, as if something terrible had happened. Everything about her cried out that it had happened entirely by accident! And that little detail baffled him. *Well okay, it’s knowing how to wait that’s important*, they both thought simultaneously, each meaning something different by it, and Andrei said philosophically:

“If a man sees a genuine dragon just once in his life, he’ll believe in it to the end of his days. But if a man actually sees a beautiful, intelligent and decent woman, he’ll never believe it, no matter what. Why *do* we have so much faith in dragons, do you think?”

“Don’t think about horrors before you go to sleep, darling. It’s bad for the digestion. Good night!” Natasha cooed.

“I’ll be thinking about you ... Sweet dreams,” Andrei replied tenderly.

15

Natasha woke up and almost glimpsed the bright-blue patch of morning sky lurking behind the silk curtain and the movement of the door opening cautiously. She half-closed her eyes, and the blue patch was obscured by the haze of her eyelashes. The gentle sound of footsteps and the smell of drowned sunlight betrayed Andrei’s presence in the room. He leaned down towards her to give her a kiss.

“I’m still asleep,” Natasha said in a drowsy voice.

“Sleep, sleep. I’m going out for a little while. Don’t get too bored now.”

We're preparing a surprise, Natasha guessed. She waited until the murmur of the car driving off faded away and then got up. No, she wouldn't be too bored. She took a bath, arranged her hair in a wonderful style, put on some light makeup, chose her clothes – a linen suit with a skirt and a top – and went downstairs. There was a book lying on the little table beside an unfinished bottle of wine from the day before. She picked it up and went out onto the stairway up which the sun made its way into the house in the morning: in the evening it flowed back into the night through the veins in the light stone of the steps. She sat down on the warmed stone with her legs crossed and held her face up to the sunlight. The haze under her eyelashes turned red, and it felt as if someone was running a warm, soft brush over her eyes, her cheeks and her cheekbones. It was such a pleasant feeling ... What a pity he'd gone. She felt like having breakfast, so they could talk together. Breakfast was an excellent time for that. After you've just woken up – the sunlight, a light, skittish breeze, a feeling of trust ... But he wasn't there, and she certainly wasn't going to ask him any questions: if he had to go, then he had to. She leafed through the book for a while, then wandered about in the palm tree garden, but he wasn't there. He'd been gone for more than two hours now. *Maybe I should call him, maybe something's happened?* thought Natasha, beginning to feel alarmed. No, she was sure nothing had happened, and she shouldn't give him that unexpected satisfaction. But when another forty minutes went by, she really did start getting worried. She took out her phone and found his number. She was stopped by the sound of music coming from a car that had just driven up. She put her phone away quickly and carried on reading, lounging in the sun.

Before he even got out of the car, Andrei was surprised by her tranquil pose. Why wasn't she worried? He'd been gone for more than three hours! He'd left in the morning and it was already lunch time. But she was sitting there as if he'd just stepped out for five minutes ... There was probably no point in asking a girl like that any superfluous questions, he was facing a worthy rival, he'd made the right choice. The thought lifted Proshkov's spirits and he smiled smugly as he opened the boot of the car. He walked over to her, loaded down with plastic bags from the supermarket and ten huge bouquets, which hid his face completely.

"Darling, I didn't know what flowers you like, so I bought all of them. Ten bunches. There weren't any more. You choose the ones you like."

"Thank you," she replied rather indifferently.

He took some absolutely fresh croissants out of a paper bag and set them out, together with a neatly wrapped dessert of berries and chocolate and a bottle of Dom Perignon 1995 champagne, her favourite. How did he find that out? He splashed it into two glasses that had appeared out of nowhere, and it sparkled with frolicsome little flashes of sunlight. They drank right there on the stairway, sitting on the warm steps and squinting at the brightness. A light, tender kiss. An idyllic scene.

"This is all for you! Good morning, sweetheart!" Andrei declared, and for a moment his eyes turned green and transparent. All the colours of the old garden had dissolved in them.

"Good morning, darling ..." she replied lightly. And she didn't say another word. She squinted happily at the sunshine, and he wondered in anguish why she didn't ask him anything.

Not a single question! He'd been expecting her to ask him a whole bunch of them. And probably the reason he'd been expecting that to happen was because he'd stayed in this house with other girls. And hired the same car. And probably taken many of his girlfriends driving on the magnificent winding mountain road. And probably figured out all the angles here ages ago. In the confectionary shops they knew what desserts he preferred. And Jean always played along with him so well. This fantastic set of coincidences worked like a charm with all the girls. They marvelled at his resourcefulness, then waxed indignant about his long absence in the morning and called him on the phone every five minutes, but he didn't answer the calls, and then tearfully stuck their noses into the beautiful roses, lilies, irises and whatever they were called, he couldn't care less. At that moment he became a god for them. For all of them! All he had to do after that was gratefully accept the sacrifice offered up to the deity. Accept it in some non-standard manner. Right here, on the snow-white sunlit steps, arousing himself with the thought of casual passers-by glancing in through the gates. Or in the swimming pool, or on the kitchen table ... This time they could have driven off into the mountains ... no, the sea would be better, they could go right down to the very water's edge, so the waves would lick at her thighs ... he started fantasising. But this teacher from Podolsk wasn't even interested in playing his game! She didn't say anything. She was considerate, circumspect, sincere, elegant, affectionate, thoughtful and cold ... He looked at her, trying to puzzle out when her will would start to yield.

Natasha took a few sips of champagne as if nothing special had happened and eventually said;

"Andrei, you're so sweet! But will you tell me one little secret?"

Well, at last! He thought and answered:

"For you, sweetheart, anything!"

"How did you find out which champagne I like? Where from?"

Proshkov smiled. He was pleased he'd found something to her taste – a very extravagant taste for a teacher.

"I could tell you how clearly I sense what you feel ... or that we like the same things ... But I'll be honest with you. I believe in numerology the same way some people believe in God or the immortality of the soul. The figures in this wine's vintage – 1995 – add up to the number six. So it's good for drinking with a beautiful girl," Andrei explained with a straight face.

"Why?"

"Because the radiance of a falling star can be seen for about six seconds ... And because the number six is called the cosmic mother of all numbers. Its positive qualities include harmony, love, artistic taste, intuition, the 'sixth sense', and its negative ones are a tendency to act in secret, egocentrism, obsessiveness ... That's especially relevant for champagne and a beautiful girl," he stated, still smiling.

"Do you check the date when all your food was made before you eat it?" Natasha quipped.

"It's not that primitive ... I'm more interested in the dates on which the people around me were born," he replied. "For instance, you were born on the second."

“No, not on the second.”

I never make mistakes. If it's not the second, then it's the eleventh or the twentieth. The sum of the numbers in the date of your birthday is equal to two.”

Proshkov was right. Natasha really was born on the eleventh.

“And what does that say about me?”

“It's say that you and I will be good together.”

“Perhaps we don't need to check that?”

“We have to check it! What if we're not just good, but really good!” Proshkov laughed and put his hand over Natasha's open palm. She carefully freed her hand and he pretended he hadn't noticed this gesture.

“What are you reading?”

“Something I found in the drawing room ...”

He took the book, opened it and suddenly started reading out loud. It was stunning! His deep, well-modulated baritone, breaking off in emotion at all the right places, caressed, enveloped and enchanted her. And there was the sun ... and the champagne ... It was so romantic. Natasha saw before her the ideal man. Any woman would have been happy to have him for her own. It was so hard to hold back and not dissolve in him completely. *This man can be like this for three days at the most*, her intuition, or rather, the remnants of her sober judgment, prompted her. And that gave her the strength to resist the charm of his voice and formulate her objective clearly – she had to resume the conversation about numbers and bring it round to the fourteenth of May ...

The way he read was truly magnificent. His voice was immaculately controlled and expressive, and the urge to admire it was almost irresistible. After he had read more than ten pages, giving free rein to the passionate overtones of his rich baritone, he suddenly sensed her gazing at him in disillusionment. She even gave a slight yawn.

“Darling, are you bored?”

“No, of course not! It's very interesting! Go on, please, I'll be back in a moment!” she replied and went into the house.

He was left sitting on the steps with the book in his hands. Ten minutes went by, then another five. He got tired of waiting. He set the book aside and went after her. She was in the drawing room, putting flowers into a vase.

“Sweetheart, I'm waiting for you ...” he said as indifferently as he could manage.

“But darling, the flowers could wither.” And that was an innocent excuse that explained everything. They really could have withered during those idiotic fifteen minutes he'd been waiting for her. “Darling, I can't manage this, can you help?” Natasha was standing there, with both arms round the old vase, unable to lift it up off the table. She could have said: “Put this vase over there, please.” But the accepted practice required her to emphasise her own natural weakness and ask for help from a strong man: “Darling, I can't manage this ...” His memory would record this scene, whether he wanted it to or not. She genuinely wanted him to feel how much stronger he was than her. Proshkov walked across to the helpless girl with a springy stride

and put his strong arms round the vase. His suntanned biceps strained, and in the tender light of the mature morning he was suddenly like the mystical Celtic god Ogmios, bearing the vessel of knowledge to the people ... He had a beautiful body. He was aware of that. He tried to call into the gym at his office for at least an hour between business meetings. His personal trainer was waiting for him there, and all the exercises were devoted to making the geometry of his body even more attractive. Perhaps he hadn't just done twenty push-ups, but the contour lines of his muscles were impeccably defined at that moment, and this girl he was intending to entertain with his body was undoubtedly a worthy opponent. These two factors were enough to put him in an excellent mood. Only he really was beginning to feel rather hungry.

"I feel very tired, I think it's time we had breakfast," Andrei said ironically when he'd finished with the vase. "Aren't you hungry yet?"

"I can go without food for five lessons. Even seven. I'm a teacher," Natasha replied.

"I always regarded studying as a kind of game of chance. It's not so important if you know the subject or not. What matters is the number of the question ticket you draw, the date of the exam and the teacher's birthday. That worked especially well at college."

"Are you serious?" asked Natasha, happy that he had resumed the discussion of numbers himself.

"Absolutely!"

"And what numbers were lucky for you?"

"One, two, four, six ... yes, and eight and nine were fairly loyal to me. But I don't like three, five and seven ..."

"Why not?"

"Well, it's just the way life has worked out. The numbers have revealed their own character. I lost my best friend on the twelfth of March. The sum of twelve is three, and March is the third month. On the fifth of May I was supposed to fly somewhere with my deputy, I couldn't go, he went on his own and the plane crashed ... I would have been dead for four years now. And there've been plenty of other convincing events ... Failed exams, cancelled meetings, deals that were fouled up and all sorts of bits and pieces that I don't even really count. After that plane I made it a rule that on the third, twelfth, twenty-first and thirtieth of March or December, the fifth, fourteenth and twenty-third of May and the seventh, sixteenth and twenty-fifth of July, I never take any decisions or go on any journeys. Long ones, I mean. I have to go across town, of course. But even there I keep the distance to a minimum. On other days, though, I don't even give it a thought, I push it right to the limit. I like speed. And so far, thank God, I've never had a single scratch. So it works ... So far ..." Proshkov repeated with an enigmatic smile.

"It's not scary with you at any speed," said Natasha.

Proshkov was taken aback by that. Acknowledgement? From her? Was she really capitulating?

"It's just that it's a good car, nothing to do with me. Shall we take a drive to the sea, darling?"

"Certainly, sweetheart ..."

Here they were careering along the winding road again, but this time downwards, towards the sea. It glittered in the sun, like the scaly back of an immense blue fish. The heady smells were intoxicating, filling her body with happiness. Maybe sometime soon someone would invent the living postcard. And then for a small payment you could find yourself, for instance, in an Aston Martin convertible, travelling along at great speed with some exceptional man. Boundless blue sky, mountains, flowers, the smells of the sea, a dream and happiness ... But would his exciting glances be included in the package? Or would that be an optional extra?

As if he had read Natasha's mind, Andrei cast her a come-hither glance, and she responded with bored indifference. They were apparently moving in subconscious unison again, every step, every movement of the eyes. These little details were the essential gist of those days together. They were well matched. And while he was wondering whether it would be best to take her in the lovely grotto on the beach or right there in the sea, she had already decided everything. Having this supermacho remember her as the exception, the first woman cosmonaut, was probably a greater pleasure than having sex with him. After a swim, they stretched out on the sand that was still warm. What bliss it was to feel the docile little grains of sand with her stomach, breasts and thighs, to burrow into them like a nimble little lizard ... Proshkov gathered Nastasha's hair into his fist and pulled her head upwards tenderly but insistently. Then he ran his hand over her neck and her back, caressing her vertebrae, and let it linger on her waist before setting it on her buttock. His palm was almost the same size as it was. He contracted his fingers slightly. His movements were carefully gauged, delicate and very agreeable.

"Andrei Alexandrovich! The first time I have sex will be with my husband. Do you intend to propose to me?"

He was about to joke that he could probably marry her for a couple of hours, but he broke off in mid-word – this strange schoolmarm was looking at him with such a serious air of responsibility for the happiness of the future generations. She'd even gone back to addressing him formally ...

"Mmmmm," Proshkov murmured in disappointment and slumped back down onto the sand. Why hadn't he checked out something as elementary as that in advance? But how could he have checked it? Asked for a note from a gynaecologist? Or perhaps that should be a psychological clinic? After all, she was probably lying ... Should he rape her, then? But he had never found violence arousing ... he needed willing adoration, beautiful game-playing, love, when it came down to it ...

"You know," he said eventually. "I'd really like to live long enough to go totally gaga. And have music like James Brown's *I Feel Good* and Ray Charles's *Hit the Road, Jack* played at my funeral. And of course, I'd be lying face down in my coffin. Just like I am now ... Then everyone who never liked me would be able to walk up and kiss my firm boxer's ass. The guests would all have a pretty good time ..."

Natasha smiled, appreciating his self-control.

"Maybe while you're still alive, I could kiss you ... on the cheek?"

“I’m afraid that might be against your religion ...”

She touched him gently with her lips. He lay there for about a minute with his eyes closed, then he spoke harshly and abruptly, as if he was passing sentence:

“By the way, you’ve got a plane in three hours. It’s time you were leaving. Pierre will drive you.”

“Who’s Pierre?”

“The man who met us. The one who carried your suitcase stuffed with dresses to enchant me ...”

“I didn’t manage that, though, did I?”

“You’re not a country, you’re not land, or earth ... You’re a different planet. From outside the solar system ...”

When she got back to Moscow, to her beloved diary, Natasha felt with every fibre of her being how terribly she had missed it, missed the opportunity to commune with the paper, with her soul, with Vika. She opened it at a clean page, which she numbered “55”, and described in detail her impressions of the trip to the Côte d’Azur with the Russian businessman Andrei Proshkov. Not simply in order to keep the diary up to date, but to pin this male specimen to the paper like a rare flower. Her feelings were hazy and unsettled. He might have lost the game, but he had still managed to disturb her. She really wanted to capture and preserve his elusive smell of the sun, the cornflower-blue glance of his eyes, the magic of his confidence ... No, it wasn’t love, it was admiration of the perfection and charisma of a glorious man who was simply alien to her. That was all ... But even so ... She concentrated the feelings and sensations she felt from him, like focusing a ray of sunlight onto the uncomplaining paper through a magnifying glass and, with the pain of it burning a black hole in her soul, she splashed him out of herself with these words:

Tender lips, slightly chapped by the wind, soft curls of burnished sunlight, beautiful fingers – the keyboard yearns for their touch – translucent eyes reflecting infinity, a vague haze of arousal, a sunset the colour of baked clay, a soulful voice, the rustling of pages drowning in the whisper of the salty waves, a dizzying aroma, the silence of solitude for two. The depth of his soul knows no distance, thoughts congeal, not wishing to be spoken, he doesn’t seek meaning, circumstances obey him, the entrancing smell of remembrance in the garden of weary palms ...

She wrote it in a single breath, holding the air inside until her heart almost stopped. Then she breathed out in relief and started feeling better. A few deep breaths in and out brought her back to reality. She turned over the page and started a new paragraph, like a new life.

And now for mission number three!

What lies ahead, I do not know ...

“And now for mission number three,” Natasha wrote at the top of the page and lifted the pen off the paper. She had no idea what to write or, more importantly, what to do next. Where had this confusion and uncertainty come from? What was wrong with her? She had to act in accordance with the algorithm, follow the precise sequence, and then the finely tuned technology would function faultlessly. She looked at the blank page of the diary. What would it contain? “Allegories of game-playing” and “Rhythms of a heart under strain” came tumbling out of that word “algorithm” as the language scholar inside Natasha carried on making her own entirely independent little discoveries. *Now is no time for playing word games*, she thought and stopped doing it. In order to gather her strength, she just needed to concentrate. Complicated things always submitted to simple ones, they found that easier. They were delighted to be arranged in diagrams, graphs, tables and algorithms, on numbered pages of lined paper ... This page didn’t have a number. The elementary order that held chaos back from entering the mind had been violated. Natasha put the number in the upper left-hand corner of the sheet of paper – “58”. There was more order now, but still no thoughts appeared. Lying in front of her were the next two dossiers, two destinies, two personalities, photographs of two men, both of them requiring work and serious preparation ... Who should she start with or, rather, with whom should she follow through on the next stage of her mission? The first one, Giuseppe Lucciano, 42 years old, a short, balding, slightly built man with regular facial features and a smouldering southern expression in his eyes, was an absolutely typical Italian. Apparently an ordinary kind of man, like thousands of others. He lived in Venice, he was married, owned a chain of coffee shops, collected modern art. The photo that Natasha was holding in her hands showed him with a woman, about ten years younger than him and slightly taller, with thick, black hair. Also nothing out of the ordinary, typically Italian. Although she was probably a bit too thin for the classical image of an Italian woman. He had his arm round her shoulders in a friendly hug – the sign of a warm relationship with a colleague or old friend that went back a long way.

