

# THE LOVERS

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*Julia Dobrovolskaya*

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Юлия Добровольская

**The Lovers**

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Роман охватывает период с 50-70-х годов (с отступлениями в 20-е годы) 20-го века до наших дней. Дина, студентка-отличница, тайно влюблена в своего преподавателя, Константина Константиновича Колотозашвили, красавца и донжуана, в котором она видит гораздо больше достоинств, чем просто привлекательная внешность. Однажды на экзамене Константина Константиновича она получает пятёрку «автоматом», что небывало для этого строгого и требовательного педагога, и приглашение на свидание. Долгий вечер, проведённый вместе, открывает обоим новые грани друг друга, усиливая взаимный интерес. \*Перевод на английский Sofia Gutkin © 2017

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# **Julia Dobrovolskaya**

## **The Lovers**

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## Dina

### The Final Exam

Dina Turbina stepped out of the university doors into an overcast day.

One could say that the colors surrounding her, washed out by the fog and the feeble rains of the past few days, and inspiring autumnal sadness, did not match her mood at all, which was upbeat and focused, as if ready to break out into song. But Dina didn't believe in such a thing as bad or good weather. She accepted without any judgment both the bleak days with their faded colors, and the bright sun in a blue sky, without classifying them as "good" and "bad," or "sad" and "happy." For Dina, the world was always wonderful and surprising, and each kind of weather had its own charm. Certainly, her mood was not always so uplifted, sometimes it went downwards, but the weather had absolutely nothing to do with it. Dina was more likely to make her surroundings match her mood!

She put on her sunglasses, which transformed everything around her, making the world appear bright and gold, like the seaside in the peak of summer.

Dina loved the sea, but she still had two whole months left to wait. Two months of internship, which was almost a real job, almost aligning with her specialization, for which she would be paid almost a real salary, one that Dina was planning to spend on a trip to the seaside.

Meanwhile, it was the very start of summer. The beginning of a typical weekday. Yet her work was already done for today, and for next week too. She had passed the last, most difficult exam for this semester, for the most important subject for her future profession. She passed under the strictest and most demanding teacher. The most attractive teacher at their university. The most attractive man that Dina had ever met so far. This was a common opinion, with every female student secretly hoping for more than just pedagogical favors from Konstantin Konstantinovich Kolotozashvili. In fact, plenty of cute girls got some. That's what people said at the university.

But that was precisely what Dina did not want to think about.

Better to think of the sea. She was hoping to visit her favorite Feodosia again this summer, once she had finished her internship and saved up enough money. Even her mom had promised to help. Awesome! This was so awesome!

Her near future definitely looked bright and alluring. Yet why could she not let go of the present?

\* \* \*

Dina took a question sheet from the table.

The question sheet was not too hard, well, as much as it could be for a very difficult subject. Dina was not scared of any of the topics since she had studied thoroughly and was confident in her abilities. She always completed all the exercises on time and started working on them straight away, not leaving them until the last day or week. She never skipped a class, and she would attend university even if she did not feel well so that she would not miss something that was not written in the textbooks, something that only a master of their craft could tell her. The very fact of her attention to these significant, or even insignificant, details of the studied subjects, tended to flatter the lecturers and garner her extra affection. The teachers liked Dina. Not only for her responsible approach to study and solid knowledge, but also for her calm and friendly nature.

Dina took the question sheet and walked towards the last table.

The students attending this exam used only the last tables. Everyone knew that this was the way Konstantin Konstantinovich Kolotozashvili liked it. Firstly, the student answering thus didn't unintentionally disrupt the person preparing for the exam, and secondly, this way the teacher could more easily spot the ones using cheat sheets.

Although he insisted himself: "You must write cheat sheets!"

Yes, that's exactly what he had said. "I strongly recommend that you write cheat sheets when preparing for the exam. But woe to the person, who brings them to the exam!"

"So why should we write cheat sheets," the students would ask, "if we cannot use them?"

"Because," Konstantin Konstantinovich had said, "a properly prepared cheat sheet is a concentrate, an essence..." He loved to wrap even everyday concepts in terms related to his subject, "an essence that is easier to remember, and which requires only the addition of a verbal broth to become the solid information, from which it was made."

That was why Dina wrote cheat sheets, and not just for that subject. But she never took them to a test or an exam.

Afterwards, her cheat sheets, written in her clear small handwriting, were hot property amongst her classmates. They were even handed down like heirlooms to the younger students, for nobody else could create concentrates of such quality. Dina never could explain to them that the only useful cheat sheets were the ones you had written yourself.

Dina took the question sheet and walked towards the last table.

One of the three topics was one that Kokon (what the students called Konstantin Konstantinovich behind his back) was failing all the students on.

Dina articulated her answers quite quickly, and remembered everything that she knew from the supplementary material. The material was not compulsory but it gave the answer elegance and utter completeness, and elevated the person answering to the status of the initiated.

It would be a lie to say that Dina was not nervous. Of course, she was nervous, like any normal student. The difference was that she could pull herself together internally and forbid herself from wallowing in any destructive emotions and thoughts. It was as if someone inside her, someone invisible in everyday life, suddenly came alive and told her, "If you fear failure, it will immediately appear." Even when she was getting sick, Dina heard the voice: "You cannot fear illness or it will be stuck inside you for a long time, simply accept it and deal with it like an opponent, eye to eye like an equal." Dina believed this Inner Voice ever since the time that she had ignored it, and was immediately beset by a problem which the Inner Voice had persistently warned her about. She had gotten off easy that time...



## The First Life Lesson

Dina was eight years old. One winter day, after hours of sledding down hills with friends on the shore of a frozen river, she was returning home during dusk, along a road cleared by the bulldozer, between the town and the Selkhoz. That was what they called the village across the river where the town's agricultural sector was located, with two-story white houses, stables, cowsheds, vegetable silos, and as it seemed to Dina back then, endless fields.

It was not far to the first town houses, and Dina could already see the lamp shades glowing in the windows and the potted plants standing on the windowsills.

Suddenly, a pack of dogs appeared from around the corner in front of her. There were about ten of them. They walked towards her in a lazy, sated jog, occasionally sniffing the snow alongside the road and playfully snapping at each other. They were returning from the various city rubbish tips – school, kindergarten and hospital tips – where they could always find plenty of after-dinner leftovers.