The second dossier was on Robert Stevenson. American, thirty-five years of age, dealt in real estate, unmarried and also an absolutely typical representative of his nation of success – a porcelain white smile glued to his face, deep set eyes, straight nose, high cheekbones and shoulders like a billboard that said “Welcome to America”. At first glance a boring individual, and also like thousands of others, if not for his fortune. Through selling real estate he had advanced to the front ranks of the American elite. But money didn’t make a boring individual any less boring.

Natasha mentally shuffled this pack of two cards, listening to what her intuition told her. Italian or American? American or Italian? Her sixth sense seemed to have taken a day off. There was only one person who could give her a pointer – Vika. How Natasha wished she could tell her right now about this strange mission that required her to seek out four men scattered round the world and find out from them if they had been on the island of *L* with a girl called Dina. What it was for and who needed it was something she didn’t know herself. Vika would probably have laughed at the way Natasha developed her plans and scenarios for taking her next mark, like a

genuine spy. And she would definitely have given her some sensible advice. But total and absolute confidentiality was the most important point in the conditions of the contract that she had signed. And even after the papers had been signed, Vitalii Arkadievich Pribylovsky had reminded her once again that if the information that had been entrusted to her were to become public, then he couldn't guarantee that her life would be safe. The space between the nose and the upper lip on the face of Vitalii Arkadievich Pribylovsky, an amiable businessman with a business of incomprehensible origins, was completely covered by dense stubble that looked more like a greying broom than a moustache. When he spoke, the broom stirred its bristles malevolently. Natasha remembered that talking broom he had instead of a mouth, the stern eyes set too close together, the bony, hooked nose, and thought about how a chain of apparently random events could lead to consequences that were anything but random. At what moment did random events acquire substance and significance? Every little piece of nonsense couldn't carry a predetermined meaning within it, surely? How had this Vitalii Arkadievich appeared in her life? He had phoned her, introducing himself as a friend of Nikolai Nikolevich Zhurov, a close acquaintance of hers. And when had Zhurov become established as one of her acquaintances? Natasha pushed away the diary with its empty fifty-eighth page away, sank back into the soft, deep, pink armchair and drifted back to the day that had probably been the start of everything.

The precise season was beyond the reach of her memory now, more than three years had passed since then, but it was dreary and rainy, a single finger hammering monotonously on the A-flat key. Classes in the university were over for the day, and Natasha was preparing to go to a job interview. She'd almost come to terms with the thought of shoes soaked through with liquid filth, when Vika rang and told her in a crisp, businesslike tone of voice that she wanted to see her in an hour's time in a cafe. In that same cafe, with the open veranda and the huge windows. Natasha started telling her about the appointment for the job interview, but Vika replied: "Those jobs of yours won't go anywhere. What's the big deal? An adviser to the UN on triple salary with free lunches? I need you today, and no objections!" The pink phone – a present from Vika – went dead in Natasha's hand, delicately reminding her of the first weekend they had spent together. She set out for the cafe without another second's thought,.

Vika was not alone at the table for two. There was a girl sitting with her, someone Natasha didn't recognise from behind. She stopped uncertainly, hesitant to butt into their conversation. Vika noticed her. *Stand behind her quietly. You'll enjoy this*, she told Natasha with her eyes. Natasha obediently halted a couple of steps away from them and heard this:

"It's such a sad love story, Vik! Men are all so cynical these days!" the girl said plaintively, concluding her tale.

"You don't have a representative sample, Milana," Vika replied.

"What don't I have?"

"Well, you can't say you know all the men and they're all like that, can you?"

"I dunno ... Most of the ones I come across are like that."

"And where do you come across them?"

“All over the place! At work, in the clubs ...”

“And do you pick them up, or do they choose you?”

“Usually they do the choosing. I wouldn’t make the first approach.”

“Why not? Any girl, especially a real looker like you, can always tempt any man she fancies with a single glance.”

“That’s easy for you to say, Vik! I wish I had your looks!”

“That’s just the way it seems to you. I’m not a hundred dollar note, not everybody likes me, and anyway not everything depends on looks. There has to be something else to a woman.”

“And I don’t have it, don’t I? They’re all cynical bastards, all the same. Nobody makes any effort, no one courts you or gives you flowers. It’s easier for them to just fling a wad of money at you, everyone’s crazy about them anyway.”

“So, if I understand correctly, you’d swap a horrible, cynical oligarch for a romantic student?” asked Vika, her eyes glinting in jaunty mischief that only Natasha noticed.

“Oh, no-o!” Milan protested. “Course not! But why don’t well-off men ever court you? They’re too used to buying everything quickly.”

“Why? Well, try thinking about it. They’re not idiots, why should they take the long, hard way if there’s a much quicker and simpler route? What I’m getting at is that you shouldn’t sell yourself if you don’t want anyone to buy you. Don’t take the money if you want the flowers.”

“What do you mean, don’t take the money? Then he’ll stop giving me any, he’ll decide I can support myself.”

“But he’ll give you flowers! Isn’t that what you wanted?” Natasha could see that Vika was already having trouble preventing herself from bursting into laughter.

“That’s easy for you to say,” Milan whined. “Why don’t you help me, Vik? Introduce me to someone. I know you can ...”

“All right! Just tell me honestly, what kind of relationship do you really want?” Vika asked with the serious expression of a psychologist in an expensive clinic, selling her couch time to bored rich ladies.

“Well, I want him to court me, give me flowers, keep me, respect me, pay me compliments, be faithful to me,” the girl listed off promptly.

“And what do you give him for that?”

“What do you mean? I’m young and beautiful ...”

“I’m not asking what you can use to attract him, I’m asking what you can give him in exchange for fidelity, money, respect and the other demands on your list.”

“Well ... me ...”

“Me – meaning sex?”

“Well, that too.”

“I see. And how much money are you counting on getting a month.”

“A regular five grand. Well, and presents as well.”

“I’m sorry, but do you really think sex fetches that kind of money nowadays? If the newspapers can be trusted, you’ve hiked the price up to five times the going rate! And then, you

won't do even a tenth of the things that are usually included, you don't have the experience for that!"

"But I'll love him. Vik ... come on, please ..." Milana's back slumped and the cigarette she was holding in her fingers started trembling.

"Is it him or his money that you'll love?" Vika asked harshly and summed up without a trace of sentimentality: "Basically, it's quite clear you've got nothing to give him. Oh, look who it is!" she suddenly cried out joyfully, waving her arms about. "Natalia! Hi! What are you doing here? Milana, let me introduce the future guru of philological studies, Natalia Sitnikova! Hey, it's really great that you're here! I've been trying to catch you in the uni, but I missed you. I really need to talk to you. How much time have you got?"

"Hi, Vika. Not very much," said Natasha, playing along with her friend as she walked up to the table. "About fifteen minutes."

"Okay, that'll have to do, but I've got a million questions!"

"All right, then," Milana sighed regretfully and got up. "I've got to be going. Nice to meet you, Natasha."

"Cheers, see you around," said Vika, smiling at her acquaintance, and Natasha thought she wouldn't ever like to have that look directed at her ...

17

"Well hello, sweetie! Sorry for keeping you waiting!" Vika said gleefully the moment Milana was out of sight. "So how did you like that performance? A real circus, eh? And for free! And you didn't hear the whole story, either! A tale to chill your very soul: 'I had an oligarch, he was prepared to fling villas, yachts and fur coats at my feet! I like that turn of phrase from the old Soviet Young Pioneer days: 'he was prepared!' He was prepared, the blackguard, but then he never flung anything! I've got those 'wasprepareds' like a dog's got fleas."

"She's got a lovely name – Milana. It sounds almost foreign, somehow."

"Precisely!" Vika laughed. "If a girl's called Tanya or Manya, it means she's from the big city, but if she's a Milana or Snezhana, she's from some village down old Ukrainia way. And there's a great multitude of princesses like her, too delicate to sleep on a pea, and they all have the same bones to pick with life and men!

"How do you know her?" Natasha asked.

"She's the one who knows *me* from somewhere. I don't even *want* to know her," Vika replied, shrugging her shoulders and setting her wheat-golden hair stirring in the movement that Natasha loved so much. It gave her a familiar twinge in her heart, as if a hand in a warm mitten was checking to make sure it was still there. "But there is a certain someone who really wants to get to know you better!" Vika added seriously.

"Me? Who?" Natasha almost choked on her double espresso.

"A certain Nikolai Nikolaevich Zhurov. A highly successful businessman. You made a great impression on him."

“Me? When did I manage to do that?”

“You remember that inconspicuous little gent in glasses who was reading his newspaper discreetly at that table over there while you and I were chatting on that veranda? I didn’t just bring you here by chance.”

“So it was all set up beforehand?” Natasha asked indignantly.

“Not set up, arranged!” her friend corrected her. “How else could I have shown you to each other without any risk to my own health? Basically, he’s asking permission to give you a call. I’d advise you to agree. Not simply because he isn’t the kind who flings offers about all over the place, that’s not likely to convince you, with your inflexible character, but because he’s a really deserving individual. Added to which, he’s got money, and brains, and contacts and he could come in useful to you. He also happens to be honest, cultured, extremely well-mannered and considerate, and he’s not vulgar, foulmouthed or stingy. A list of qualities like that in a man with money is a phenomenon not encountered very frequently in nature. Think about it!”

“I already have. Thanks for the concern, of course, Vik, but no. I don’t want a relationship with anyone. No man is ever going to touch me again. And that’s settled!” Natasha replied decisively.

Vika looked at her friend closely. Natasha lowered her eyes in embarrassment.

“Is there some reason I don’t know about?”

“Yes ...”

“Out with it!” Vika ordered her. “You shouldn’t keep things like that to yourself. It’s far too dangerous and destructive.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I feel ashamed. You won’t respect me anymore. And I couldn’t stand that,” Natasha said stubbornly.

“There’s no way I could stop respecting you, or even think about doing it, no matter what I might find out about you. But that’s a completely different matter ... Don’t tell me if you don’t want to. And listen to me. Once long ago in my distant childhood I got food poisoning from potatoes with mayonnaise. Even just telling you about it now, I feel sick. And nobody will ever make me spread mayonnaise on a potato and eat it again. But this appalling fact of my biography has never prevented me from enjoying other dishes. If you get obsessed with something, especially something bad, it limits your thinking, makes you narrow-minded, and narrow-mindedness poisons your life. And why would you want to poison your own life? Judge for yourself! Zhurov is a high-class dish from a good restaurant. Let him give you a call. And just spend a bit of time with him. If I know anything about him, he’ll become a good friend of yours. And if it doesn’t work out, he won’t try to cause you any more pain or mess you up inside.”

“And is he married?”

“What do you think? When did you ever see any normal man in the prime of life with a healthy bank account who wasn’t married? If he’s not married, he’s still recovering from his latest divorce, or he’s in that ‘all women are bitches’ state of mind, which automatically excludes him from the category of ‘normal’ men, either temporarily or permanently.”

“I wouldn’t like to cause trouble in someone’s family. The family’s sacred,” Natasha said sincerely.

“Don’t talk nonsense, sweetie! Of course the family’s sacred, but only when the man and the woman both stick to that view, when they take good care of their relationship. In that case, sure, it’s a great sin to come between them. But if one member of a married couple isn’t getting all that he or she should from the other and simply can’t accept the fact, no high-minded moral arguments are going to stop them from looking for what’s missing on the side. And especially the man. He said he really admired your dignity and aristocratic bearing ...”

“He did?” Natasha felt the colour flooding her cheeks. Had she really managed to change something in herself? “All right, what if I do agree?” she asked cautiously.

“In the first place, I’d be very pleased because, above all, it would show that you trust me. And in the second place, have you read the Diary of V.S.?”

“Not yet, Vik. I don’t want to do it on the run, and I hardly have any free time at all. There’s so much studying to do, and the languages, and I’m looking for a job too ... But I will read it! Honestly!”

“I will read it, I will learn it!” Vika teased her. “That’s class five, term two, my God! What good’s that?” she said sternly, then took hold of Natasha’s hand and added tenderly: “And a woman absolutely must have some free time! To spend on herself! Do you understand me?”

“I’ll do better,” Natasha answered, looking into Vika’s eyes, glittering like little blue lakes in the thickets of her eyelashes – mischievous, beloved, they seemed to be asking *Do you remember? Do you want it? – Yes, I do remember, I do want it*, Natasha’s eyes replied.

“All right,” Vika said gently. “The diary’s your homework. But in the meantime, pardon me if I instruct you. We don’t have much time, and you don’t have much experience. Here are a few simple truths you’ll need to know for a start:

“Firstly, about presents. If you want to receive expensive presents from a man, you have to behave as if they’re nothing unusual to you. If you feel uncomfortable accepting presents, if you think something’s too expensive for you, that you don’t deserve it, then you can be quite certain you really don’t deserve it. And it won’t take long to persuade a man that that’s true. It’s a good idea to accept presents before sex with him happens for the first time. I’ve drawn one very useful conclusion from my life: before sex a woman names her own price, whatever she wants. After sex the price is fixed by the man at a level that suits him and it can be very hard to raise the bar any higher. I’m not suggesting you should set conditions, that’s what whores do, just let him know gently what he can do to please you. I’m sure he’s already thinking about that anyway. And you have boundless scope for imagination! An expensive woman should have expensive accessories: jewellery, belts, handbags, shoes, phones.

“Secondly. About his behaviour. Don’t try to re-educate him. The governess syndrome has ruined the lives of many women. In this context the maternal instinct is far more productive, after all, a mother accepts her son as he is, with all his shortcomings, addictions and even physical abnormalities. That’s exactly the kind of relationship men need. A man is like a child, he only ever wants to hear praise. And that applies especially to sex. Sex is a touchy subject for any

man, and the more you praise him for his professional skill in this area, the closer you'll bind him to you. It's an old recipe, but one you must never forget, no matter what! And never try to restrict his freedom! The modern man is as timid as a hare, if he ever senses you measuring his neck for a collar, he'll be up and gone in an instant – they're very good at that. With the right approach, he won't notice a yoke or your feet on his neck, but he'll always spot a collar! Take special care about that! And remember: if a man has promised you something, it doesn't mean that he's already done it, or that he'll ever do it at all! So you should never believe him, and especially never thank him for it in advance. Don't judge men by what they say, but by what they do or, better still, by what they buy.

“Thirdly. About keeping feelings alive. It is highly desirable to surround yourself with beaux and admirers. It will stop you from getting fixated on him and becoming dependent, give you more confidence in yourself and more high-grade sex, and make him feel he faces healthy competition and final victory is beyond his reach. And he needs that far more than you do! You have to be a commodity that has them standing in a queue a mile long, get it?”

“Where am I going to get a queue like that? Bring in the troops for the crowd scenes?”

“You have some extreme ideas, sweetheart! But that was quite good, actually,” Vika laughed. “I'll take care of the crowd scenes, you won't know where to put them all, we just have to make a start, as Gorbachev put it. In the meantime, a beautiful bouquet standing somewhere in your room wouldn't do any harm.

“Well, there you have the basic rules, more or less. Of course, there are a lot more, but for that you have my magical notebook, which you're going to master soon. Ah, yes! I still haven't told you the most important thing of all! When the presents, words, promises and other flim-flam starts – don't get hung up on all that! Never forget that it's nothing but hooks and bait. Never think the man is more stupid than you are! This film director, I think it was Jim Jarmusch, once said something pretty smart on that subject, although his jokes give me the shivers: ‘Anyone who thinks he's smarter than everyone else is headed for the graveyard’. It's basic mistake, and women aren't the only ones who make it and start thinking they can control everything. There's no way! As a result they just end up dependent, bought – not necessarily for money – and limp as dishrags. The woman gets transformed into just one more trophy, spread out and nailed to the wall in the bedroom. In psychology that's called ‘concealed manipulation’. The old saying's true: ‘Make a woman a queen, and she'll be your slave’! That's the rule followed by all the men who sponsor, invest and support, and the rest of the hot air merchants and bullshit artists. That's the basic danger! And, of course, the most important rule is: Never, never, never relax! Why don't we have another coffee? The desserts here are absolutely scrumptious! That one, for instance,” said Vika, jabbing her long nail at one of the pictures in the menu.

“I've always admired your ability to do several totally unconnected things at the same time!” Natasha laughed.

“It can't be helped. I have it be like a Cicero with six hands! Like I said, you can never relax! The Milanans of this world don't waste any time, they're always buzzing around my little piece of bread and caviar! If you've got any questions, go ahead and ask, poppet, don't be shy.

Better get it off your chest now than wind up analysing your mistake and licking your wounds later on. Although there'll still be plenty of those anyway ...”

“I have ... not really a question, it's something I'm not clear about, maybe because I don't understand, maybe because I'm afraid ...”

“What do you mean?”

“I haven't had many men, you know that. My two and a half admirers were nothing special, just ordinary young guys. And I would like to meet someone like this Zhurov, a man who seems like a mystery and a riddle to me, but at the same time I'm afraid.”

“Zhurov is almost yours already, in the first place, and in the second, try to formulate what exactly it is that you're afraid of. Is it that you don't know how to behave with him, or you're afraid of not measuring up to something, are you afraid you'll lack self-confidence? What *are* you afraid of?”

“Well no, I think I have enough self-confidence,” Natasha said with a smile. “And I'll master the rules of the game, they're no more difficult than ancient Latin. The problem is that I DON'T WANT TO PLAY! Do you understand? I want to be myself! I want to be natural! And I'm afraid I'll spoil everything if I play games, even very subtle ones! I'll spoil everything, because I'll be untrue to myself ...”

“You know, Natash, on another day back in my childhood, I came across a dried-up well. And to this day I still remember that feeling of a shift in the reality close around me. Just imagine, I thought, people are scrabbling in their gardens, dogs are running and flies are flying, and I'm standing here, looking into a bottomless abyss ... infinite, black, beckoning ... And at that moment I myself turned into infinity, and nobody around me had any idea I could do that and I wasn't just an ordinary little girl ... And I didn't feel any fear, I was just bursting with pride that this was my secret, and only mine! When I'm with you I sometimes feel something of the same kind. You're deep and infinite too. And you don't know what you're like, you don't know yourself! You simply can't know how many personalities, roles, masks, colours and lives there are hidden inside you and how deep it all is ... And maybe you're that very case when the ideal form of existence is to be yourself! The way to exist in general, and the way to deal with relationships with men too. You know, men who have millions are no idiots. They can see through any situation, you can't make fools of them. There's only one way to get the best of them – with naked sincerity. And it mustn't be that cheap kind of sincerity, when you say everything you're thinking. It has to be sincerity with substance. It must be deep enough to dazzle him and take his breath away, like a little boy looking into a well! I don't even mention the fact that in order to be deep, you have to have serious reserves of energy and work really hard on yourself. I don't mention it, because you already have all that, poppet ... And that kind of sincerity is the only thing that's impossible to withstand. It's not possible to shield yourself when someone deals with you sincerely. All you can do is take fright and run away. That's why people run away from love. Because it's sincere. There are no techniques for handling it, no antidote. You're helpless, you open up and lose all your defences. That's the whole reason for the fear ... Men are more afraid of love than they are of women, because for them love also means

responsibility, and who needs all that hassle nowadays, when everyone's wondering how to survive, and nobody wants to open up and let down his defences. That's why I wouldn't flourish this dangerous weapon except in the heat of battle. Be yourself with a man, but in a queen's dress. Let him feel like a king. But show him that he's only a king when he's with you ... Then he won't be afraid and he won't leave. And that isn't a game, it's a law of life!

18

Nikolai Nikolaevich Zhurov phoned Natasha the same day. And he lived up to the positive epithets Vika had bestowed on him. He'd been searching for a long time for a girl who combined the qualities of dignity, sincerity and gratitude and didn't have, as he put it, "a card-scanner on her back". This phrase stuck in Natasha's memory from one of their rare frank and open conversations. "You know, Natasha," he confided, "the idea of a relationship for gelt disgusts me now. You date a girl for just another bauble, for presents, for paying the bills. Imagine what the generation of twenty years from now will be like when morals become totally extinct! Will every girl have a credit card scanner on her back? How is it possible to live and love in such a depraved society? And the most terrible thing of all is that girls no longer feel any need to study, to develop their minds and talents. What do they want with any of that, when they can live the easy life by just spreading their legs! And the barefaced insolence of the way they try to attract the attention of men from my social set. It's absolutely incredible! But lots of them get away with it. Fortunately, I'm in a position where I choose, and I'm not chosen. And if anybody doesn't like that, they can complain to the European Court of Human Rights if they like, or the newspapers here, like *The Siren*."

Natasha's relationship with Zhurov, a rather plain-looking and reserved individual, taught her that an ordinary exterior can conceal a very unusual personality. Natasha found Zhurov impressive. There was no love between them. "Love's an illness, one I've already had, and I have a robust immune response" was the way he explained his attitude to what was happening. She never hinted at any presents and she behaved in a calm, dignified manner. And that was exactly what was required. Zhurov helped her and he did it sincerely, but not without self-interest. He rented an apartment, more for his own sake than hers – he couldn't visit her at the student hostel, could he? He took pleasure in giving her presents, but he never gave her money. "You're a capable, talented girl," he said, "I don't want to corrupt you by making you a kept woman." But Natasha wouldn't have taken money anyway. After she moved to the apartment, she decided she could move on to an intimate relationship. She felt sure nothing bad would happen with Zhurov, as if he was the father she could barely remember. "Perhaps the indecent secret of sex is that it's not really all that indecent," he said thoughtfully one day, caressing Natasha considerately and respectfully, in the same way he did everything that concerned her. The rare occasions of intimacy with Zhurov didn't supercede her relationship with Vika, but

merely accentuated its significance.

Vitaly Pribylovsky's phone call had come several months later. Natasha was already working on her degree thesis, totally absorbed in studying the subject of office vocabulary in English- and French-speaking companies. She had found herself a job where she could gather the material she needed for the thesis – there wasn't much literature on the subject, and she had to take everything "from the life". Her aristocratic dream had retreated into the background temporarily. Natasha had had her teeth whitened and her height increased – the advance towards perfection resulting from a few extra shades of brightness and a couple of additional centimetres was extremely subtle, but still enough to make her feel one step closer to her goal. She didn't say anything about it to Vika, but the changes didn't escape her friend's attention. "What's happening to you, sweetie?" she remarked. "You get taller and lovelier every time I look at you! It's like I always said – a regular sex life and good shoes work wonders for a woman!"

Vitaly Arkadievich Pribylovsky, who said "hello" on the phone, in the American style, instead of the Russian "alyo", introduced himself as an old acquaintance of Zhurov's, reeled off a string of convoluted compliments and asked if he could meet her. Zhurov was in London, he often went away on business, and Natasha agreed – she felt as sure of Zhurov's friends as she was of him. And, just as expected, Vitaly Arkadievich was a courteous, convivial, energetic man of about 45, a successful businessman and witty conversationalist. The only off-putting thing about his appearance was that talking brush instead of a mouth. But that was only noticeable when he spoke seriously; when he laughed, the unpleasant impression immediately evaporated, overwhelmed by his invincible charm, which made it possible to ignore such a minor defect. He knew how to have a good time and give others a good time too. He started every meeting with an amusing story or joke, acting them out with the skill of a professional actor, like some fine-honed variety act. He explained his call and his wish to meet her by "business requirements" – he said he'd heard from Zhurov about Natasha's competence in the area of comparative linguistics. He started by asking her questions on this subject, brought along documents with phrases that were hard to translate and asked her advice. Then he simply invited her to restaurants, entertained her and cracked jokes, kissing her hand with exaggerated courtesy when they parted and reappearing again the next day. Natasha even got used to his company, but there was one simple question she couldn't answer: What did he want from her? He didn't proposition her or try to drag her off into bed, or advance their relationship, but he was always there, as large as life ... She shared her concern with Vika. Her friend put her doubts down to lack of experience and explained: "There are some strange men like that, they enjoy the company of a beautiful girl. Who else knows there's nothing between you? They watch and feel they envious. That's enough for him. He's impotent, but he's an elite limp dick, not an ordinary one. You like spending with him, don't you? So don't get hung up about it!"

Natasha remembered their "special" date because it lacked the usual jocular atmosphere. There was still a joke as a warm-up, but Vitaly Arkadievich ran through it as if it was part of his compulsory programme, something he did just to make sure he'd be recognised.

“Hello, doctor, I’ve got problems.”

“Have a seat, old chap, tell me about it.”

“I’ve just lost interest in everything and my shoulder’s started twitching.”

The doctor carries on writing and says:

“Valerian drops at night – that’ll fix it.”

“Doctor, at night I dream that I’m building underground pyramids in Tuscany, I’m terribly concerned about the preservation of the frescoes and the way the bonding cement will react to contact with the ground water.”

The doctor looks up:

“What’s that you say? What are you using to reinforce the foundations? I can highly recommend quadruple tempered steel rods, that’s an old trick, well tried and tested.”

“Doctor, there’s something wrong. My caller ID shows numbers from people who haven’t called me, all the words in the signs and posters that catch my eye come from the same root. And my hamster hasn’t spoken to me for more than three days, he sits in the corner of his cage and stares at me like the Balrog lashing at Gandalf with the end of his whip.”

The doctor:

“My, what a well-read little beast he is, have you tried giving him the Russian classics?”

“Doctor, I can tell what women are feeling, I understand them.”

“Good grief...”

In Vitaly Arkadievich’s rendition, the doctor had an Odessa accent and burred his r’s funnily, and the patient was a caricatured intellectual. She smiled in appreciation of his artistic performance.

“And what can I do for you?” she asked.

“Natasha, do you have a dream?”

“A dream? Yes ...”

“I would consider it a great honour for me if you would confide in me about it!” said Vitaly Arkadievich. His smile completely disappeared and he gazed intently at Natasha, waiting.

“I want to pass on the right set of genes to my child,” Natasha replied seriously.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“I want my children to be the continuers of an aristocratic line. A genuine one. With an ancient genealogical tree. I want the spoons they use to eat their baby food to bear the family crest of their clan. I want them to live in a huge old castle with a library that occupies an entire room and go for walks with their nanny in their own park, with avenues and a pond. The castle and the pond are figurative, of course, but I dream of my children not just being educated, but well-bred, and speaking several languages, born with a straight back and true nobility of character in their blood, so that they don’t have to learn these things! I want to change the setting of their life forever ...” said Natasha, getting carried away.

“You have a very beautiful dream, Natasha,” he responded. “And I’m very pleased you think I deserve your trust. But you do understand that the man you wish to meet and who you

want to give you children with that kind of family tree (that is what we're talking about, isn't it?) has no need of a poor Cinderella? We're not living in a fairytale."

"I understand that. And I'm not a poor Cinderella."

"Well, by comparison with the fortune that you're dreaming about, we're all poor Cinderellas, as poor as church mice."

"I'm not talking about a fortune. I'm talking about aristocratic character and nobility of soul. Genuine, and not bought," Natasha corrected him.

"Praiseworthy, very praiseworthy. So you're not interested in money?"

"Why do you think that? Money it adds polish to manners, offers increased opportunities to a sense of style and scope for the intellect. It embellishes, but only what is genuine."

"I entirely agree with you. It's quite possible to read a lot about different countries in books, but why not see Paris in the evening with your own eyes? How splendid it is, the world of good manners, expensive cars and beautiful women in furs. How splendid they are, all those pictures, the silver tableware, leisurely conversations between people of the same circle ... But to what extent do you think that aristocratism and cultural refinement are identical? After all, they both involve nurture, education and intellect, don't they?"

"Not entirely. The two concepts are related, but not synonymous. And the differences between them are not a matter of opposition, merely of different emphases. At least, that's how it used to be. For instance, they both presupposed that people were well educated and polite. However, the intellectuals preached a respectful, or at least polite attitude to all people, but aristocrats believed that respect has to be earned and despised those who failed to earn it. Wealth was not regarded as a merit in itself, judgements were based on considerations of honour. I've read a lot about it. I think that the aristocratic attitude has every right to be intolerant, but the cultured approach doesn't. The intellectual attitude is uncompromising, but the cultured attitude prefers tolerance in its judgements, even of those who cannot really be called individuals. The intellectuals emphasised relationships with the surrounding world and paid particular attention to the justice of their judgements, but the aristocrats emphasised their attitude to themselves, their own impeccable bearing and appearance, and the justice of their judgements concerning outsiders, people not of their circle, who did not follow their code of honour, was of little concern to them. The aristocratic attitude is the indisputable superiority inherited from family, honed over the centuries, polished by taking a strict, demanding attitude to oneself. It is dignity and discipline, it is intellect, taste and a sense of measure, it is cultured speech and manners, it is the ability to deal with servants, in short, it is conscious membership of the caste of the elect ...

"Most certainly!" Vitaly Arkadievich agreed with her readily. "Certainly, membership of the elect! To which universal access is impossible and, indeed, absurd! Membership of the elect – one of the laws of life that simply have to be accepted. Not everything is granted to everyone, and if you have been granted it – then be worthy! Isn't that it? But for one aristocrat to be able to drink his coffee in bed in the morning and live in the style befitting the members of his circle, there had to be a dozen servants in the house and hundreds of peasants or hired workers."

"Aristocratism is not always equivalent to wealth," Natasha continued calmly. "After the

revolution of 1917, the aristocrats didn't stop being aristocrats. They were still the same, even without a single kopeck in their pockets. In the concentration camps only two kinds of people retained their individuality – believers and aristocrats. And you know what the main difference between culture and aristocratism is? In the face of culture, boorishness surrenders, but in the face of aristocratism, it dies!”

“Natasha, I must concede you undisputed victory,” said Pribylovsky, breaking into a smile again. “You are an excellent rhetorician, you can defend your point of view magnificently and convince the other person with precise arguments and logic! Bravo! In fact, I never really had any doubts about you. But a little check never does any harm,” he said, twitching the grey bristles of his brush without the faintest sign of humour. “Do you like travelling?”

“I don't know yet. The only travelling I've done so far is from Khabarovsk to Moscow,” Natasha replied honestly.

“What do you think of the prospect of finding yourself in Paris in the near future? Venice? New York? London?”

“Are you joking?”

“Not at all.”

“Then explain.”

“Of course, you're an intelligent and perceptive girl, so I'll be absolutely frank with you. But for the present, all I can say is that there's a certain (small) number of men, who live in these wonderful cities – each in his own, naturally – and someone else is very interested in a certain event in their lives. You would have to meet each one of them and get him to tell you about this event himself, without suspecting anything unusual. You can find out in some other way too – the important thing is a documented result, which must be presented within an agreed time frame. Naturally, all expenses are paid, not to mention the fact that the fee for this straightforward job is highly competitive. And what's more, it's all perfectly safe.

“Adventures like this are every girl's secret, passionate desire, any girl would be only delighted to say yes but, as you can probably guess, Natasha, I intend to offer this job to you. You can ask questions, which I will try to answer within the limits of my competence. But you will only learn the details if you accept the job, and after you sign the necessary papers. You needn't bother to ask the question: ‘Why me?’ I've got to know you well enough to conclude that this job is well within your capabilities.” Vitaly Arkadievich stretched his bristly brush out into a smile.

“That was the very question I wanted to ask,” Natasha replied with a smile. “All right, then, the second question is: ‘How much?’ That smooth formulation – ‘highly competitive’ – is rather hard to enter into a calculator.”

“I like your approach, Natasha! ‘Highly competitive’ is, let's say, forty times your present salary. Work it out for yourself, if you're on such good terms with your calculator. Plus absolutely all expenses paid: daily outgoings, air tickets, hotels, clothes, certain additional accessories, if you require them. Don't forget that, either.”

“Very well. I'm counting,” Natasha replied. “I would receive forty times my salary in three

years and four months, assuming that my salary didn't increase. Which is unlikely. The management think well of me. So I would earn that sum in less time. And without taking any risks, getting involved in dubious ventures with incomprehensible goals, so all in all I'd be living a good healthy life, without causing anyone any harm. It's hard to say which is the better choice."

"You have a suspiciously analytical turn of mind for a philologist," Pribylovsky chuckled. "But there's one item you haven't added in, or rather deducted, in your reasoning. In the three years and a bit you'll be working in your firm, even with an increase in salary, you won't move a single jot closer to your dream. You simply won't have the time or opportunity for it. And you don't find princes just lying around on the fiancé market, like unwanted goods. I certainly don't want to hurt your feelings, Natasha. You're a wonderful girl. In the time I've had the pleasure of your company, I've become quite certain of that. And I won't try to hide the fact that deep in my heart I have even felt envious of our admirable Nikolai Nikolaevich. I encourage you to consider my proposal from a different angle. What do you actually have to lose? Temporarily, contact with your friends and relatives, owing to the absolute confidentiality required. And that's just about all. In every other way, you win! A fascinating journey, wonderful language practice, socialising with extraordinary people! And you don't have to kill, rob or deceive anyone. And entering into intimate relations with these men is not part of your job description, either. That's important for a girl, isn't it? But then that point is up to you. All you have to do is get inside their lives without causing any suspicion, build up a relationship to the level of trust by becoming a friend, lover, sister, mother – your own imagination can prompt you there – and extract information carefully and neatly. That's all. Creative work, with plenty of fresh air and lots of company, as they say. What could be better? Ah yes, and another thing! If you complete the assignment successfully, there's a bonus waiting for you. I'm sure you'll find it interesting or, rather, him! A French aristocrat – old vineyards, a castle with a park and a pond, the only son of parents whose grand-grand-whatevers were granted their title and land by one of the Louis' – I don't remember his number. A very interesting young man of 29, tall and handsome, a ready-made set of genes – every time he closes his eyes he dreams of getting married ..."