\* \* \*

Dina had never been afraid of dogs until last summer in Anapa, where she had been bitten by a cute ginger mutt called Bobik.

Bobik looked really placid and lived chained to a wooden doghouse in the yard of a house where Dina and her mom, as well as her mom's friend Albina and son Sergey were renting a room. Dina knew that at night the chain was attached to a wire that stretched alongside the fence, and Bobik thus guarded the large fruit garden, the yard, and the house. Dina also knew that she was not to approach Bobik's kennel as the owners had warned all their guests about this.

Nevertheless, Dina was tricked by the placid appearance of this fluffy ginger dog with a black muzzle, shiny dark nose, and a tail that curled like a bagel.

One day, she approached the kennel, squatted down and started talking to Bobik. He sat with his side to Dina, his sweet smiling face turned towards her, his tongue hanging out and his wagging tail raising a cloud of whitish dust. When Dina realized that Bobik had been unfairly slandered and was really very nice, she stretched out her hand to pat him. Bobik suddenly growled and jumped on her, knocking her to the ground and sinking his teeth into her chest.

She must have screamed, although she did not remember this. She only remembered the owner with the strange name of Nikandr Nikandrovich lashing Bobik with a thick rope that he had folded a few times over.

After that, Dina's mom took her to the hospital every day, where she had injections into her stomach. They also stitched together the ragged wound from Bobik's sharp teeth on her chest, and stuck a plaster over it, so that Dina had a patch of white, untanned skin there.

\* \* \*

The dogs were approaching Dina but not paying her any special attention, she was just a girl that they were passing by.

It was probably the first time that Dina clearly heard her Inner Voice. The voice said, "Keep walking, don't even think of getting scared and running away!"

Dina listened to the voice, gathered up all her inner strength and drew level with the pack, neither slowing down nor speeding up.



The pack flowed around her, without forgetting to utter a few yelps in her direction. Perhaps it was a greeting, or maybe a warning, like, do not even think of provoking us, we won't care that you are small and helpless.

"Don't run, just don't run," Dina kept repeating the advice of the Inner Voice. But her back went numb from the thought that a whole pack of semi-wild dogs was ambling behind her right now, and who knew what they might decide to do...

Something snapped inside her, the fear became impossible to control, it blanketed her eyes and mind, and drowned out the voice. She ran. She did not understand or feel anything. She was vaguely aware of the dogs, who had immediately caught up with her, surrounded her and were running alongside her, barking loudly and snapping at her tights and the edge of her coat.

They fell back only where the country road became the town pavement.

Dina ran into a shop on the corner of the nearest building – it was the biggest food store at the time in their small town – and then finally came to her senses.

She stood in the entryway between the two glass doors, one leading into the shop and the other one leading onto the street, and leaned against the wall.

The dogs were gone, she was safe, her coat was not torn, so they hadn't bitten her, only scared her, and her face wasn't wet, so she hadn't been crying. It was good that she had not screamed or cried. She did not know why she thought this was good.

It was very bright in the shop from the many hanging metal ceiling lamps, and it always smelled of milk and fresh bread, which was lying on wooden latticed shelves on wheels.

Every section in this shop had its own sound.

The glass sounds lived to the right of the doors: it was the bottles knocking dully against each other in their wooden pallets, while the glasses jingled merrily on their enameled trays. There was also the babbling turning fountain, which the saleswoman Valya used to wash the dirty dishes. One could drink some juice here, tomato, for example, which poured thickly from a large glass container with a lid into a faceted glass, and foamed in its own special way, not like the grape or apple juice. Or soda water, for example, cream soda, which flowed with a hiss from the long-necked green bottle, and one had to quickly bring the glass up to one's lips so that the nose and lips were sprayed with tiny bursting bubbles and their wonderful sweetly-sour smell of cream soda.

The grocery section resounded with the crunching of newspaper sheets, which were used to make bags for pasta, flour or chocolates, and the rustling of round aluminum scoops, scooping up pasta or sugar from the sliding plywood boxes or directly from the large shaggy gray bags, standing on the floor.

A whole symphony was taking place in the dairy department... First, the people waiting in line for the milk heard a dull grinding of metal against the pitted cement floor – that was the heavy full milk churns being dragged towards the counter using hooks. Then came a jingling and a sucking noise – two churns were opened and immediately came the sound of clanging of the liter or half-liter long-handled aluminum ladles against the customers' containers, accompanied by the delicious, thick bubbling and then the equally delicious burbling of the milk, as it first filled the ladles and then the customers' cans. Then jingled the lids of the empty large churns and the full small cans. The empty churns were noisily rolled back to the storeroom, and then the dull grinding of the full churns being dragged to the counter could be heard again...

And above it all came the chiming of coins being thrown into the cash register drawers, or onto the metal money dish, which was screwed to the stand, the lively clicking of buttons with numbers and the juicy chirring of handles, which looked like meat grinder handles, but which produced a blue-gray receipt instead of mince...

\* \* \*

The door opened, and Dina's mom came into the store. Mom always came into the store after work.

Dina did not tell her about what had happened so that she would not get worried.

In the evening, as she was falling asleep, it struck Dina that what happened today only happened because she hadn't listened to someone's wise and sensible advice. She decided not to do this in the future, no matter what.

## Konstantin Konstantinovich Kolotozashvili

“Turbina, I can see that you’re ready to answer,” came the soft baritone of the teacher.

“Yes, I am ready, Konstantin Konstantinovich.”

“Please.” He moved the chair beside him slightly, gesturing for Dina to sit down.

Walking towards the teacher’s table, Dina noticed that Konstantin Konstantinovich was watching her legs, as if afraid that she would trip over the scuffed linoleum or slip on it.

Yes, that was how Dina first interpreted her teacher’s intent attention to her clicking heels and her ankles, in no way special from her point of view, and her knees, peeking out from a not-so-short skirt.

In the next second, Dina smiled, almost audibly, at her own naivety.

She stopped abruptly.

Konstantin Konstantinovich, a raven-headed, eye-catching thirty-year-old man, always dressed in a sharp dark suit, white shirt, and fashionable tie, looked up into Dina’s eyes. His face was somewhat puzzled, as if asking, “What is the matter, young lady?”