Natasha didn't say anything. The last phrase had brought on a loathsome feeling of injustice: so it was that simple – the great dream of her life lay in the hands of this affected humorist, he was dangling it in front of her eyes, tossing it up in the air and toying with it, teasing her, knowing she would do anything to achieve her heart's desire. How repulsive his certainty was! And he himself was repulsive – why hadn't she noticed that before?

"I understand your silence, Natasha. You like to take level-headed decisions. You don't have the usual female emotional craziness. Logic, reason, calculation and flexibility – those are your trump cards! I truly admire you! You certainly are worthy to live that fairytale about the hardworking, honest girl who marries a prince as honest and noble as herself! Ah, how wonderful! Speaking for myself, though, I prefer a different fairytale. Let me tell you it. 'Once upon a time there was a prince, and one day he asked a beautiful princess: "Will you marry me?" And she answered: "No"! And the prince lived a long and happy life, went hunting and fishing,

met his friends every day, drank a lot of beer, gorged himself stupid, played golf, threw his socks around the palace, screwed the servant girls, the neighbours' wives and his girlfriends and sang in the shower until he died of a heart attack'." Pribylovsky burst into loud laughter, and Natasha gulped down the salty lump that had risen in her throat.

The telephone rang, jerking her out of her reminiscences. She recognised Pribylovsky immediately from that American "hello". And with that recognition, a note of anxiety and alarm crept into her mood.

"Greetings," he added, as if "hello" required special translation. "Well, how's our project coming along? Are you in Moscow?"

"Yes, I'm back. Everything's fine. Did you get my e-mail, Vitaly Arkadievich?"

"Yes, yes. I saw it. Good, very good. Actually, that's what I'm calling about. I have some information. In a couple of days, on the fifteenth, your Italian is flying back home from Munich with Lufthansa, via Moscow. I'll send the flight number and precise details to your e-mail address. I've reserved a business class seat for you, just in case. And the second thing – the Yank is going to Aspen for the New Year. I've booked a deluxe double at the St Regis Resort Aspen Hotel. It's usual to book early there. Well, you make what you like of it all, it's just for your information. That's all, be in touch. I'll be waiting for news."

"Yes, I'll be in touch ..." Natasha replied, but the line was already dead.

The question of what would be on page 58 of the diary had answered itself. And so, mission number three – Giuseppe Luciano. In a couple of days he would be in Venice. Two days to prepare to meet a man who was like thousands of others. She examined the photograph again – the typical Italian man with a friendly arm round the shoulders of the typical Italian woman – and re-read the dossier. The owner of a chain of coffee houses, an active interest in modern art, married ... She would dye her hair blonde – that was a sure-fire way to catch the eye of a dark, temperamental southerner – and take a job as a waitress in one of his establishments. And then get her bearings on the ground. Well, now at least she had some kind of plan. Forward!

The Boeing hung in the bright-blue sky, as if was dangling on strings over clumps of white cotton wool. If not for the rumble of the turbines, the illusion would have been complete that the aeroplane and all its passengers were puppets in a children's TV show about travel. One detail that matched the image perfectly was the swarthy, balding head by the window in the second row of business class. It kept drooping chestwards, falling into sleep, then jerking back up again, as if a clumsy puppeteer was tugging on its strings. The owner of the head, a skinny man in jeans and a pink shirt with a design of small flowers, had been carefully examining something in his laptop for about fifteen minutes. Then he started nodding off, and eventually he fell completely asleep with his mouth open and his laptop still on the table top. The blonde with her hair tied back in a ponytail, wearing a large pair of dark glasses and sports clothes, couldn't see the screen of his computer. She was sitting four rows away from him, on the other side of the cabin. All she could see was the nodding head with the straight, regular nose – that was probably where the string jerking it up was attached. *I need his laptop*, the girl thought, setting herself a goal. The smell of

airline food arriving on trolleys interrupted the sleepy progress of the show about travel. The passengers livened up. *Chicken, meat, fish, coffee, tea with lemon, tomato juice, apple juice, orange juice, vodka, cognac, wine ...* Everything started rustling and shifting about. The man jerked his head up one last time and opened his eyes, woken by the need to make a choice. He closed his laptop, put it away and started on his food. His movements were remarkably graceful. Not many people could manage a plastic knife and fork with such elegance. When he finished his meal, the man “lowered his chair to the reclining position” and closed his eyes again. His head didn’t jerk about anymore – the puppeteer must have got the hang of his strings. Half an hour later, the man straightened up in his chair and turned his head left and right, stretching his stiff neck. Then he got up, straightened his clothes and went to the forward section of the plane, where the toilets were located. The blonde immediately jumped up off her seat and followed him.

“Excuse me, do you speak English?” she asked the contented-looking man in the pink shirt as he emerged from the cubicle, rubbing his hands together.

“Yes, of course,” he said, stopping and glancing at the female stranger with a placid, polite expression in his freshly-brewed-coffee eyes.

“Could you help me, please?”

“What’s the problem, Signora?”

“You see, I work as a PA for the director of a consulting company, and I’m on my way to meet a client. I have important information about him that I need to look through. But my laptop’s battery has gone flat. Completely! It just went dead ... How did I let that happen? I happened to see you working on your laptop, and then put it away. And I thought perhaps, while you don’t need it, you might let me use it – if it’s not too impertinent of me to ask, of course. I absolutely desperate ... I only need fifteen minutes, at the most. I can do it right beside you, if you’re worried ... I’m sorry ...” The girl lowered her eyes behind the large glasses that made her look like a blind, apologetic dragonfly, and smiled in embarrassment.

“Oh really, that’s fine! Take it, of course. And I’m not worried about anything. I’m not in the habit of storing my business affairs in such insecure places. I’ll just turn it on, there’s a password.”

“Oh, you’ve saved my life! It’s so nice to meet a real gentleman up in the air!” the girl said, delighted.

“What’s your name?” the man asked, glancing condescendingly at the girl’s light hair – well, she was a blonde, what could you expect? And either this condescending thought or the reflection of her light hair set a white espresso froth dancing in his coffee-coloured eyes.

It can’t be Natasha, the girl thought. In Europe Natasha has a bad reputation. Let’s make it something Polish. To an Italian the entire population of the Warsaw Pact all look the same, the way Chinese look to us.

“I’m Irena Polonskaya, from Gdansk. That’s in Poland,” she replied with a smile.

“Pleased to meet you. Very pleased. I’m Giuseppe Luciano from Venice. That’s in Italy.” He blinked away the foam, perplexed and uncertain what else to say, and instead of continuing

the conversation, he went to his seat to get the laptop.

The girl down settled down in her seat with her booty and looked at her watch. She had to give the laptop back in exactly fifteen minutes, in order to avoid provoking an awkward situation for her persona as a dumb blonde. The contents of the Italian's laptop surprised her. There were only three folders – “Performance Pieces”, “Installations” and “Nina”. The first two were subdivided into several folders with files containing long lists of names, titles and texts in Italian. There was a separate folder entitled “Video”, in which figures that were half-people, half-puppets came to life, illuminated by a strange, dead light. They moved, smiled, spoke without making any sound, and it all seemed totally pointless. Natasha didn't have much time, and she didn't wander any deeper into these tangled thickets. The folder “Nina” contained photos. A lot of photos. The first one that opened showed Luciano beside the woman from the photo in the dossier. He and the pretty lady with a shock of black, curly hair, looking too thin to be a typical Italian woman, were sitting at a large table in flourishing garden, in the company of an elderly couple. All four of them were smiling. The air in the photo seemed to be drunk on the sunshine, the aromas of ripe fruit and the cosy sense of family. In another photo the two of them were alone on a gleaming-white yacht. A strong sea wind ruffling the woman's black hair, suntanned bodies, snowy white smiles, sunshine, happiness – but all of it too calm for a pair of lovers. The woman's face was in close up here, and Natasha noticed a faint light scar on her left cheekbone in the form of the letter V. If not for the suntan, nothing would have given it away. The photographs that followed showed the same people in various scenes from life – posing in front of world-famous landmarks, on holiday, in a large, brightly lit house, on old streets. The old couple showed up again several times. Natasha got the impression of a happy alliance, but not a husband and wife, with their faces displaying the conflicts and disappointments that were inevitable by their age, this was something more substantial ... *She's his sister!* Natasha realised with a sudden flash of insight. She looked through the photographs again more carefully, comparing the features of the elderly couple with those of the Italian man and his female friend, and found enough elements in common to convince her that her assumption was correct. There were a few videos too. In one of them Nina – which was pretty certainly her name – was walking along the seashore, barefoot and smiling. A light coloured hat, a broad “country-style” skirt dancing in the wind, and a strange way of turning in her foot as she walked, as if she was slightly pigeon-toed ...

The time was up. Irena Polonskaya returned the laptop to its owner with apologetic gratitude, only to disappear from his life forever. But the fact that the Italian's relationship with his sister went beyond mere family ties, and she meant something special in his life, and the idea that the “performances and installations” were reflection of his own unusual psyche, were already fixed in Natasha Sitnikova's mind, along with many other things that could well prove useful

The Italian sky was smiling. It was the smile of an old man who was once great and ruled the world, but is now a demented imbecile. He can't even remember who constructed these brilliant works of architecture and painted these great pictures, he simply gazes at the ruins of his former grandeur through this bright, tearful smile ... And the sun, bleached to a state of total indifference, couldn't care less who was great and who was wretched, it shone on all alike – the young olive trees and the shamefaced ruins.

“Bongiorno, signora! What would you like to order?” said the delightful young Italian woman with a badge that said “Sonia” on her white starched apron, running up to the table at which the new client had just taken a seat. The client had thick black wavy hair, light-brown eyes, delicate facial features and a faint scar on her left cheekbone. She didn't look like a local, they hadn't seen her here before.

“Bongiorno! I'm afraid I can't speak Italian yet,” she answered in English. *“But I've simply fallen in love with your country! And I've heard a lot about the special coffee that's only served in your establishment. I don't even know what I want to order. The menu only confused me ... I'd like to try everything!”* the young woman said with a sincere, slightly embarrassed smile.

“I understand! We have so many types of coffee that you have move in or work here if you want to try them all. We have Arabic style, Turkish style, Bavarian style, Warsaw style, Vienna style, Irish style, Java style, coffee with rum, with lemon juice, with cognac, with whipped cream, with milk, with mineral water, mocha coffee, iced coffee and mocha flip, Polish coffee, Czech coffee, French coffee and Italian coffee! Every coffee has its own kind of beans and it's brewed in its own special way. For instance, Italian coffee is brewed with milk, not water, and filtered in the cup, and the sugar is served separately. But to prepare French coffee they filter a strong brew, add just a tiny bit of salt, then pour it into the cups, adding a little cognac to each one. There are lots of subtle points to preparing coffee. Coffee is one of the oldest and the most modern of the arts! That's what our boss claims! And he's the best in the business!” The girl glowed with pride as she pronounced that last phrase.

“I'm simply astounded,” the client exclaimed. *“But is that possible? Is it possible to work here? I'd I really like that!”*

“Are you serious, signora? This is an unusual kind of coffeehouse. It's not a very big chain, although there are branches right across Italy, mostly in the north, but the service here is the best, and the standards demanded of the staff and the kitchen are very high, we've had a reputation as the best coffeehouse for ten years!” The waitress Sonia unwittingly shifted into a whisper, as if she was revealing a terrible secret. *“The boss himself comes here once a week to see how business is going and drink a cup of coffee. And he's one of the best cup-testers in Italy!”*

“He comes every week?” the client enquired, apparently greatly delighted by this news.

“Yes, every week, and always in person! A year ago something happened – they said his sister died – and he sent his manager then, but only for a few times!”

“Now I understand why you have such an impeccable reputation! If the boss and all the staff take that attitude to their work! I’d really like to be a member of your team! Can you give me any pointers on how to get a job here?”

“We have a personnel manager here, Gozzi, he decides. If you like, I’ll ask him, I think he was saying we need more waitresses or girls for the kitchen,” she replied.

“Oh, *grazie, grazie*, Sonia! My name’s Nina. I’m so pleased to meet you!” She held her hand out and smiled a warm, simple smile.

“Pleased to meet you,” the Italian girl replied, smiling in the same way.

“I’m sure you and I are going to be good friends!”

“Yes, I’d really like that ... But for a start I’ll bring you something that tastes very, very good and ask Gozzi about you. I hope you can try everything you want later! The staff get big discounts!” Sonia shouted as she went running off.

Natasha-Nina started work the very next day. A waitress who could speak three languages – English, French and Russian – was taken on without too much consideration. Those were the languages that most of the tourists spoke, and there had been more and more Russians recently. Apart from that, they were expecting the boss at the end of the week, and there was plenty of work for all the girls. Gozzi was very thin and very swarthy, as if he had fiery *ristretto* running through his veins, and his only interest in female beauty was as an inexpensive way of attracting clients. And she was a real beauty – those luxuriant black curls, thin and tall, with that faint scar on her left cheekbone – it even had a certain charm. Perhaps it was a mark left by the delights of love? And such a simple, uncomplicated name – Nina. That was what the boss’s sister was called, wasn’t it? That was another plus! If Giuseppe was against hiring more staff, the best thing would be to get rid of fat Sara.

The boss was expected on Sunday. Everybody was on their feet from five in the morning. Together with the others, Nina scrubbed, washed, moved tables and chairs, straightened tablecloths and set out fresh flowers on the tables. There was a lot of work to do. That week she hadn’t even taken a proper walk round the city. She went to work first thing in the morning and went back to the hotel late in the evening (20 minutes by train to Padua), and then in the morning it was off to work again. She only saw the light-blue sky of Venice, smiling in farewell at its own vanishing miracle, between the fantastic folds of the delicate cream-coloured curtains of the coffeehouse.

Lost in contemplation of the sky, Natasha-Nina didn’t notice the commotion that had started up in the main hall. Gozzi, as ungainly as a camel, together with the senior waitress, Phoebe – a plump, obliging woman – and several of the other girls, went running to the doors. Giuseppe Luciano appeared in jeans and his usual flowery shirt – an image of springtime in the Sahara – accompanied by a young man with a suit. He immediately started talking about something with Gozzi. From the smiles and the nods of agreement, it was easy to guess what the conversation was about.

“Nina! Come over here, please,” Natasha heard Gozzi’s voice say a few minutes after the

conversation started.

Now for the show! You're on, signora Nina! Natasha Siktnikova told herself, without moving from the spot. They would have approved of that perfect pause at the Moscow Arts Theatre. It was only after Phoebe repeated the request in a loud voice and the entire group, led by Luciano, turned their faces in Natasha's direction, that she started walking slowly across the hall. Seeing her own reflection in the window panes and the eyes of the girls, who were standing there absolutely still, she could easily have cast false modesty aside and simply admired herself: with the sleepy morning sunshine tangled in her shock of black, curly hair, which frisked and cavorted on her immaculately straight back at every graceful step, her wide "country-style" skirt – exactly like the one Nina had in the photo in the laptop – swaying round her shapely legs, the bright gleam in her light-brown eyes (the coloured contact lenses suited her very well). There was just that slightly pigeon-toed walk ... But even the effect of that was delightful, rather than repellent.

"Is your name really Nina?" asked Luciano, suddenly confused and forgetting to introduce himself.

"Yes. Does that bother you for some reason?" the girl replied in a concerned voice.

"No, no, it's a fine name ... Could we ever have ..."

"This is my first time in Italy."

"Yes, yes ... of course. It couldn't be ... And such a close resemblance ... Where did you say you came from?"

"You didn't ask me that yet," Nina said with a smile.

"Oh, didn't I?"

"I'm from Russia. I always dreamed of seeing Venice. But not from a bus, I wanted to touch it, take my time. And I just adore coffee! So I took a job working for you."

"Yes, yes, you can't see anything from a bus ... And coffee is an art ... Do you like art? Modern art, for instance?"

"I don't really understand a lot about it ..."

"Will you permit me to be your guide for today? Just don't say no! I implore you!"

Gozzi and Phoebe exchanged puzzled glances. It was a long time since they'd seen their boss in such a strange state. What was wrong with him? He was usually so dynamic, decisive, precise.

"Of course, I'd be delighted," the girl replied simply and turned her left cheekbone towards Luciano. He stared at the small scar on her face without speaking. There was a long, awkward pause.

"Pardon the tactless question, but where do you get that?" he finally managed to force out, keeping his eyes fixed on her left cheek.

"What exactly?"

"That ..." The Italian couldn't find the right words for what interested him so much. "There ... on your cheek ..."

"Ah ... the letter V? That's a mistake of my youth. Scarring used to be quite fashionable once – my first love was Victor," Natasha said, blushing.

“First love ...” Luciano repeated like a man in a trance, and stared intently at Natasha’s cheek again ... Then he pulled himself together with an effort of will, turned to Gozzi and instructed him in a tone that brooked no objections: “Replace her with someone, I need Nina today.”

“Okay, boss,” Gozzi replied with an inscrutable expression on his face.

21

In the street Luciano took her hand in his and raised it to his lips, but didn’t kiss it. He just held it close to his lips and squeezed the fingers gently, then let go.

“Nina, Nina ...” he repeated in a dull voice and fell silent. Then, as if he had just woken up, he told her: “Please don’t be frightened because I’ve dragged you away from your new job. I’ll explain. You see, you bear an incredible likeness to a certain person who was very dear to me ... And I have such an uncanny feeling – I realise logically that you’re not her, but it’s such a pleasure, such an intense pleasure, to see your astounding similarity ... her hair, and her eyes, and the little scar, and even the name ... I’d very much like to spend some time with you ... with her And then, somehow I can’t get rid of the feeling that we’ve already met ... I just can’t shake it off ... It’s positively mystical. Only don’t ask me about it, okay? Ask about anything else, anything you like. I’m entirely at your service!”

Natasha smiled understandingly. Even she hadn’t expected Nina’s image to produce such an impression on him and provoke such a strong reaction, it had been pure guesswork, improvisation. She had decided in the plane to gamble on the family feelings. After they landed at Marco Polo airport, which looked like a huge glass elephant, she had dropped into a beauty salon to have her hair dyed black and gently permed. Seeing how easily Nina had started to come to life again in her, she had bought the coloured contact lenses and the country-style skirt and applied a colourless tattoo transfer to her left cheekbone, bringing her image as Luciano’s sister as close to the original as possible. And it was only after making all these changes that she had found the coffeehouse she needed. She hit the bullseye by sheer luck. Or maybe it wasn’t just luck, and she was simply becoming a professional, the kind who are always distinguished by their subtle intuition? *Forty-two years old, a short, balding, slightly built man with regular facial features and a smouldering southern expression in his eyes ...* She recalled her first impression of him, written in the diary. How far she had moved on from that already ... She saw before her a different man – severe, temperamental, complex, multilayered, strange and deeply vulnerable, with eyes the colour of freshly brewed coffee ... The colour of his eyes was a unusually good match for the colour of time with which the streets, buildings, bridges and canals here were coloured. An exceptionally close harmony ... *He’s completely at my disposal? Excellent!* Thought Natasha, and asked a question that led away from the tricky subject of cloned relatives:

“Giuseppe, you’re regarded one of the best cup-testers in Italy ... Do you have to drink a lot of coffee for that?”

“A cup-tester? That’s not exactly the right term for me! I’m just a reasonably good

professional at organising this type of business. Cup-testers are highly specialised professionals who can perform three functions. Firstly, recognise the subtle variations of flavour in different coffee beans, for instance distinguish between the taste and aroma of beans grown in a plantation in Brazil, Columbia or Puerto Rico. Secondly, distinguish between the 'pure' sorts of coffee, that is, the sorts that consist of one type of coffee bean. This is very complicated, it requires a lot of training and tastings, and you have to give up smoking and using spices. A cup-taster has to take good care of his sense of smell and his taste receptors. You know, some sorts of coffee can contain dozens of different types of beans! And thirdly, he has to know how to blend the different kinds, for instance to avoid mixing sorts with opposed or identical characteristics, which shouldn't be combined in a single sort of coffee. And there are thousands of sorts of coffee. There are blended sorts and unblended sorts. The blends are mixtures of ground beans which can be from various species of coffee trees and be collected in different plantations on different continents, at different times of the year. And it all affects the taste of the coffee! It's even affected by the plantation's height above sea level, the size of the beans, the way they're processed, how strongly they're roasted and lots of other things as well. Combining coffee beans together to produce a blend is a very painstaking process. You have to know how to emphasise the positive points of different coffee beans and conceal their defects. The formulations are extremely complicated, and the process is like writing music or painting pictures ... So, to become a genuine cup-taster, it's not enough just to drink a lot of coffee ... And I'm merely a modest lover of this divine beverage. Have I answered your question, Nina?"

"The first one, yes!" his curious listener said with a nod.

"Okay, Nina, let's have the second!" Luciano's face lit up with a childish kind of joy, like some little boy who had been invited to join in a word game, and now his turn has come.

"Which coffee is the best of all?"

"There's no such thing, just as there's no such thing as the best musical composition of all, or the best sculpture ..."

"Then which coffee do you prefer?"

"I'm not picky ... I'd go for a cup of good espresso and a sip of cognac. But I've tried all sorts, of course, even Kopi Luwak at 160 dollars a pound."

"Why is it so expensive?"

"It's an Indonesian export. The coffee beans are naturally processed in the stomachs of small, wild tree-dwelling creatures in the tropical jungles of the islands of Java and Sumatra. These creatures love the ripe fruits of the coffee trees, but the beans pass through their bodies virtually undigested. However, the taste of the beans is improved as a result of this processing. The local inhabitants scour the jungle for their droppings and hand them in. No more than 50 kilograms are collected in a year. That's why the price is so high.

"And the taste? What kind of coffee does it produce?"

"I thought it tasted like burnt sugar. But the price certainly improves its aroma ... I can treat you to this extravagant drink if you like, Nina. You can find any kind of coffee in Italy. I believe Italy is the coffee capital of the world. We have a genuine cult of coffee and coffeehouses here,

that's why you find them on every corner. Italian coffeehouses are usually family businesses, handed down from generation to generation. It's the usual thing here to value every client and respect the old rituals. In every Italian coffeehouse the morning starts with tuning up the coffee machine. And the owner, who is usually also the barista, will never pour a visitor even an ordinary traditional espresso until he's convinced that's its quality matches the standards established in coffeehouse. So even in coffeehouses next door to each other, you won't find two coffees that taste the same. And what's more, in Italy there are some establishments in which brewing and serving coffee has been elevated to the status of an art. At the MAX BAR coffeehouse in Binasco, for instance, sixteen kilometres from Milan, they serve their cappuccino as a designer drink. Every time the barista creates a masterpiece of latte-art, drawing pictures on the milky foam with food colours ...”

As they wandered through the whimsical streets of Venice, Natasha delighted in the pictures that appeared round every bend, but without forgetting to make sure that her pigeon-toed walk looked natural, while Giuseppe held her hand, and talked without stopping for a single moment, which betrayed the depth of his agitation. *I really must have turned out very much like his sister, he simply can't get over the likeness*, thought Natasha, but she waited for the right moment and asked:

“Giuseppe, where are you taking me?”

“Nina, you dreamed of seeing the real Venice, of touching it, without having to hurry, didn't you? Did I understand you correctly? Well, now I'm dragging you along on a pedestrian excursion through the city that I love. A city of freedom, with the sweet aroma of decay ... Venice is a special world, a mosaic assembled out of 118 islands and 160 canals, linked together by bridges and arches. It's not large at all, you can walk from one end of it to the other in 40 or fifty minutes without hurrying. There are no cars here, only pedestrians, and things that float – like thousands of years ago ... It's a special place, time comes here to die ...”

Luciano spoke so poetically and with such love, that Natasha couldn't help envying him. She envied him because he could speak in that way about his home place, about the city he lived in ... She felt bitter as she recalled Workers' Street in Khabarovks, and the houses standing higgledy-piggledy, just like all the other streets in her home town ...

“Now we'll come out onto the legendary Piazza San Marco with the cathedral and the Doge's palace,” said Luciano, continuing his excursion commentary. “If you visit Venice, you have to go there! A certain traveller once said: ‘Anyone who can stand on the Piazza San Marco and not feel his heart beating faster ... doesn't have a heart at all ...’ ”

Natasha stood there on the enclosed rectangle of the piazza, surrounded by buildings of incredible beauty, feeling the touch of the Italian's rough, dry hand and baffled by her own inexplicable feelings. She wanted to stand in front of the San Marco cathedral forever, turning slowly clockwise or anti-clockwise – which way didn't matter here – and just look and look. Even the most eloquent exclamations of delight seemed insipid and inadequate ...

“Strange,” was the only word she uttered after a long silence.

“What's strange, Nina?”

“There are so many pigeons here, and crowds of tourists feeding them, but the square is clean ... I can imagine what it would be like in Moscow ... Some of our statues are monuments to pigeon droppings, not writers and poets ...”

“They must have an agreement with the ministry of tourism,” Luciano laughed. “The pigeons don’t crap on the sights and the tourists, and the tourists don’t crap on the ministry.”

Natasha smiled. This “typical Italian” knew how to win someone over.

They walked along the embankment towards the Lido, and took a stroll in a cosy little park, where there were no tourists.

“Venice is very beautiful, especially the parts the tourists don’t reach,” said Luciano, resuming his narrative. “Do you see that little courtyard over there, Nina?”

At first glance the little courtyard with a children’s playground, two or three trees and traditional mums with their children, didn’t look anything special. It was simply surprising to see a piece of ordinary life and living trees in this stone tourist trap.

“When we were little, my sister and I loved to wander through Venice and dream about the future,” Giuseppe told her. “We used to buy bread, ham and olives in a shop and eat them on a bench somewhere ... So unbelievably delicious! The most surprising thing is that this city hasn’t changed at all since those days ... Despite all the traffic lights and road signs that have been put up on the canals, at the crossroads the gondoliers still yell loud enough to be heard a block away – to avoid running into a motor boat. When they can’t manage the steering, they still push off from the wall with their foot in the same way. There are the same crowds of tourists and the same sweet smell of decay ... Venice reminds me of one huge, brilliant performance piece ...”

“What’s a performance piece?” asked Natasha, immediately recalling the title of one of the folders in the Italian’s laptop. So far, she hadn’t had the slightest inkling of how to move on to the subject of the fourteenth of May, she’d just let herself relax and go with the flow. Especially since in Venice that was so absolutely the right thing to do.

“You can find out exactly what it is today, at a small theatre not far from my house. There’ll be a showing of a performance piece I bought at the last Venice Biennale. All questions later, okay?” Luciano replied, nodding at a classic red Ferrari that was parked nearby and nudging Natasha towards it. “Right, now we’re here. It’s a pity we have to speak English,” he said after they got into the car. In Italian we have two different pronouns for ‘you’ in the singular – *Tu* and *Lei*. I’d really like to call you ‘Tu’ ...”

“We have them in Russian as well,” Natasha replied.

He glanced at her and quickly turned away, as if he’d seen something that made him feel uneasy.

The term “small theatre” proved to be a blatant exaggeration. It was private house with a rather spacious drawing room, in which a cold buffet had been set on small tables standing round the walls, while the centre was occupied by a large oval table with place settings for twelve. The

guests, of whom there were several dozen, didn't rush to occupy the seats. They just trolled about, making conversation in low voices. Thanks to Natasha's keen ear for languages, she could already make out a little bit of spoken Italian. Luciano smiled and people greeted him, slapping him on the shoulder, shaking his hand and casting friendly glances at Natasha, but he obviously had no intention of introducing her to the assembled company. She moved off to one side and occupied a convenient observation point besides a large painting in a massive frame. The picture was either a portrait or a still life: a bluish female nude who looked like a wind-cured ham with two tufts of dark hair, reclining on a tall couch. Seen through the glass of Martini in Natasha's hand, her hip acquired a golden, softly smoked tinge. Natasha felt slightly nauseous. *This is art too*, she thought, *it distracts you from the business of the world and forces you to reflect on spiritual matters*. She no longer regretted not having had time to change into a dress more suitable for the occasion – her image of a village beauty with curly black hair in a wide skirt fitted into the local ambience perfectly.

Eventually, when all the unnecessary lights had been turned out, leaving only the chandelier above the large oval table, Luciano came back to his abandoned companion.

"I'm sorry, I hope you weren't bored. Now watch carefully!" he whispered in her ear, and his hand slid over her naked elbow.

"I don't speak Italian," Natasha said, bemused.

"You'll understand everything."

People walked into the room. Men and women, six couples. They sat down as couples at the oval table. Once they were in their places, they started eating the spaghetti that was on their plates. The men and women wound this favourite Italian dish on their forks and ate without saying a word. This went on for several minutes. Suddenly one of the women abandoned her plate, pushed back her chair, got up from the table and walked out of the room. All the others carried on eating. A minute later, a man who was not her partner at the table followed her out. All the others looked puzzled and started glancing at each other, then at the clock, but no one actually said anything. This went on for another seven minutes, for as long as the two runaways were absent from their places. When the seven minutes were up they reappeared together – slightly dishevelled, adjusting their clothing here and there, and he sat imperturbably in her place, and she sat in his, as if they had been sitting there from the beginning. They sat in each other's places without saying a word and carried on eating spaghetti as if everything was perfectly normal – he used her plate, and she used his. It looked as if they didn't even realise they'd swapped places and were eating from the wrong plates. They behaved as if they had never gone out and nothing at all had happened.

And that was all ... The show was over ... applause ...

The actors at the table remained seated in their places. A few minutes later the show resumed, following the same script, but nobody took any more notice of them. The guests Luciano had treated to his new spectacle came up to him, greeted him with ebullient emotions, congratulated him ... or was that a continuation of the performance?

The Italian spent another half hour or so accepting plaudits from the gathering until finally he took Natasha by the arm and led her out of the improvised “small theatre”.

“Well, how did you like it?” he asked, bursting with pride.

“Impressive,” Natasha replied with evasive civility. “But what has it got to with you? Why were they congratulating you?”

“Because I’ve bought the rights to the script.”

“I didn’t really understand where the show ended.”

“It’s not a show, it’s a performance piece. And there isn’t any end as such.”

“What happens now?”

“The actors will sit there and carry on eating. Then the same thing will happen, over and over again.”

“For how long?”

“For as long as there’s an audience. Just like in real life.”

“Do these people really not know each other, according to the script?” Natasha carried on interrogating him.

“That’s hard to tell from the context, but it’s not the most important thing ... the point is that when those two leave, the others start speculating on why they’re gone for so long and what they could be doing. Everyone’s terribly curious, but no one asks any questions out loud, they’re all well-bred people, after all! Everything happens on the level of an exchange of thoughts and glances. The most primitive idea is that they’re having sex. But that’s too banal, no one even dares presume to sink to that level. It’s too barbaric to just go away to have sex in a situation like that! It’s all much deeper and more interesting! People have become so absorbed in the search for meaning that elementary explanations don’t satisfy anyone any longer. That’s the essential point of the performance, Nina.”

“I think I understand ...”

“I can find another couple of intriguing puzzles for you. They’re at my place. Shall we go? It’s just close by,” Luciano said with a laugh, as if it wasn’t an invitation, but a challenge.

“Yes, let’s,” said Natasha, accepting, and she recalled a phrase from a film she knew backwards and inside out, *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* – “The evening’s getting a bit less miserable”. The Russian words that sprang up in her head in the middle of a conversation in English with an Italian flavour looked like flapjack in a plate of spaghetti. Delighted with this unexpected greeting from the homeland, Natasha got into the Ferrari. Luciano slammed the car door behind her, got into the driver’s seat and looked closely at the V-shaped tattoo on her left cheekbone. She pushed her black hair back with a graceful gesture and smiled at him – “look as much as you like ...”

They were all alone in the huge house. A servant – a tall woman with very swarthy skin – scuttled past them inconspicuously and Natasha clearly saw Luciano gesture for her to leave. He showed his guest round the house, telling her which things had been acquired where, taking her by the hand or the elbow, or running his hand down her back to her waist, but every time Natasha adroitly slithered out of his embraces. Both of the puzzles her host had promised were in

his bedroom. They were two installations. The first consisted of a phrase projected onto the wall opposite the huge bed: "Happiness is expensive". The second took the form of a large cardboard box, and the action began when you glanced inside it – four men beating and hammering on the sides of the box and waving their arms about, trying to attract attention so they could be rescued. They looked perfectly lifelike, but it was really a holographic film, and the 3D effect was only visible when you looked down from above. *What can a man who keeps a box with men begging for help inside it in his bedroom, and reads "happiness is expensive" on the wall every morning, have inside his head?* Natasha thought and asked:

"I still don't understand what the difference is between an installation and a performance."

Luciano fixed his eyes on her, as if he was pondering what lay behind this simple-minded curiosity, but after pausing for a few seconds, he replied:

"There are actually more similarities between them than differences. Installations assimilate the viewer. It's a young genre, a monster that absorbs all the old-fashioned classical genres. It's three-dimensional, it's not an object, but space organised according to the artist's requirements. And performance is just that, a brief series of actions presented in public by one or more performers. The basic thing that a performance and an installation have in common is that they're conceptual – in both of them ordinary things and objects acquire new, unexpected meanings in unusual combinations, or when they're used in non-traditional ways."

"What's the point?"