Dina continued her journey, holding her teacher’s gaze with her own.

She approached the table, pulled out the chair and sat down. Then she crossed one leg over the other. She did it all in her usual leisurely manner, with a dignity that nobody here at the university had any idea about.

With a smile, containing a mixture of surprise, admiration, and the recognition of being beaten by a worthy opponent, the man took Dina’s ticket and put it in a pile with the other used ones, without checking what was on it. Then he moved aside Dina’s draft answer sheet in the same manner. Konstantin Konstantinovich quickly wrote something down on a clean sheet of paper, and pushed it towards Dina, saying loudly, so that the whole auditorium could hear him:

“I do not doubt your knowledge, Dina Aleksandrovna Turbina. I therefore don’t intend to waste your precious time. Your record book, please.”

Dina opened her record book on the required page, with all the subjects there showing only “Excellent,” and read the message on the sheet of paper, written in large, fast handwriting: *Today, at 18:45 in front of the Peace Cinema.*

The teacher signed Dina’s record book. “Congratulations on an excellent finish of the semester, Dina Aleksandrovna.”

“Thank you, Konstantin Konstantinovich,” replied Dina and reached for her student ID.

Konstantin Konstantinovich held down the corner of the record book with his index finger. Once Dina lifted her eyes to look at him, he released the book and said in the same playful tone, “See you in the next academic year, Dina Aleksandrovna. Have a good internship and enjoy your holidays!”

“Goodbye, Konstantin Konstantinovich.” Dina stood up and walked stately out of the auditorium.

Click... click... click... her heels counted the distance from the table to the door, from this year’s last exam and until next year, the final year of university.

Dina could physically feel Konstantin Konstantinovich’s eyes on her calves. As she was closing the door behind her, Dina turned around and could verify that she was right.

\* \* \*

That was what would not let Dina go from the cloudy late spring of the present into the sunny summer future. The note, inviting her on a date with the most gorgeous but also the most fickle

– so her not-overly-experienced heart told her – the most fickle man in the world. And this man's undisguised interest in her appearance, or to be more exact, her legs.

All this thrilled Dina and made her waver between sweet anticipation and vague fears that sent chills down her spine. And to feel sorry that the next academic year was so far away...

Why, why would he want her? Hasn't he got anyone else to go to the movies with? It is not like there was a lack of beauties at their university or even the whole big city.

"Don't think about it!" she heard suddenly. It was her Inner Voice. "Do you want to go on this date?"

"Yes... I do."

"Then go. Don't worry about the other beauties for the moment."

## On Beauty

Dina did not even consider herself cute.

Not because of an inferiority complex, so often present in young ladies, who were not fortunate to become the center of universal male attention. Not at all. The reason was that Dina's ideas of beauty were based on such unattainable ideals that even the girls others considered beautiful and attractive did not deserve such labels in her opinion. Perhaps only Rimma Yakovleva, the second-year girl that Dina shared a room with, could be called cute... Therefore, there was no point in getting upset if you weren't born looking like Anna Magnani! You had to be satisfied with what you had.

It was Anna Magnani who was the benchmark of female beauty for Dina, and not Brigitte Bardot and Sophia Loren, whom all the girls her age were obsessed with.

"She is hideous like Baba Yaga!" laughed her classmates at first, and then the girls at university, looking at the portrait of the little-known actress.

"You just don't know anything about beauty!" replied Dina with a quiet dignity and the unwavering certainty in her right to have an opinion that differed from the majority.

She did not become offended. What did she have to be offended about? The fact that they lacked the emotional subtlety to sense – sense rather than see – what true beauty was? She should not be offended by them but pity them.

Dina did not yet have a benchmark for male beauty. Nevertheless, the sickly-sweet blue-eyed Frenchman that everyone swooned over conjured up in her a feeling of dislike, almost disgust. Muslim Magomaevev, on the other hand, whom Dina had only seen in magazine photographs, but knew and loved his voice, thrilled Dina. And Jean Marais... Although Dina would not have been able to say with certainty whether it was the character of d'Artagnan, the valiant musketeer, that she loved, or the actor playing him. One way or another, in both d'Artagnan and Jean Marais, Dina sensed the important thing that every woman subconsciously seeks in a man: nobility and virtue, and the ability to protect the lady from all troubles. Dina did not yet know if nobility and inner strength went hand-in-hand with external beauty.

Dina was a slender girl, slightly taller than average, with great posture and the unhurried walk of someone who is sure of themselves. Her mom had taught her from childhood to watch her posture. She had also taught Dina everything else that made her extraordinarily unique: good manners, how to take care of herself, careful wardrobe selection, and later, make-up.

"Even if you're no great beauty," her mom always said, "your face, hair and nails should be always well looked after."

"Even if you don't have a lot of clothes," she continued, "the ones you have should be of good quality."

"Never," her mom also said, "Never chase after the latest fashion. It's better to find your own style and stick to it. You can make references to the current fashion trends perfectly well using accessories."

How this provincial woman, who had never finished high school, could know these very un-Soviet things, Dina had no idea. And why, despite all this, her mother did not follow her own principles, was a mystery too.

Dina dressed with her mom's help. Her mother sewed or re-sewed from her own clothes the items she thought a metropolitan student needed.

This included a formal suit, a few blouses, a few skirts, and an evening dress, of course. Only the outerwear and shoes were bought in the stores. Well, and the underwear, of course. For those things, Dina's mom selflessly saved money from her modest salary, often denying herself some nice trifle.

“Sweetie,” her mom would say when Dina would try and dissuade her from a new purchase, “Dinotchka, I’ve already proven myself, but you need to make a statement: a fine dress helps to impress!” And she would laugh a bright, child-like laugh.

Nevertheless, even with such a low assessment of her appearance, Dina did not think that she was any worse than the people around her.

“I’m just different from the rest.” She comforted herself this way until she got used to this self-identification, which worked like a filter, capturing and rejecting unwanted thoughts and feelings about her appearance, which were nothing but a distraction from life itself, so beautiful and amazing in all its aspects.

“Even girls worse-looking than me get married.” She would tell herself when she noticed an engagement ring on the finger of a really homely woman.

Until one day, her Inner Voice said in response, “All sorts of people get married... but is that what you want?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you really need someone to put a ring on your finger? Is that the extent of your dreams?”

Dina thought about it and replied, “No. I don’t think so.”

“So what is your dream?”

Dina thought about it again. “I want to love and be loved.”

“There you have it,” said the Inner Voice. “Being married does not necessarily mean loving and being loved. The reverse is also true: mutual love does not always imply marriage.”

“Really?” Dina was surprised.

## On Family and Love

Like all girls, Dina of course thought about love and happiness, and about a family that she would someday have. She mentally tried on some guys as potential husbands, only the ones that she liked, of course.

Take Sergey, for example, who was the son of her mom's friend Albina. He was four years older than Dina and they had known each other since early childhood.

\* \* \*

When she was five years old, Dina realized that she loved Sergey.

She understood this by the indescribable happiness that she felt whenever her mom mentioned Albina, and any discussions of plans to do with Albina, which meant that Dina would see Sergey, and that her joy meant love. For what is love without joy?

Sergey was kind and sweet, and looked after her from the position of his age and life experience, after all, he was already going to school and knew a great deal.

Sergey took Dina to the movies, holding her hand. In the cinema bar, he bought her a soda with a bright yellow, thick syrup, a flaky pastry, always the most golden one, sprinkled with large granules of sugar, and then wiped her lips with a handkerchief and brushed the crumbs off the collar of her dress.

Sometimes Sergey would read Dina his favorite books, and those were the happiest hours of their time together. Dina watched Sergey's lips and often did not even understand what the book was about, but this was not important. It was not for someone's adventures, even if they were fascinating, that she was sitting here next to her precious Sergey!

But then Albina remarried and moved far away to Kamchatka, taking Sergey with her. Dina mourned him for a long time and wrote him long missives using printed letters. Albina had sent one of the letters back to Dina's mom a few years ago, as a keepsake.

Dina read it and laughed through her tears. "Helo Sergy. Today I went to the movees at 4 oclok. The movee was reely good. I reely liked it. Hau r yu? What movee did yu cee? I mis yu alot. Big kises. Yor Dina."

Every word was written in a pencil of a different color, and the letter was a kaleidoscope of uneven letters and rainbow colors.

They next met at the seaside in Anapa, and Dina knew that Sergey was the love of her life.

Nevertheless, in fourth grade, Dina unexpectedly found herself in love with a boy with black curls, called Vova Gladstein, who appeared in their class in the middle of the year, and then disappeared just as suddenly in the middle of the following year.

"The father was transferred" was the reason for such comings and goings of several schoolchildren in Dina's class, her school, and her town.

Vova went away and a gaping emptiness was left in her soul. Then Dina remembered Sergey and her heart went back to him once more. But not for long...

She fell in love again in eighth grade.

With Valera Revyakin, who was repeating the year, the biggest troublemaker at the school and a headache for all the teachers.



Why did he treat Dina in the same way that Sergey did all those years ago? He cared, and protected her – even though there was not much need for it – and Dina liked his touching solicitude.

It was interesting to hang out with him, as he told her different stories from his life, which made her blood run cold, and half of which, Dina later decided, were either made up or not Valera's stories at all.

Then he moved away after completing ninth grade.

Dina remembered their farewell: her tears, which she could not hold back, his kiss on the lips, which she treasured for a long time.

"We're moving really far away, to another country," said Valera to Dina, making her swear an oath to keep this a secret, "so I won't be able to write to you."

Dina started writing to Sergey again.

The correspondence with Sergey somehow faded away on its own, and resumed only when Dina received a wedding invitation from him when she was already at university. She did not come, of course, for it was too far away and too expensive. She did not have the time either, not with all the lectures and exams. Nevertheless, she wrote him a warm letter and they continued to occasionally exchange news and photos.

Since then, Sergey had already gotten divorced and was not planning to marry again – or so he wrote in his letters to Dina. Dina sometimes imagined them meeting somewhere, and their old tender friendship blossoming into love, and then...

So she knew that a family started with love. This meant that someone she loved needed to be at her side. Love was forever. She did not take her mom's experiences into account. Her mom was just unlucky for some reason.

\* \* \*

When Dina was very young, she once asked her mother, "Mom, why don't we have a dad?"

Her mother answered very calmly. "Our dad died. Never ask me about him again because it upsets me very much."

Dina did not want to upset her mother so she did not ask any more questions about her dad. If any friends living nearby or at the kindergarten asked her, "Where is your dad?" she told them what her mother had said.

One day, her mom came home with a new man and said to Dina,

"This is Uncle Tolya. He'll live with us now."

Dina was very excited and asked, "Can I call him Daddy?"

Uncle Tolya was delighted by this and said, "Of course, Dinochka, call me Dad."

Everything was wonderful at the start, they went to the movies together, to the zoo, and skiing.

Dina was proud of her dad and happy for her mom, who laughed a lot and dressed up.

Then Uncle Tolya started disappearing somewhere for a few days at a time, while Mom went around with red eyes and her hair uncombed, and told Dina that she was sick and that Uncle Tolya had gone away on a business trip.

"Dad, not Uncle Tolya," Dina corrected her mother.

Dina's mom would give her a strange look, not say anything back, and disappear into the kitchen or bedroom for long periods of time.

One day, Dina came back from school and found Mom in tears, and Da– Uncle Tolya yelling at her mother, also with tears in his eyes. He was holding the kitchen towel and kept wiping his eyes with it.

“Opening your legs for other men, that doesn’t count either?!” he was shouting.

He repeated those words two or three times so Dina remembered them for the rest of her life. But she did not know what they meant.

She also remembered how a strange oppressive tension settled over the apartment after that. As if Uncle Tolya’s yelling could suddenly appear from any corner, or from behind any curtain.

When she was left home alone, Dina tried to air the apartment, she opened all the windows and even sprayed the air with her mom’s perfume or Uncle Tolya’s cologne, but nothing helped. The feeling of hurt, the tears and the destroyed happiness, were stuck in the apartment like an unbearable load. Her mother laughed less and less, and Uncle Tolya took them to the cinema or the zoo less and less often. Then he did not come home for a very long time, and Dina’s mom said that he had gone away.

“Forever?” asked Dina.

“Forever,” said her mom. “Never ask me about him again, it upsets me very much.”

So Dina did not. She never had a Dad after that.