"The point is that the work is liberated from any interpretation by the artist and the products of his creative endeavours. The only thing the viewer can do is encounter his own sensations and impressions, which might have nothing at all in common with the internal world of the artist. The viewer loses vantage point for understanding the author, but acquires a different one – for understanding himself better."

"What attracts you about this kind of art?" asked Natasha. "Why not painting or something else, more traditional?"

"The fact that traditional art is frames. More or less precisely defined. But performance art proclaims freedom. In everything. Freedom from professionalism, freedom from virtuality, freedom from the control of thought, freedom from conceptual frameworks. The viewer has the right to see what *he* sees, not what the author wants him to see. To encounter himself. That's the most interesting thing for every human being. And at times the most frightening ...

"And what do you personally, as a viewer, see in a cardboard box with live people in it, trying to escape?" Natasha enquired.

"Me personally? I see death ... Its inevitability ... The human world is one huge performance. The box is simply a model on a reduced scale. Our freedom is the freedom to die within the confines of time and the fragile cardboard walls of our lives. The only freedom."

Luciano turned away from her. The suntan of his incipient bald patch was covered in perspiration. The little beads of sweat glittered in the soft light of the sitting room that was decorated in coffee and beige tones. It disrupted the harmony. The only thing it seemed right to do in this creamy coffee-coloured space was discuss art in a leisurely manner, but certainly not

cry or sweat. *If you enlarged his bald patch, it would be an installation: a deposit of large diamonds on the weather-beaten spherical surface of an alien planet. Nobody would ever even imagine that beneath the sparse vegetation of this knobbly surface with its sparse vegetation, there lies a memory suffering torment. How much depends on the angle of vision,* thought Natasha

Luciano didn't say anything.

"Do you still love her?" she asked, standing very, very close behind him.

The Italian slowly turned round to face her, and they were "within the confines of each other's lives" as he would probably have put it. He gave off an acrid, rather harsh smell, like some overripe tropical fruit. His coffee-coloured eyes gazed at her unblinkingly. The coffee in them was cooling rapidly ...

"Yes, you know, I definitely have seen you somewhere before, Nina ..." he said slowly, answering his own thoughts as if they were a question. "That dimple on your neck, that slight slavonic accent, that skin tone, that ..."

"The fourteenth of May, on Ladhu Island. I think I saw you there too, Natasha blurted out almost without thinking, and instantly turned cold. It was a total and absolute bluff. She had to come up with some cover story that allowed for the possibility of them having met, before he remembered Irena Polonskaya and her penchant for studying other people's laptops ...

"Ladhu?" The geographical name seemed to swing the gondola of his thoughts round sharply, just as it was about to dock in the recognition of an appearance that had been forgotten. "Yes, I was there ... I went to unwind – sunshine, the ocean, beautiful girls ... And there was that crazy Dina ... Well, never mind about her ... So? Did we see each other there?" the Italian asked suspiciously."

"Have you got any photographs from then? Maybe I'll find myself in a swimsuit, pareu and hat somewhere in the background? I even think you might have asked me to rub sunscreen on your back, and I flirted with you. Remember? Anyway, do you have any photos at home?" Inspired by her easy victory, Natasha showered him with questions, struggling to hold back her emotions. "A family album, for instance? I'd like to see what you looked like as a little boy. You know, I can't shake off the feeling that we've not just seen other before, that we're related ... close ... Only don't laugh ..."

"No, I didn't take any photos on the island ..." Luciano's voice sounded as if he had sunk even deeper into himself. "And I don't feel like laughing any longer ..." he said seriously. "I do have an album, though ..."

23

"This is my sister, Nina," said Luciano, opening the album in the middle.

"Oh, my God! That's impossible!" Natasha exclaimed. "We're just like twins!" She covered her face with her hands and froze in amazement. It looked very natural.

"She was skilled," Giuseppe said, and his voice trembled.

“I can understand you better than you think,” she answered

“What are you talking about?”

“I lost someone close to me too. I was four years old when my father died. I can barely even remember what he was like, he didn’t have enough time to become ‘someone’ for me. But when I grew up I felt I remembered him subconsciously. I started recognising him in various different men – his voice, his smell, his eyes, his walk, the way he touched his chin when he was worried, or hunched over when he was listening to something carefully, or drank tea without taking the spoon out of the cup. I don’t understand where I have this memory from, but I can always recognise his features in others. Like in you ... You’re very much like him, more on the inside than on the outside, with you I feel like the little girl I used to be ...”

What Natasha had said was true. Or almost true. Of all the men she had met so far, Zhurov was the one her childhood memory told her was most like her father. She had transferred these feelings to the Italian out of elementary concern for her own safety: it wasn’t part of her plans to test out the perversions of his dark subconscious on herself. It was already clear that the relationship between him and his sister was “different” – the photos in the laptop and the albums demonstrated that. To stay in an empty house with him would be quite incredibly foolish. She had decided to transform her Italian friend’s dubious fraternal feelings into paternal ones – rather more predictable when it came to the undesirability of sex spiced with incense. And in any case, mission number three had been completed, and all she had to do now was wait until the morning. It would be nice to get a good night’s sleep ...

Luciano sat beside her in silence, examining the pattern on the magnificent carpet under his feet, as if it was the first time he’d ever seen it.

“I’d like to be your father,” he said after a pause.

“Why?” Natasha asked in surprise

“I don’t know ... There’s something about you that I’d like to see in my grown-up daughter ...”

“What?”

“I can’t express it precisely ... Complexity ... depth ... substance...”

“I’ll be your grown-up daughter for tonight ... Would you like that?”

He didn’t answer. Then he asked:

“Tell, me, Nina, if your father was sitting beside you now, what would you want most of all?”

Natasha felt a lump rising in her throat.

“I’d like to ask him something ...” she said eventually.

“What?”

“What a woman should do to make a man want to teach her like a queen ...”

“An unexpected question coming from you ... But I understand what you mean. And I think I know the answer ... And I would definitely have tried to explain that to my daughter ...”

“She’s listening very carefully,” Natasha said with a smile.

“Okay,” the Italian said thoughtfully, “can I hold your hand?”

Natasha held out her open hand and Giuseppe put it on top of his, then laid his other hand over it and intertwined their fingers slightly. The composition formed by their fingers was a ready-made installation – “Lobster Love”. The female lobster was frozen in anticipation, with her delicate, manicured legs parted, and the male lobster was wiggling his dark, hairy claw-fingers on top of her ... And Luciano started speaking to her, as if he was lulling his foolish teenage daughter to sleep.

After a while Luciano fell silent, as if he’d started thinking about something, then he started talking again, as if he was on autopilot. Then he fell silent again.

“What’s wrong? What are you thinking about right now?” asked Natasha.

“Come on, I want to show you something.” He got up, without letting go of Natasha’s hand, and pulled her after him.

They went up the spiral staircase with warm wooden banisters – the same colour as coffee that isn’t fully brewed yet. Upstairs was the same bedroom where Natasha had already been, with the words on the wall and the magical box, but Luciano lead her past it, to a different door. He stopped in front of it.

“What’s in here? You didn’t show me this room,” said Natasha, surprised.

“I’ve never shown it to anyone,” he answered. “Go in ...”

Her nose caught a strong smell of coffee. It was so dense, she could have drunk it, the fantastic aroma filled her throat, lungs and thoughts, saturating them completely. The light came on, and Natasha saw what – or rather who – the smell was coming from. Standing in the middle of the room was an immense buffalo, two metres high. Fur standing erect on its withers, two twisted horns, ready to spike anyone who came too close, flared leather nostrils, chocolate-brown skeins of hair on its flanks, merging without no perceptible boundaries of light or colour into a mound of coffee beans. The buffalo seemed to be ploughing a coffee field, with its head lowered to take the strain, floundering up to its flanks in that fragrant mound.

“What is it?” asked Natasha, startled and amazed.

“An installation by the artist Paola Pivi. ‘Buffalo in Coffee’.”

“Does it symbolise you?” she surmised.

“Don’t look for meaning where there is none,” Luciano answered. “At the present moment, this is simply an illustration of our little talk ... A certain queen used to make love on the back of this buffalo.”

Natasha imagined a naked woman lying on her stomach on the animal’s back and a man embracing her from behind. One of his hands was pressing her waist against the buffalo’s powerful rump, and the other was sunk into its coffee-coloured wool ... The magnificent monster swayed from side to side, and Natasha seemed to see the beast padding along the seashore with a free, melancholy stride, with the setting sun sinking behind its back ...

She could almost feel the buffalo’s coarse fur on her breasts ... She would have wanted to do that too ... with a man she loved ... But love had not arrived yet ... and there was still so long to wait ...

Luciano locked the door of the strange room and turned towards Natasha. She looked away

and blushed, feeling as if her thoughts could be read in her face.

“Don’t scorn modesty and shyness, if you have them.” he said, running his hand tenderly over her cheek.

“But are modesty and shyness really words for a queen?”

“Men choose bitches,” said Luciano, as if he hadn’t heard the question. ! Do you understand? Never let up, never indulge men! No one else will ever tell you that! And it doesn’t matter how you dress – men don’t look at that, it’s enough to look simple and stylish, but never provocative. The important thing is always to behave like a total bitch! An angel with an absolute devil inside her. A good girl with the most perverted slut imaginable inside her! That’s what makes men woo you, run after you, pine for you and turn a blind eye to everything! Yes, yes, yes, and again yes! Men love bitches. Bitches who don’t set their love for a man above their love for themselves, who are not prepared to sacrificed themselves for a man’s sake, but bitches who have soul!” the Italian exclaimed in the excitement brought on by either his role as a parent or his memories ...

“But what if I’m not naturally a bitch?” Natasha asked in a timid little girl’s voice.

“You’re all bitches with someone. You just have to make that ‘someone’ everyone!”

24

Natasha’s legs were numb ... She’d been sitting cross-legged on her huge pink bed for more than an hour, pouring out into the “Diary of V.S.” the story of what happened with the Italian. She wanted to fit everything into the little squares of its pages – Irena Polonskaya and the waitress Sonia, the Doge’s Palace and the gondoliers, pushing off from the walls with their feet at corners, the coffee maturing in the stomachs of small tree-dwelling creatures and the performance piece with the mysterious disappearance of the spaghetti-eaters, the empty house with the words “happiness is expensive” on the wall on the bedroom and its owner with eyes the colour of freshly brewed coffee, playing the role of her father in a one-off performance. And the smells, the sounds, the thoughts ...

On page 66 there were only a few storeys of lattice-work cells were still uninhabited by her rounded letters. The final phrase of her last dialogue with Luciano: “You’re all bitches with someone. You just have to make that ‘someone’ everyone!” finally fitted into place, and Natasha lifted her tired hand off the paper.

Now she had to inform Vitalii Arkadievich of the outcome of her third mission, and this time she certainly had something definite to report – on the 14th of May, Giuseppe Luciano was on the island of L. She could have phoned Pribylovsky ages ago, or sent an e-mail, but she had been putting it off. There was a strange, heavy feeling in her chest that held her back, resisted. She invented reasons for not doing it. She decided that first she would write everything down in detail, and then afterwards ... And now that “afterwards” had arrived. And what if she didn’t report anything at all? At least for the time being? There was still the fourth mark, wasn’t there, the American? Nobody knew what would emerge there, that made the temporary delay easier.

Yes. That's what she would do ... Report later ... Not right now ... She pictured Luciano – such an untypical “typical Italian” ... His eyes, that could assume the subtle shades of every stage in the formulation and preparation of coffee. His swarthy, balding head, stuffed with knowledge from every sphere of his interests: it was all so mannish – his morbid love for his sister, his acerbic smell ... She suddenly wanted to talk to him again ... No, probably not to him ... To some non-existent, ideal man ... Maybe that proverbial Prince out of the fairytale? She suddenly wanted simply to climb into that fairytale, as easily as when she was little, when all she had to do was open the book *Stories from around the World* or something similar ... Fairytales for children were full of magical characters, so that the children wouldn't confuse the story with real life. And only grown-ups knew that life included the complete range of good and evil. Evil was better represented – the wide range from devils and witches to the demon drink and talking mushrooms was enough to satisfy the most captious of critics. Good lagged well behind in both management and logistics. A fairytale for grown-ups was probably not so much characters as the magical situations in which ordinary people could find themselves in ordinary life, and a fairytale for a little girl who had grown up was the man she had invented for such situations ... Absolutely real in every respect ...

Natasha turned the page, leaving those few lattice-work storeys of square cells uninhabited – after all, a fairytale had to start on a brand new page! She numbered the next sheet of paper “67” and wrote: “My darling ...” She didn't know what her darling's name was yet ... It might as well be Giuseppe ...

My darling Giuseppe ...

Today the insolent, torrential rain has been hammering away since the morning ... not exactly the string section, more like relentless keyboards.

I'm sitting in front of the fireplace ...

A white china cup of coffee that has already gone cold. I pour milk into it and that gives it a pleasant, acerbic taste ... The taste ... how many colours there are in that simple phrase for me today ... coffee with the Venetian sea breeze ... with a lingering melody ... with the unique voice of the man I love ...

Now I gaze at the fire and imagine us strolling along the seafront somewhere in Normandy: in those parts in November there's a special kind of voluptuousness in the depth and breadth of the space ... Images balancing temerarily on the borderline between fatalism and objective reality ...

A few minutes further along the seashore, the coolness of your hands transmits the mood ... Listening to the quietness, I recall the taste of flower tea from Claude Monet's gardens in the village of Giverny, which we eventually turned into on the way to ... No, I don't think that's right ... it's this – the taste has already mingled with the aroma of calvados, the one we tried in Rouen a few hours earlier, wandering through the ruins of a 10th century castle, like genuine archaeologists ...

At times the waves fall quiet, timidly caressing and repeating each other, the mist dissolves

into them before it can even feel that impetuous touch ... All that's left is the evanescent scent of salt and seaweed on your skin ... you want to feel it with your lips ... The contact of hands and eyes ... That's the only thing my memory can preserve from today ... There's nothing sweeter than to seeing your eyes turn black for an instant and smile ... But what's this? A piece of paper ... After its lingering dance of love, a weary, languid wave has cast it up on the shore ... It looks like a page from a calendar, the letters have been blurred by the salt water ... But the date can still be read. It looks like 14th May ...

Our feelings chime with the waves, moved by the ocean ... That rare case when, like them, we take no decisions ...

Now, how did she manage to do that? She had never been in Normandy, or in the village of Giverny ... Yes, she thought she had read something somewhere. And what was this she'd written? A letter? Who to and what about? The one who would come into her life some day? Or, perhaps, who would never come now ...

The one thing that is beyond the willpower of even the strongest personality is to force love to submit to logic ... Natasha added, and then through the aroma of coffee filling her head and the murmur of the ocean, she heard a ringing sound. At first, she couldn't think where the repulsive jangling was coming from – it was somewhere above her, on the other side of the notebook, somewhere in real life.

It was the phone ringing, interrupting her fairytale for a grown-up little girl.

“Hello, mademoiselle! Or is it signora? Or miss?” the voice in the receiver said and laughed.

“Hello, Vitalii Arkadievich,” Natasha replied, thinking that she ought to change her ring tone.

“Well, what's new in the world and its suburbs? How's our little project coming along?” Pribylovsky asked cheerfully. He was in an excellent mood.

“I shall be ready to report in full on the work I have done by the deadline we agreed,” Natasha replied drily.

“O-oh, don't be like that, Natalia Evgenievna ...” the voice drawled. “Of course you'll report, you have no choice about that,” it said and chuckled again. “I only ask in case there's some way I can help. We're colleagues and friends, aren't we?”

“I'm sorry, I'm rather tired ... Of course we're friends ... I have to be in Aspen for the New Year, but all the hotels have been booked out for ages. I've already enquired. Can you help with that?”

“Well, my darling, I told you that some time ago, didn't I! That's your slip-up! I know I'm devilishly charming, but even I can't do everything in his life.” He broke into loud laughter, and when he finished, he added: “I'll help, but only with the visa and tickets. What you do after you arrive there is up to you, go skiing, enjoy yourself, breathe the air. The air there is wonderful! I envy you! In a good way, of course! Have you ever done any downhill skiing?”

The question itself was derisive. The last time Natasha had put on skis was for P.T. in the tenth class at school. The skis were the standard school type, so badly worn that there was

nothing left of their name on the old, battered wood but “igh” – from “flight” or “right” or “height” ...

“A few lessons would come in handy ...” she replied evasively.

“Well you know, my darling, our budget’s not elastic! We’ll be hit with a neat round sum as it is for these New Year holidays, for your trip to such an incredibly expensive resort! So let’s make do with mountain walks in the fresh air,” he said and croaked in laughter again.

“Very well, Vitalii Arkadievich, we’ll make do with walks,” Natasha agreed.

“Come now, don’t take offence! I’m always honest to a fault with women. I’ve never once said ‘I love you’ in order to achieve my goal, although sometimes that would have been quite enough. I’ve always bought, or taken what was freely given. And I’ve never promised more than I can really do!” Pribylovsky said narcissistically.