## The Student Dorms

Dina stopped to think about where she should go. The girls at the dorms were preparing for the exam that she has just passed. Aunt Ira was at work, Anya and Kolya were at university. It was cloudy outside and the rain could start at any second, and she did not want to get wet. It was rather boring to eat ice-cream alone in a cafe...

She decided to return to the dorms.

\* \* \*

The dorm rooms that were designed for two students usually housed three, and the rooms for three students housed four. It was the same in almost all the rooms, with very few exceptions.

On her floor, in the men's half of the building, lived a husband and wife in a two-person room, Yuri Tolokonnikov, a long-haired gorgeous guitar player from Dina's course, and Luda Zaytseva from the year above. They had gotten married last summer, and in September they were allowed to move into a separate room because they were from out of town, and they also said that they were going to have a baby soon. In actual fact, the academic year was nearly over and there was no sign of a baby or that one was on the way.

Four girls lived in the neighboring room, at least, that's what it said on the list hanging on their door. Yet Dina had never met any of them except one, Tanya Kharitonova, from the Faculty of Mechanization and Automation. Tanya was rather odd, she could be very engaging and outgoing, or walk around with a dumb half-smile on her face, ignoring everyone. If you greeted her in that moment, she would only glance at you with a vague look and keep floating down the corridor, without saying anything. Sometimes she would lie on her bed and groan loudly, almost scream. The first time that Dina heard those terrifying sounds, she knocked on Tanya's door, which was unlocked, and saw Tanya in that exact pose: knees under her chin, her arms wrapped around them, and her head swaying from side to side.

"Tanya, what's wrong?" Dina asked worriedly.

"My period..." Tanya groaned.

"Do you want some Tylenol?"

"No... it won't help... go away...."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

Dina only realized what had really happened to Tanya many, many years later.

\* \* \*

Dina's classmate, Arthur Davlatyan, who came from Armenia, also lived alone in a two-person room. Dina didn't wonder why he was so lucky – he just was.

Arthur was a generous guy and often had a group of classmates over, to celebrate a completed group project or an exam with tea. He always brought out a bottle of cognac with the tea. Not the usual cognac bottle with the factory cork and the regulation labels, but a large milky-white plastic flask, probably a liter in size. He always had incredibly beautiful and incomparably delicious dried fruits and nuts. Having once tried Arthur's delicacies, Dina could look with nothing but pity at their pathetic copies, displayed on the shelves of stores like Nature's Gifts.

Sometimes Arthur invited Dina to his room, to ask for her advice regarding a test or a term paper. Dina conscientiously explained all the hard parts to him, although she knew that it was hopeless since Arthur would never write the paper or project himself, so it was easier to simply write it for him. Which is what she did.

She did not like it one bit. If it had been first year, that would have been one thing, but they were in fourth year, and Arthur still had not completed a single exercise without someone else's help... How was he going to write his thesis? How was he going to work in this field? If he had to answer at the blackboard or during an oral exam, he muttered something unintelligible, plus his accent made his answer completely incomprehensible. But his record book didn't have any threes... not that he had any fives either, just fours. Dina was really surprised, as she knew plenty of smarter and more talented guys who the teachers were not so generous with.

"Arthur," Dina would say emphatically, "Why don't you study? At least memorize something, even if you don't understand anything! Fine, I'll write the paper and the project for you... But you'll have to get a job in the future, and you don't know anything, you can't even tell an acid from a salt by its formula!"

Arthur would only smile with his beautiful Eastern lips and drop his lush eyelashes over his velvet gaze. Then he would take a large packet of mandarins or dried fruit from the cupboard, place it on the table next to Dina and say, "I will not work. I only need diploma. And you will not work. You will live like a queen!"

No, Dina simply could not comprehend that – to go to university but not to study, to get the diploma but not work in the field!

It seemed that Konstantin Kolotozashvili also could not comprehend this – Dina heard rumors that Arthur had to try five times to pass every exam, and that Konstantin Konstantinovich was tortured every semester in the Chancellor's office, who made him change Arthur's mark from "Satis." or "Unsatis." to "Good." Then they would send Davlatyan to another teacher to retake the exam, who would then give him a four.

Dina occasionally considered Arthur as a possible partner. Especially as he had paid her special attention since first year, and even invited her to Armenia with him every summer. He told Dina that she would not have pay anything for the trip, that he would buy her the tickets and food, and even new clothes, and that he would take her to sea, whichever one she prefers, the Black Sea or the Caspian Sea...

When Dina told her mother about this, her mom started to actively persuade her daughter to go with Arthur to his homeland. But the Inner Voice, although brief, persistently told her not to go. "Don't... don't..." it repeated quietly but very firmly.

Dina never told her mom about Arthur again, and in response to questions about him, said that he had a long-term girlfriend. What if Dina told her mother that Arthur was proposing to marry her in the last year of university, and for her to go to Armenia, where she could live like a queen?

Dina did like Arthur. He was courteous, well-mannered and generous. She liked his appearance too. He was tall, slender, with slightly darker skin, beautiful hands and dark, kind eyes. Once, not so long ago, just before this spring term, Arthur had almost kissed Dina...

She had written him a rough draft of a term paper, and as usual, he had taken something tasty out of the cupboard, placed it on the table, and hugged Dina. Dina stood up from the chair and looked at him in surprise. He took her by the shoulders and brought his face close to hers. He was looking into her eyes, as if asking: May I? If he had not asked, Dina would have been all for it. She had never kissed anyone as an adult. She even got nervous as she waited for the kiss. But he was waiting for her permission, which she did not like. She said, "Don't, Arthur."

Arthur dropped his thick eyelashes over his eyes, smiled slightly, and let Dina go.

And Dina had left his room without taking the packet of dried fruit, back to the three-person room where four girls lived.

If Dina became the wife of Arthur Davlatyan, she would live with him in his very non-student-like room with carpets on the floor and the wall, the KVN television set and the Comet tape player. But she was not sure that she loved Arthur. It was one thing to like someone, but love... love was something else completely, Dina was sure of it, so she continued to live in the cramped room with one table for four people.

## Neighbors

“Did you pass?” Vera and Valya asked almost in unison when Dina appeared in the doorway.

They sat on either side of the rectangular table, which served as both a desk and a kitchen table, with their books and notebooks spread out. Dina’s artisanal cheat sheets lay in two piles at the edge of the table.