Natasha said nothing, although she desperately wanted to reply with some kind of scathing comment. She simply straightened her back and walked over to the mirror in the bedroom. The dark tresses of hair that she still hadn’t washed out after Italy flowed down over her shoulders, but the tattoo transfer on her left cheekbone had already worn off. The grey eyes (she had removed the contact lenses before take-off) gazed out firmly and forthrightly. Her entire appearance radiated dignity, confidence in herself and immaculate self-control. Nobody and nothing could throw her off balance.

“Yes, by the way,” the phone wheezed, “I’ve seen your aristocrat here. A fine looking young man! He asked me if I had any girl in mind that I could recommend: I’m tired of false princesses, he said ... I promised to assist him, and if I promise something ...”

“I’ll get everything done, Vitalii Arkadievich!” Natasha said calmly. “You’ll have all the information in the New Year.”

“There’s a clever girl,” the phone replied. “I’ll be in touch.”

25

Victor Arkadievich switched off his phone and also walked over to the mirror in his dark, deserted apartment. It was a huge one, in an old carved frame, the crowning element of an antique sideboard. There was once supposed to be a family triptych of three, but Pribylovsky despised old mirrors. There were too many dead men lurking in every one of them. And in three the number was tripled. He had replaced the triptych with one new mirror, in which only the elderly craftsman who made it could have been reflected before him, and chosen an old frame. He didn’t despise frames. He took out a special small comb that was hidden behind a carved flower-bud on the frame and began slowly running it through the greying brush of moustache under his nose – savouring the pleasure. This activity was a kind of meditation for him. He was pleased with himself, and he had every reason to be. He had found an excellent candidate to carry out the assignment he had been set by his friend Mark. In a month’s time he would have all the information about that foursome, and so repay an old debt to an old friend, as well as making a profit on the deal! Yes, he really was a genius! How neatly he had hoodwinked this young

philological provincial Sitnikova, with her idiotic dreams of an aristocratic gene pool – the bait that she'd been hooked on, like a stupid carp on semolina. No, he didn't intend to deceive her! His acquaintances really did include an aristocrat who had been left "on the shelf", but the prospect of him falling for the latest girl hunting after his noble name was as nebulous as the fog over London town, from where Pribylovsky had just returned following a meeting with Mark. She certainly was ideally suited to their purpose: young, attractive, intelligent, well-organised, motivated, *et cetera*, as the French said. In addition, just as Mark had wanted, she had no relatives, apart from a mother somewhere near Khabarovsk, in Moscow she only had some girl;-friend or other and Zhurov, who was always busy and, in the final analysis, was not really concerned about her. His path and Zhurov's had crossed once, so long ago that when he met him and Natasha in a Moscow restaurant, he had difficulty recalling Zhurov's name and the circumstances in which they met, although his memory never let him down. But Zhurov's companion had caught Pribylovsky's eye straight away. He was struck by the way she carried herself, and her urbane manner of speaking, and her general air of dignity. He took a seat at the table nearest to them, and gathered that the girl was about to graduate from the philological faculty at Moscow State University, that her thesis, on some topic involving English and French was coming up, and her name was Natasha. A request from a respectable gentleman with a distinguished greying moustache to help him find a good student with knowledge of languages met a ready response in the office of the dean of the faculty. They gave him several telephone numbers of graduates and prospective graduates, and especially recommended Natalia Sitnikova. When he told Mark about his find, his friend had raised his bushy eyebrows in surprise and exclaimed: "You mean you can still find girls like that in Moscow?" That was an untypical reaction. It was practically impossible to surprise Mark with anything ... So in herself Natasha was already a sufficient reason to feel self-satisfaction, but Vitalii was even more delighted by the opportunity to repay his debt to his childhood friend. He had found his obligation to Mark a serious burden for a long time. No matter how hard he tried to make himself necessary to Mark, he could never feel that they were equals. To an outsider, their relationship appeared to be one of friendship between two people who had known each other for a long time, but that wasn't exactly the case ...

Mark Natanovich Bernstein was a highly successful lawyer, who was born in St. Petersburg and taken to Israel by his parents when he was still a teenager – they still lived not far from Tel-Aviv. He developed a passion for the law and after completing his studies, he worked for a while, before moving to France, where he married a French girl, produce a daughter, Dina, and then got divorced five years later, after which there was nothing to stop him devoting himself completely to his work. His firm, Bernstein and Co., was located on the ground floor of a modest mansion in the 16th arrondissement of Paris. The second and third floors were occupied by his apartment, with antique decor in red tones. Not many people called in to the office "off the street", and they tried to get rid of any chance callers on some plausible excuse. Mark preferred to work with "his own kind of people", and only by recommendation. He was certainly very talented at "making friends". Pribylovsky had never seen anyone with such a great number of

“his own kind of people”. And Mark remembered everyone, maintaining “friendly relations” with all of them, and earning money from them in the same light, easy manner in which he socialised with them. He was a genuine expert in comfortable socialising. Pribylovsky had borrowed his manner of starting a conversation with a funny story from his friend Mark. A well-told joke or story from life, of which he always had plenty in reserve, always went down brilliantly, and knotty problems seemed almost to resolve themselves ... Pribylovsky could guess at what lay behind that “almost”, but others knew for certain. His friend was a rare specialist in putting through deals that bypassed the legislation of virtually any country.

Mark’s father, Natan, used to have a huge map of the Soviet Union hanging on his wall, with red flags marking the places where he, a talented Soviet engineer, had worked on assignments. The entire 1/6 of the earth’s land surface was bristling with little red flags, and for some reason Natan was terribly proud of that. But the son had so far excelled the father that he could have stuck little flags all over the remaining 5/6 of the globe’s land. Mark had “friends” all around the world, and for every one of them he had done a “confidential favour” – given him “a helping hand”, as he liked to put it. And Pribylovsky was no exception. He was also under obligation to his childhood friend. But not simply because of a “confidential favour”. He owed Mark his life ...

At the time they were both a little over twenty years old. Mark was slightly older, but he had always been small, and ever since they were little, their “yard gang” in St. Petersburg had accepted them as being the same age. When Mark was going to school in Israel and Vitalik was studying in St. Petersburg, they kept in touch by phone. Mark never forgot to congratulate his “best friend” Vitalik and all his relatives on every important day – personal, Soviet or religious – including Vitalik’s father “uncle Arkadii”, his mother “aunty Liuba” and his mother’s sister “aunty Nadya”. And he also sent greetings to all the acquaintances he remembered, as if he had only left St. Petersburg yesterday. If their cat, Lusya, had celebrated special days, he would have sent her his best wishes too. His parents thought Markusha was wonderful. “He’ll go a long way,” they prophesied, advising Vitalik to take him as a model. Vitalik himself realised that he had to be friends with Mark. His intuition for people was the equivalent of perfect pitch. It always guided him to the “right” contacts, it had never once led him astray. And the female student philologist was no exception

Vitalii Arkadievich’s mind was wandering ... He walked round the drawing room for a little while, went across to the sideboard and took out a little pouch of tobacco. He filled a pipe, slowly and deliberately, sat down in a soft leather armchair that gratefully accepted the form and the warmth of his body. He adored it. He didn’t want to go out today ... The titillating aroma of tobacco filled his nose and throat, his forehead, the back of his head ... The grey smoke wreathed lazily in the air, dissolving unhurriedly in the gentle silence of the drawing room. It was exactly like the smoke given off by a flat bread cake baked out in the desert, on an iron vat heated by the sun.

It was Mark who had suggested they could earn a bit of money by working as guides for tourist groups in the Negev Desert. He had helped with all the necessary documents. Documents had always been his natural element. At the time, Vitalik was simply fired with the idea of

breaking out of the narrow niche of Soviet reality into a fantastic world of hot sand, Bedouins and adventures! And he wanted to earn a bit of money too – they were offering huge money compared to his modest income as a student. And he could practice his English.

The simplistic newspaper cliché of “a land scorched by the sun” evaporated from his head the moment reached land. Meandering hills, the remains of ancient volcanoes, muted cliffs that were two million years old – the desert, full of mysteries and riddles, was astounding, it shattered all the stereotypes. Their work consisted of taking a group of tourists from a starting point to a finishing point with several halts at places where food, water, rest and sites of interest were waiting. Every group had two guides. Mark, who had already worked here the year before, took Vitalii as his partner. Every day at ten o’clock, they collected a group of people from the departure point and led them through the desert the whole day long. In the heat, sand and sun, their sweat mingled with their tears, and the desert (translated from the Hebrew, “Negev” means “towel”) instantly dried out the moisture, leaving the trails of its scorching breath on their skin.

The most popular site with the tourists was Mount Karkom – the alternative Mount Sinai, where, according to tradition, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Scientists had argued for many years about the location of this mountain, but about twenty years earlier they had discovered about 40,000 drawings, inscriptions and sites of ancient buildings here, demonstrating that Karkom really was Sinai. Immediately after this discovery, tourists had started flooding into the Negev in such great numbers that additional guides had been required. The peak of the mountain was usually shrouded in mist, but when the mist dispersed, the spectacle of thousands of rock drawings illustrating the commandments plunged the tourists – believers and non-believers alike – into a state of shock.

And in general, the desert changed people. All their vices, complexes and fears surfaced. Some became touchy and intolerant, like spoiled children, others retired into their shell, and still others plodded apathetically after the guides, seeming less and less human. “The process of ‘bleaching’ is not entirely painless,” Mark explained. He himself was focused and hardly ever spoke, just occasionally uttering phrases that he might have read from some the stone on Mount Karkom.

One day Mark had an unusually philosophical conversation with one of the tourists who had come to “gawp” at the wonder and had broken down before even reaching the first halt. The sight was actually quite comical. Mark’s Berber robes, his face tanned almost black and his manner of speaking, without wasting any excess energy on his words, made him seem like an absolute aboriginal. The tourist, a puny man overgrown with bristly stubble, with the rapidly evaporating veneer of a library-desk intellectual, shouted in a high-pitched, resentful voice. Vitalik listened to his colleague, unable to recognise his friend in him.

“I don’t understand why I have to put up with these deprivations and sufferings in order to look at some historical discovery!” the tourist whined.

“The burden of daily deprivations purifies the thoughts, for it leaves no time for fruitless speculations,” Mark replied.

“I dreamed of glimpsing the mountain on which Moses received the commandments from

the Lord, not of dying here from the heat and lack of basic requirements!” the tourist complained capriciously.

“A dream is necessary, so that you can realise it, and the desert is necessary, so that you can overcome difficulties on the way to your dream,” Mark responded emphatically.

“You know what – overcoming difficulties is your responsibility. I paid money for this trip!”

“Every man has one single responsibility – to follow his destiny to the end. He has no others. You came to the desert. Something made you do that.”

“Nothing made me do it! Archaeology happens to be one of the things I’m interested in. I read about the discovery of an alternative Mount Sinai, and I came to take a look. Especially since it’s not expensive. During my vacation, by the way.”

“Most people accept the course of events as something that stands to reason and stop taking responsibility for what is happening to them.”

“You mean to say I acted irresponsibly by coming here? Or that if I hadn’t come across the magazine with that article, my life would have gone differently? Do you realise what drivels you’re spouting? You’re too young to argue about this stuff.”

“As soon as the word ‘if’ sounds in his head, a man ceases to be the master of his own destiny,” Mark declared without a trace of emotion. “You have to believe that the choice you make is the only correct one.”

“What religion is this that you’re preaching? Judaism, Christianity? Marxism? I can’t seem to tell, somehow!”

“In the desert you shouldn’t talk, just look into yourself or down at your feet. Whichever happens to be bigger in your case.”

Mark took a swig from his flask, glanced at his watch and got up with an expression on his face that said “this conversation is over”. All he said was “Time to go”. Vitalik waited for a free moment on their journey and spoke to his friend.

“I don’t recognise you, Mark! You’re a completely different person! What happened to your gift of the gab? What happened to the Mark that I know?”

“Mishka, Mishka, what happened to your smile?” Mark chanted and chuckled. “I’m serious because I’m in love”

“You’re in love? With whom?”

“With what,” Mark corrected him. “With the desert. With these rocks, with this earth, with this stillness, with this kingdom of sun and time. With the feeling it gives me. This place has made me feel like someone who’s alive. Someone who can and must achieve something in my short life. Only here do I realise that I have everything I need for victory in myself!”

They usually baked the bread cake at the second halt. The recipe was as ancient and simple as the truth. The water, flour and salt were thoroughly mixed together, and the dough was laid out on a sizzling hot tub, just as it used to be thousands of years before. The delicious grey smoke circled unhurriedly in the air, dissolving into the windless haze of the desert. This bread baked without fire or electricity was a genuine miracle. The people sat round the tub, transfixed

by the mystery of it. At the very moment when the warm bread cake was being shared around, a snake crawled up to the halt and little bird flew up. Before the eyes of the astounded tourists, the bird started to sing and the snake rose up into a vertical pose, swaying to the bird's song on its springy tail, every scale glinting in the blazing midday sun. No one knew who had had taught this pair to beg like this, but the scene, which was like a parable come to life, never failed to shock the people watching it. They froze, and then laughed, applauded, and crumbled the bread onto a piece of sackcloth that had been laid out specially, watching as the bird and the snake feasted on their well-earned treat.

It went on like that for a long time. The groups changed, but the sharing out of the bread cake was always concluded by the star turn with the bird and the snake. One day, when the snake rose into its usual pose, one of the tourists threw a stone at it, probably in fright. Vitalik was standing closer to the snake than anyone else.

He couldn't remember what happened after that. When he came round, he saw a dark silhouette against the sun – a man in Berber costume doing something to his leg.

"I told you he'd come round," the man said in Mark's voice, holding a flask of water up to Vitalik's lips. "He'll be all right now ..."

"Which stupid jerk threw that stone?" Vitalik asked in Russian, only just stopping short of swearing.

"That's not important," Mark answered. "You gave me a real fright, my friend."

"And it was a hefty stone too! Where did he get that from?" the bitten went on furiously.

"Drop it. Everyone casts a stone the size of his own sin ..."

After that, Vitalik remembered a ride on an Arabian camel well acquainted with the ways of the world, which Mark had led up, together with a Bedouin, and then the long time his leg had taken to heal. The scar on it was still visible scar. He never went back into the desert again. Mark was there a few more times, but new interests gradually crowded his fascination with it out of his life.

Vitalii Arkadievich leaned down to his leg, in order to look at the mark from the snakebite. The leather of his favourite armchair creaked in protest. He lifted up his right trouser leg – yes the scar was almost invisible, it wouldn't even pass muster as an "identifying mark". He was certainly lucky ... If only he didn't owe this debt that to Mark. There was nothing more oppressive than a feeling of gratitude ... His rescue had disrupted the balance of their relationship. He was a casualty and Mark his noble saviour. Even though Mark was not in the habit of "reminding" Vitalii of the important role he had played in his life, whenever Mark asked him for a favour or a kindness, the thought was there quite unambiguously in his eyes. Or it seemed to Vitalii that it was ... He had been waiting for an opportunity to do something for his friend that would restore the balance between them, or at least reduce this feeling of eternal gratitude that he was so sick of. And now it seemed that his opportunity had turned up.

About four months earlier Mark, speaking in a voice that was strangely agitated and altogether too serious for him, had asked Vitalii to meet him.

They met in a small; restaurant in the old city. When the owner saw Mark, he smiled at him like an old friend. Mark raised his hand in greeting and smiled back, but the smile was forced, and he looked tired and shrunken into himself. Vitalii had never seen his successful friend like that before.

“Have you heard the latest joke about Putin?” he asked Mark out of habit, to set the mood for the meeting.

“Yes, I know them all,” Mark said with a wave of his hand. “The Internet’s still working. But the jokes are no good any more. It’s all turned stale and petty, my friend Horatio ... Everything’s wrong ...”

“That sounds very much like an old man’s grouching, my friend. The walls used to be higher, the grass was greener, the girls were younger ...”

“Oho, when were girls ever a problem for you? Your plough’s never out of the furrow, you old charger, you!” Mark said with a grin

“That’s right ... But do you know what an effort it costs me? Not to mention all the outlays on devilish charm and continuous production of testosterone! Yes, my friend, you and I are getting old ...”

“There’s something to that,” Mark agreed. “But, you know, I’d like to warm my distinguished limbs in the sunshine in my old age and dine on a caviar sandwich, not thin gruel in a prison cell.”

What do you mean, Mark? What’s happened? Vitalii asked in alarm.

“You know how I feel about you, and what binds the two of us together. I want to ask you for one favour that I would never ask from anyone else. No one would believe it.” Mark stopped, waiting for his friend to absorb the implications of what he’d said.

“You can count on me,” Vitalii said honestly and sincerely, to clear away any possible lingering doubts about his allegiance.