Vera and Valya were studying in a parallel group, so their exam with Konstantin Konstantinovich Kolotozashvili was tomorrow.

“Did you have any doubts?” replied Dina, and started changing.

“About what?” asked Valya.

“Ask something more interesting!” said Vera and threw a curious glance at Dina. “You got a five, I bet.”

“Really?” asked Valya incredulously.

Dina did not reply, taking off the whispering weightless cloak and changing into her fur-trimmed home slippers, which were slightly worn out but still quite neat.

She approached the table, looked over Vera’s shoulder into her notebook, then at the book, turned a few pages and said:

“You should memorize this. Kokon always fails people on the additional questions.”

“Kokon fails everyone on everything,” Valya said quietly.

Valya came from a village in the Vologda Oblast and could not get used to the big city even after four years. She spoke quietly, either because of her strict domestic upbringing, or because she was embarrassed by her country accent and provincial appearance, or maybe because of all of the above.

Once, Valya had asked Dina to work with her on grammar and pronunciation, flushing with embarrassment. Dina had written out a long list of Valya’s mistakes, which she had successfully fixed during the academic year. It was only the characteristic *okanye*<sup>1</sup> that seemed incurable.

“Yes. Everything,” said Dina. “But this is his favorite this term.”

Vera rushed over to the larger pile of cheat sheets and started rustling through it, looking for the right one.

“What did you get?” she asked.

Dina replied calmly:

“That’s what I got.” She added after a pause, “But he gave me five points automatically.”

Both girls stared at Dina in amazement. “Kokon?! Automatically?!”

Dina sat down on her bed and leaned back against the pillow. “Well, not quite, not automatically... semi-automatically.”

Vera and Valya again exclaimed almost at the same time, “Semi-automatically? What does that mean?”

“I took a question sheet, prepared my answer, approached the table and sat down, and then he said to me: ‘I don’t doubt your knowledge and won’t waste time asking you.’ He didn’t even look at my draft.”

Vera tsked. “What a beast! Why couldn’t he say so straight away?”

“That’s Kokon for you!” Added Valya.

“But do you know of any other teacher who loves his subject as much as he does?” asked Dina.

“He loves the ladies, not the subject,” interrupted Vera.

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<sup>1</sup> Okanye – A particular way of pronouncing the vowels ‘a’ and ‘o’, characteristic of certain Russian dialects (*trans*).

“Well, he’s not such a beast after all...” Valya interjected. “I remember how in the first lecture, he made it sound like I should just pack up and leave the university immediately, and then he ended up helping me on the exam.”

“What about his humor?” Dina suddenly wanted to discuss Konstantin Konstantinovich, for some reason. “Everyone at university quotes his jokes!”

“Oh yes!” Valya agreed. “Yet he never repeats himself... not like that man... who teaches scientific communism... when he makes a joke, you don’t know which way to look...”

Vera rolled her eyes up dreamily. “Yes, Kokon is not a man you’d forget even after university. He’s a ray of light in a dark realm!” Then she remembered where she was, and picked up a book again. “All right, enough chit-chat, I’d like to pass the final exam on first try!”

Dina stretched out on the bed and put her hands behind her head.

“Go ahead, I’ll have a rest. Let me know if you’d like some tea.”

She looked at the color portrait of Muslim Magomaev, whose songs she adored, especially the recording in Italian. She had cut out his picture from a magazine, maybe the Soviet Screen, and it hung opposite Dina on the side of the cupboard, together with a few other portraits, each one with their own story.

There was Jean Marais, smiling from a glossy photographic print, which Dina had begged from her aunt, and who had received in turn from her friend. There was an autograph in the lower corner, done in blue ink. Although Aunt Ira tried to explain to Dina that the signature did not belong to Jean Marais himself, that her friend had added the autograph herself, Dina refused to believe it.

Next to it hung the terrible quality picture of Anna Magnani from a film Dina had never seen, which had been copied from a tiny photograph and enlarged to the size of a magazine page. She had once read a small article about the Italian actress with the beautiful name that was so well-suited to her unusual appearance. The article was illustrated by a few black-and-white shots from the films that she starred in. The image that was hanging on her cupboard now – the actress’ face with contrast lighting – was the one that Dina had liked the most, and she had asked the laboratory technician from the school physics laboratory to copy and enlarge this portrait.

Slightly to the left hung Dina Durbin. An attractive woman, but not in Dina’s taste. It was her mother’s idea: to name her daughter after a famous actress with a surname that was so similar to her own.

“When you become famous,” her mom would say, “people will only remember Dina Durbin because her name is similar to yours!” And she would chuckle.

There was the portrait of Dina’s favorite author. Dina had begged her mother for this portrait for a long time, done photographically on embossed paper that looked like fabric, with a loop attached to the thick cardboard backing – a serious, well-made portrait. It had cost two rubles and ten kopeks, serious money for their budget, especially since Dina’s mother did not consider a writer’s portrait to be an essential item, even if he was a favorite. Nevertheless, when Dina finished nine classes with almost perfect marks, with only one four, her mom remembered the strange request and decided to reward her daughter for her hard work. Besides, it was when her mother had been promoted at work, and she started to earn eighteen rubles and forty kopeks more every month. Dina’s mother was not in fact greedy, just very practical.

And Muslim Magomaev... He does look a little like...

Never mind! It’s not important right now! Dina wanted to remember how the exam for her toughest subject had gone. She mentally rewound the imaginary film, which had recorded the events, and started watching.

Here she is walking to the teacher’s table, catching his eyes, which are staring at her legs, and stopping midway. Konstantin Konstantinovich Kolotozashvili, dressed in a loose red shirt, with a high collar and wide sleeves, gathered at the cuffs, which is open at the chest and tucked into



tight black pants, rises from his chair and stands to his full considerable height. He extends his arms towards Dina and says in a rich baritone, "Congratulations on an excellent finish of the semester, Dina Aleksandrovna."

In the exact moment that Dina, trembling with happiness, realized that her teacher was actually Muslim Magomaev, somehow here, in the exam auditorium, her neighbor Vera stuck her head through the doorway, and unceremoniously interrupted this incredible moment of meeting her favorite singer:

"Dina, why aren't you getting changed? Some tea would be nice."