“All right,” said Mark, satisfied. “There’s something I have to tell you before I move on to the crux of the matter. A couple of years ago I bought a small house on one of the Maldive Islands. It’s a very modest house, not much more than a dacha, like the ones our compatriots used to build on the small plots of land handed out to them by the considerate authorities. With just one difference – it stands beside the ocean, and there are palm trees instead of an untended collective farm field with a copse of birch trees. The house is on the edge of the island, in a palm grove, and there’s nothing to make it stand out from the other real estate at that spot which, as you know is by no means the cheapest on the globe. I used to rent it at first, so that I could get away to the sun a couple of times a year, and then I bought it. By the way, do you feel drawn to the sun? Blazing pitilessly, like in the Negev? Remember how we used to bake the bread cakes?”

“I remember, Mark ... No, I don’t feel drawn to that kind of sun ... I’d prefer something gentle, Mediterranean, with a warm caress, and girls in bikinis ... I don’t want to go to the desert. as it is I already turn my left leg towards the ladies, like Julio Iglesias, because the hair doesn’t

grow on the scar on my right one,” Vitalii laughed.

“But you look even better from the left side than from the right!” Mark said with a smile. “Well then, no one knew about this little house of mine on the island, apart from myself and Dina. The two of us have stayed there together a few times, I have always tried to be a good father. Or rather, I was certain that no one knew about it. Now I’m not so certain. A couple of weeks ago, I discovered that something was missing there ...”

“And what is it that’s gone missing?”

“Well you see, I think you realise that my professional activity is not bounded by the limits of the law that are too narrow for certain people and circumstances. And I love life too much to refuse my help to people who are in need of it. In short, I had moved all my old dubious business records to that house, as the safest and least well-known place that I have. Dossiers on people who had come to me for help, and so on. About twenty files in all – I think it was nineteen. They were in a safe, arranged years. The file for the year 2005 disappeared.

“I see ... I’m intrigued,” said Vitalii.

“Me too.”

“And you think it was your Dina?”

“I don’t think, I’m certain it was her. Amir said she was there on the 14th of May, and she wasn’t alone. Amir’s an old local man who keeps an eye on the house and does a few things around the place. He lives close by. She gave him that day off, said it was her father’s instructions. He didn’t see who she was with, he just left when he was given the day off. A simple soul ... But he says he heard voices – a man and a woman.”

“And have you spoken with Dina?”

“Why, of course, Vitalik. What sort of question is that?”

“And what does she say?”

“She just plays dumb ... Like her mummy, she doesn’t have enough mischief in her. First she said: ‘I don’t know anything, I didn’t go anywhere, I didn’t take anything’. Then, when I said she’d been seen there, she came up with: ‘maybe I was there, and maybe I wasn’t’. I tried to explain to her what kind of documents they were and why they were important to me, asked her just to tell me everything, threatened her with the police, threatened not to give her any more money – which is the best way of getting through to her ... It was all a waste of time ... There were screams and tears, hysterics ... ‘I hate you, you won’t let me live, I wish I had a different father ...’ and so on like that. It’s all very hard ... I feel guilty about the way I’ve treated her. Her mother and I separated on such bad terms ... Do you remember Liza? Mademoiselle Elise Ranier, as she was known until she took it into her head to marry a man ‘with a past like that’. All she’s done ever since our divorce has been try to give that zigzag in her life story some meaning by thinking up ways to take her revenge on me.”

“I remember her vaguely,” said Vitalii. “You did all of that so suddenly. Went away to Paris, got married, then divorced, there was so much talk about you at the time ... Well then, what about Dina? Maybe I should talk to her?”

“No, there’s no point. I’ve already wasted a whole heap of time trying to persuade her ... Do

you know what she's just come out with? 'I'll be leaving your house soon, and just keep your nose out of my business'. Of course, I put the pressure on, explained to the fool exactly whose business was whose, and she burst into tears again ... Typical hysterical behaviour for a junkie ..."

"Oh, come on, now. Don't say things like that about the child," Vitalii said, coming to Dina's defence.

"It's true, unfortunately ... I didn't tell you ... She smokes grass ... And not just grass, either ... I should have taken her away from Liza immediately after the divorce ... Now it's too late ... But never mind, all that... I'll sort things out with my daughter, I'll already booked the clinic. But it's quite clear that she couldn't have done this on her own initiative and without outside help. Some adult is clearly involved here, an experience man who is out to get me for some reason ..."

"I agree with you."

"Then let's get to the point: if my memory doesn't deceive me, that file contained four cases for four individuals. To be quite honest, it cost me quite an effort to recall its contents. We are getting old, you're right ... But I think I've remembered all the important things. The individuals are as follows: Andrei Alexandrovich Proshkov, Russian, lives in Moscow, or at least he did until 2005: a French citizen of Iranian extraction, Achane Bejare - he's a quite well known photographer; an Italian, Giuseppe Luciano, who was in the coffee business, if I recall correctly: and Robert Stevenson, an American, made his bucks in real estate, and very serious bucks too ... That's the most important information I've remembered. Well, apart from a few amusing little details, as you know, they always stick in the memory for some reason. For instance, that Achane is fixated on red lingerie, I've seen his box of bras myself. In Proshkov the world lost a great theatre or even circus director, he adores all sorts of spoofs and practical jokes. Luciano is obsessed with his sister, and the American is obsessed with his country, and he's pretty screwy in general ... That's not much in the way of character portraits, but it might come in useful. All the rest of the information, as they say, was in the file ..."

"Mark, listen, I understand there's no question of going to the police, but what about a private detective? Why not consider that possibility?" Vitalii enquired.

"Do you think I invited you here, so you could advise me to employ the services of a private detective?" Mark said sharply.

"Sorry, old man, I'm just trying to run through the options."

"I've already run through all the options. The police are out, and a private detective is too inconvenient a figure, in case afterwards I have to ... You know what I mean ... I don't need any problems right now, or later on, in my old age! I need someone who has been checked out, who is as dependent on me as I am on him ... That's the most reliable bond. And that person is you, my old childhood friend, who owes me his ... Well, I won't go into that old story now."

"I'm willing, Mark. What do you have in mind?"

"Right, now that's a man's answer, not a boy's!" his friend said, satisfied. "I think you can already picture the general outlines of the assignment."

"In theory, yes," Vitalii replied. "We have to gather up to date information about these four

and find out which of them was on that island of yours with Dina on the 14th of May. He's the one behind this."

"Correct. But the problem is, that's all theory. In practice it's more complicated. We have to act as neatly as possible, without arousing any suspicion, subtly, you could even say delicately, tenderly. I think we have time. But not a lot of it. If the thief hasn't made any demands in the time that has passed since the theft took place, hasn't tried to use these documents to blackmail me, but withdrawn into the background instead, that means his plans are based on longer-term considerations. And that's given me an idea ..."

Mark's idea was that the person they needed actually to carry out the plan was a provincial girl – intelligent, self-motivated and pretty, who could speak at least English, and preferably had no relatives. At the time, Vitalii Arkadievich had felt his heart sink. He couldn't refuse, but the assignment seemed almost impossible to him, even though he knew heaps of girls. He loved to surround himself with "young ladies up to the age of 25". He found it easy to impress them and was a past master at dragging them into bed after a cup of coffee and a long flurry of words, while still remaining "Vitalik", "a sincere friend and good guy" to all of them. His address book swelled up with the numbers of "young ladies" in just six months, but his hardy, toughened body constantly demanded a "continuation of the banquet". Out of respect for his body, Vitalii Arkadievich changed his address books regularly. But even he had to give serious thought to the question of where to find "a provincial girl with a knowledge of languages" who was also "an intelligent, self-motivated and pretty orphan". He racked his brains over the problem until he saw a girl in a Moscow restaurant in the company of his old acquaintance Zhurov. Natasha ...

27

"Scram, you lousy beasts!" the old tramp yelled at the sparrows and stamped his patched shoe angrily on the gravel of the path. The birds abandoned their half-pecked bread roll and scattered in flight. Bending down awkwardly, the old man picked it up, dusted it off and bit into it with the teeth still remaining in the left side of his jaws. Chewing and champing intently, he walked over to the bench by the old maple. It was completely heaped over with leaves. "That'll be soft!" he croaked and stretched out on his back on the leaf-covered boards. His almost colourless eyes gazed up at the grey sky from behind sparse lashes. The wind shook a bunch of leaves off the maple and tossed them at those pale puddles of tears. The old man scraped the refuse off his face and turned over onto his side with a grunt. There was something hard in the way of his head – a book or a notebook. Without looking, he fumbled in the leaves for this "something", shoved it off the bench and put his elbow under his head ... Now that was good ...

The notebook fell on its spine and teetered for a while, deciding whether its "inner world" could be trusted to the bunch of old grass leaning down over it, then graciously fell open close to the middle, on page 68:

This is my first time in America! I dreamed of seeing New York with those skyscrapers all set to shoot up into the sky like rockets. I hope I will see it, but now I'm in Denver, the capital of the state of Colorado. And for the first time, I'm not starting from the sky ... In Spanish, "Colorado" means "red tinge" – the Spanish explorers obviously had a hard time choosing a name for the colour of the local rocks here. I would have been at a loss in their place, too ... The combination of the shades of young brick and mature granite, changing with the light and the time of day ... Very beautiful ... From Denver to the mountain ski resort of Aspen, where my fourth mission, Robert Stevenson, is waiting for me, is only a twenty-five minute flight in a small plane. I'm almost at my goal. But the verb "waiting" is too presumptuous. I have no clear plan of action, not even a clearly thought-out strategy of behaviour. And his dossier doesn't tell me very much about him: Robert Stevenson – 35 years old, deals in real estate, unmarried, wealthy ... in the photo, a typically American "glued-on" porcelain smile, deep-set eyes, straight nose, high cheekbones, shoulders like a billboard that says "Welcome to America!". Thanks, we're already here ... No plan of action, That leaves improvisation. And why not, anyway? I have only one disadvantage – I can't ski downhill. Apart from that, I have only advantages. With the merits outnumbering the drawbacks so heavily, I'm ready to join in the game! And in any case, I have no choice ...

There's my small plane ...

See you later, diary! In twenty-five minutes I'll be twenty-five minutes closer to my dream!

The idiotic compliment "you're dazzling" must have been thought up by someone who had just seen mountains for the first time, thought Natasha, moving cautiously across the crust of snow in the skiing gear she had rented. There was simply nowhere for her eyes to rest "in the shade". Shining its heart out, the sun beat down mercilessly on the white, snowy mountains under the abnormally bright blue sky. After muted Moscow, so comfortable for the eyes, looking at this was unbearable. Natasha lowered her protective goggles from her woolly cap. Right, now. That's better. She had found a pace to stay quite quickly. Pribylovsky had been wrong in claiming that there were no places left. Seek, and ye shall find. The expensive hotels and chalets were booked out months in advance, but an ordinary room could be found. She had taken one that was inexpensive by local standards, in a condominium. Of course, it was rather far away from the St. Regis Resort Aspen, where Robert was staying, but there were no problems with transport here. There were no problems here with anything. The level of service in Aspen was astounding. For Americans the very word "Aspen" was synonymous with the words "success" and "prestige". The richest and most famous Hollywood stars and sports stars came here, along with the simplest, plain ordinary millionaires.

The Victorian-style building of the St Regis Resort Aspen was located at the foot of a mountain, between two ski-lift stations. Robert's probably skiing already, Natasha reasoned. That's what he came here for. Especially since it's the 31st of December. He has to get his final pleasure out of the old year. Meeting a charming stranger who can't even stand on her skis

properly is sure to enhance that pleasure with a few more pleasurable feelings. And best of all would be to run into the stranger – “amid the noisy ball, by chance ...”.

It was to arrange the chance encounter celebrated in Russian literature that Natasha was giving her ski gear an airing at the foot of the mountain in this prestigious American resort. So it seemed very strange to hear Russian being spoken:

“The three-times Olympic downhill skiing champion, Jean-Claude Killy, claims that modern downhill skiing technique is a tower built out of individual bricks – extremely simple elements. The height of the tower depends on the amount of time and effort spent on building it. Every star has started from the basics, from the very bottom of the hill – the ‘plough’, the ‘skid’ and straight descents down shallow slopes. The effect is always directly proportional to the effort expended ...” The suntanned, dazzlingly handsome young man spoke Russian with an amusing accent. Probably some immigrant instructor, teaching the basics of skiing in a Russian-speaking family. The family – dad, mom and two children tucked into jumpsuits – were listening to him with a noticeable effort.

The young man’s teeth flashed the colour of the very highest peak as he pepped up his pupils:

“But what you mustn’t do is get nervous and stressed! You need to do a lot of skiing and enjoy it, without wasting any time on complexes about your own failings. Everyone makes mistakes, even the Pope fell on the piste, causing his security men all sorts of trouble. The most important thing is to praise yourself for every lesson you’ve learned! Appropriate praise is the most powerful stimulus to achievement. Set yourself realistic goals and take joy in achieving them! Remember that enjoyment always comes first!

The entire family smiled, and mum even smiled too affably. Dad noticed and tried to hurry the white-toothed Adonis along.

“Yes, yes, we understand. We’re ready to get started!”

“We’re starting right now,” said the instructor, speeding up understandingly. “Children, guess what’s the very first thing that we’re going to learn?”

“Skiing down a slope? Jumping off a ski-ramp? Sidestep climbing?” the children rattled off.

“No, you didn’t guess. The first thing we’re going to learn is falling on a slope! And remember, fear is your normal reaction, it’s your energy, it helps you to focus as hard as possibly to make your study fruitful. Once you’ve learned how to fall, you’ll be protected from possible injuries. What do you need to know to fall properly? Never, on any account, relax while you’re falling.”

Never, never, never relax, thought Natasha, recalling Vika’s main rule, and her heart skipped a beat ...

“Do you happen to know, Dan, where the name Aspen comes from?” curious mom suddenly asked, blatantly ignoring her husband’s jealous glances.

“The name comes from the aspen tree. It reproduces very rapidly, through sprouts from the roots. One old tree creates a small forest around itself,” the instructor explained in a habitual

manner.

“Oh, how interesting!” mom exclaimed invitingly.

Dad silently showed the instructor his watch and tapped on the glass with his finger.

The instructor led the family away, and Natasha carried on airing her ski gear in independent style, glancing at the figures sliding down the mountain and going back up on the ski lifts. The mountains in the distance really were completely covered with fir trees and aspens, and it suited them very well. There were a lot of people, but no one looking like Robert Stevenson: “tall, with chiselled features, high cheekbones and square shoulders”. She spent several hours “walking on air”, as Vitaly Arkadievich had advised her to do, with no result or even the slightest idea of what do next.

Having mastered the initial skills of skiing, the family paraded past again. The children frolicked about, pushing each other over into the snow. Dan was still accompanying them.

“That’s enough for today! Tomorrow you’ll feel much less afraid already. But if you’re worried about it, the psychoanalysts recommend a simple exercise. Imagine a situation that you’re afraid of, for instance, a bad fall at high speed. Then wind the picture forwards and backwards, faster and faster, gradually making it black and white. For contrast, imagine a different picture – a dream come true, for instance: you on your skis against a background of mountains, or a sunset, with a smile on your face. Like mine, for instance. Then play these pictures by turn, gradually reducing the size of the first one compared to the second. Although I expect this evening you won’t have time for winding pictures backwards and forwards,” the instructor said with a bright flash of teeth.

“That’s none of your business ... Thanks Dan, see you tomorrow,” mom and dad sad simultaneously.

“Happy New Year,” the young guy replied and turned to Natasha. His smile was astounding, even with his eyes hidden behind dark glasses. *I wonder what colour they are?* thought Natasha, smiling back politely and moving away – in this fairytale setting, she had completely different objectives ...

Natasha was already on the point of leaving, trying to figure out how she could get into Robert’s hotel that evening, where the likelihood of a chance encounter was much greater, when she saw two agitated figures dressed in hotel personnel uniforms, running from the direction of the hotel. They were shouting something as they ran and waving their arms in the air. They stopped at the spot where there were most people, still shouting and gesticulating. More and more people gathered round them. Natasha moved closer and heard a few phrases:

“ ... bombs have been planted in the town and the airport. Some lunatic phoned the police. Everybody’s already on the move. The sheriff has ordered all visitors to be evacuated from Aspen! The risk is too great! We’re evacuating our guests to the Ritz Hotel outside town. Buses have been arranged to take them. Please be sensible and don’t panic. We hope everything will be cleared up tomorrow, but tonight you have to make sure you’re safe! The buses are already at the hotel. They’ll travel with a police escort! We recommend you not to use your cars! Please, stay calm!” they kept repeating over and over again.

Many people were already running towards the hotel. The dazzling landscape shed the people too quickly and, she thought it seemed glad to return to its pristine harmony.

Natasha suddenly felt afraid. Why did something like this have to happen? Here in a resort where millionaires were so thick on the ground, you couldn't avoid them. It was like a bad dream, when you realise you're asleep and having a nightmare, but you just can't wake up. *What if that lunatic really has planted bombs here? Then what's going to happen?* She was already hurrying towards the buses, trying to drive away her bad thoughts, each one more frightening than the last. Now she really did have to get in there! No matter what it took!

If you want to get a full copy of this book, please contact author on lanska.work@gmail.com