Dina clearly knew that Vera was not present at the exam...

She opened her eyes.

Muslim Magomaev was looking at Dina from the photographic print, with a red shirt open at the chest, extending his arms towards her, with his mouth wide open, as if he was saying "Congra-a-atulations." Vera was sitting at the table, leaning back on the squeaking chair.

"You've got nothing to do anyway," she added. As if Dina needed to be persuaded or compelled!

Dina stood up, fixed her clothing, and picking up the kettle that stood on the windowsill, stepped out of the room. She headed to the kitchen to boil the water on the gas stove, and so couldn't hear the conversation of her two neighbors behind her.

Vera: "She's so lucky, getting out of this exam."

Valya: "Yes, and with perfect marks too."

Vera: "Well, she doesn't get these fives easily."

Valya: "Yeah... only this one seems to have dropped down from the sky."

"Yup, you don't say. And from Kokon, of all people!"

"Maybe she has really caught his eye?"

"Hmmm, maybe. She's not gorgeous but she can present herself well."

"That's true."

"She'll be an idiot if she falls for him."

"Yeah... Like Rimma, and then she'll need to get an abortion... Where is our Rimma, by the way?"

"In the reading room, maybe."

"Ha! Rimma in the reading room! Don't make me laugh!"

"She needs to retake the exam with Barbara, and unless she studies her butt off in the reading room, she won't pass."

"True."

Dina entered the room in that moment, together with the boiling kettle and Rimma, the fourth occupant of the room, whom Vera and Valya had just been gossiping about.

## Rimma

Rimma, an eye-catching brunette with dark gray eyes and the graceful moves of a capricious cat, was a very attractive girl. Yes, it could be said that Rimma was the only exception to Dina's theory that beautiful people were either not real or lived in faraway places. Like Anna Magnani.

Rimma was good at utilizing the modest arsenal of makeup that the poor university students could afford: pearly eye shadow in either gray or light blue, often bought from gypsies, made from goodness knows what, and placed in a plastic black or white checkers piece, covered with a piece of cellophane, and dark pink lipstick, which she saved for special occasions. Her eyeliner was the same as most of the other girls: a black pencil from the Artwork pencil set. Rimma wore her hair in a ponytail, like Dina and most of the girls, but her hair was thicker and shinier than the others. Yes, Rimma could certainly be called a beautiful girl.

She was also very good at drawing. She had a large set of pencils in a huge carton, which opened and could be set up in a special way, so that the pencils were displayed at a few different levels, and a box with pastels. Rimma used the pencils for the usual drawing album, and the pastels for large and small pieces of black paper, which were used to cover photoplates, and which, Rimma said, her father especially collected for her from his photograph friends. Rimma Yakovleva also sang beautifully and played the guitar.

But she studied at university without any desire or diligence. Maybe not everyone, but Dina knew that it was not because Rimma was stupid. It was just that she found it boring. Nobody knew what she was really interested in – perhaps drawing, singing and reading?

\* \* \*

Dina poured the hot water into the special infusing teapot that Vera and Valya had prepared, while Rimma said cheerfully,

“Hi! I'm just in time, as usual.”

Vera, who liked to say something spiteful at every opportunity, did not fail to do so. “Oh yes, as always, straight to the table.”

Rimma, who must have been in a good mood, laughed. “All right, Vera! I'll wash the dishes today.”

“What wonderful news!” Vera replied sarcastically.

Rimma did not respond to that, but took out a block of chocolate and placed it on the table.

“I almost forgot – here – I got a present. I haven't even taken a bite of it myself!”

Vera, deciding to completely kill Rimma's unexpectedly good mood, spoke again. “So who is feeding you chocolate, then?”

“Someone,” Rimma replied mysteriously and started spreading butter on a slice of baguette.

“Someone Someonevich Kolotozashvili?” asked the horrid girl.

Rimma looked at Vera in bewilderment, her eyes filled with tears, and she threw the unfinished sandwich on the table and ran out of the room.

Valya timidly criticized Vera. “What did you say that for? You know that...”

Vera, feeling guilty but refusing to admit it, snapped back. “No, I don't. She didn't say anything to me personally.”

“I told you.” Valya spoke timidly but reproachfully.

Dina took Valya's side. “Go and apologize.”

“I won't. What a princess! It's her fault for being such an idiot around a guy like him.”

Valya stood up and left the room.

Vera, who had learned since childhood that the best form of defense is attack, turned to Dina. “Did Kokon give you an automatic five just because, or is he making a move on you too?”

“Could be just because, and could be because he’s making a move,” Dina spoke calmly, without pausing her tea drinking.

“Why the vagueness? Is he making a move or not?” Vera persisted.

“If I were you, I would find Rimma and say sorry.”

“Did you know about Rimma’s abortion, too?”

Dina nearly choked on her sandwich but pretended that the news had not shocked her. She waited a moment and said slowly, between sips of hot tea, “Whether I know... or not... is not important... But you know... and you’re using it against her.”

“It’s her own fault. What an idiot, falling for that one...”

The door opened, and Valya and Rimma entered. Vera, defiantly slurping her tea and eating the chocolate, stared out the window.

\* \* \*

In the evening, Dina took a mirror out of her bedside drawer, carefully inspected her face and wiped it over with a cotton ball soaked in almond milk, whose smell she had loved since childhood. Her mother had the same one, in the same glass bottle. She used a pencil to fix her eyebrows and drew a line over her upper eyelids. She then opened a round cardboard box with powder and dabbed the white puff over her face. She barely touched her lips with a pink lipstick and started to paint her well-tended nails with a pearly pink nail polish.

Vera and Valya, who were still poring over their books and notes, looked at Dina’s actions with envy.

Vera, who could not keep quiet for very long, found a reason. “Lucky Dina! Now you can paint your nails and do nothing.”

Rimma, who was reading a book in bed, glanced up at Dina but did not say anything.

Dina was quiet too. She approached her cupboard.

“Where are you off to?” Vera kept pestering her.

There was nobody to control the arrogant Vera in this room. Valya did not dare to speak up against Vera, being in a sort of subservient position. Rimma simply avoided her, like a puddle, to avoid being accidentally splattered with mud by a passing car or bicycle. Only Dina sometimes told Vera what she thought of her most flagrant violations of polite manners. But in truth, it was like water off a duck’s back, as only a more rude and vulgar person could have shut up Vera.

Without waiting for an answer, Vera stipulated. “Off on a date, I bet. With Kokon, I bet. You’ve got to pay off that semi-automatic mark!”

It must be said, Vera sometimes understood perfectly well when she had said too much. But the realization came too late, together with the knowledge that a word spoken is like a bird that’s already flown.

Vera bit her tongue and threw a nervous glance towards Rimma.

The other girl slowly put down her book and looked at Dina questioningly.

Dina, as if she had not noticed either Vera’s words or Rimma’s stare, continued to comb her hair in front of the mirror.

Rimma waited a few long moments, and asked, “Is this true, Dina?”

“Yes,” Dina replied calmly.

Vera and Valya stared at Dina with their mouths open. Rimma’s beautiful lips slowly twisted into a smile that looked more like a grimace.

“Well, well, well...” she said.

Dina stopped what she was doing, approached Rimma, and asked, staring at her openly, “Rimma, did I steal him from you?”

Rimma looked down and did not say anything. Her face was a frozen mask.

“Why aren’t you saying anything?” Dina gave Rimma a long look. “If I don’t go on this date, will you feel better?” Rimma was silent. “Will you? Tell me!”

Vera and Valya watched this scene with disbelief.

Rimma spoke slowly. “Whatever, I don’t care anymore... It’s just that... you could have at least lied about it...”

“Oh! Lie to you! No way!” Dina snapped. She turned to Vera and Valya, who were sitting at the table, and said, trying to keep her overwhelming emotions under control: “You are the ones, who are used to living surrounded by lies and envy. I believe that we should live honestly, love openly and dislike openly... You’ve pulled so many masks over your faces, this one and that one... Then you go hissing like geese behind each other’s backs.”

“What has got you so worked up? Off you go, then.” Vera was stung but did not plan to back down.

“Oh, I’m going,” Dina said. “But the rest of you, and especially you, Vera, you ought to think about how to live from now on.”

“Yeah, we’ll think about it, and why don’t you slap some more makeup on, to show how pretty you are,” Vera kept up.

“Thanks for the advice,” Dina said calmly. “You’re right.” She took the pencil and drew the lines slightly thicker. “By the way, you would do well to look after yourself. With your old, worn bathrobes and unwashed hair, you’ll keep sitting here until you get married to the first man that looks at you twice.”

“Oh, and you’re so special that you won’t marry the first one, of course!” Vera responded.

“If I fall in love with him, I will,” said Dina, putting on her coat and tying a gauzy kerchief around her neck. “But I’m not going to open my legs before I know that it’s love.”

Rimma said suddenly, “Kokon won’t ask you, he’ll just open them.”

Dina turned to Rimma. “Like hell! I’m not going to let anyone do something to me against my will!” She forced herself to calm down, then added, “Girls, let’s not fight! I’m not doing anything bad to anyone right now, not interfering with anyone’s business or stealing anyone... And I don’t wish anyone any harm.”

With that she stepped out of the door.

Vera, always wanting to have the last word, muttered, “Yeesh, she’s so righteous that it makes me sick.”

While Valya said slowly and thoughtfully, “Well, yes... she is righteous... and she lives the right way. And does everything right. Maybe that’s the way to do it?”

Rimma grimaced bitterly. “Righteous! Let’s just see how Kokon fixes her up.”

## The First Date

Dina perched by a mezzanine window inside a house standing beside the cinema. It was an unconscious urge. She had been walking from the tram stop and had glanced at her small gold watch, which was a gift from Aunt Ira and Uncle Sasha when Dina had started university. The watch showed twenty-five minutes to seven, so she had ten minutes left before the appointed time. Dina did not want to stand around and wait for Konstantin Konstantinovich to arrive, since she did not know if he was already there or not. So she had stepped into the first entrance she had seen, in a large pre-war building with a spacious and echoing vestibule, and a wide staircase with cast-iron railing.

Somebody had left the day's newspaper on the windowsill. It had clearly been used as a tablecloth recently as it showed dried pink circles and drops of wine, crumbs, and scraps of foil from processed cheese. And all this right over the "Speech of the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Comrade L. I. Brezhnev at the XVI Congress of the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League on May 26, 1970." Next year, she would have to take this newspaper to the reading room and write some sort of paper about the Congress...

Dina stood and watched the evening city, the people walking along the street, the traffic lights switching over briskly and cheerfully, and seemed to be thinking of nothing at all. That is, she was not thinking of anything in particular, her thoughts appearing out of nowhere and disappearing amongst the waves of emotion that came forth from the depths of her being... It was hard to describe the feeling exactly.

Dina had felt something similar when she saw her name on the list of people, who were accepted into university.

She was happy, of course. All that stressful preparation, all those sleepless nights, and the worry before each exam – what kind of question will she get? – and afterwards – what score did the Committee give her, will it be enough to pass?

But together with the satisfaction and excitement, she also felt lost before this independent new life, waiting for her in a strange big city. She would no longer have her mother beside her, to wake Dina up on time, to make food, to remind Dina about lessons and clothes... Plus her doubts about whether she had chosen the right future profession, since all that she knew about it was just the cover of a book, speaking nothing of its content, or only mentioning it superficially. It was the understanding that she had made a very important step, and that to cancel it would require not less but maybe even more effort.

She felt happiness, doubt, bewilderment...

Same as now... Of course, many girls would have given anything to be in her place. But is this what Dina wanted? And then what?

She felt happiness, doubt, bewilderment...

Yes, she liked Konstantin Konstantinovich.

Not only as an outstanding teacher: even the less diligent students left his classes, be they lectures or seminars, with much reluctance.

Not only because of his captivating appearance. Despite his eye-catching looks, there was something elusive in his manner, like patina on the surface of polished silver, which gave this external glimmer a hint of nobility.

It was not only Konstantin Konstantinovich's sense of humor that Dina liked: if he was telling an anecdote or making a joke, it was a clever and subtle one, and he never allowed himself any slimy

ambiguity that some of the other teachers employed in the hope of being treated as “one of the boys” by the students.

It was not only his erudition, which he did not use to show off but strictly for its intended purpose, to expand his students’ horizons.

Dina liked Konstantin Konstantinovich. Yet she would have never thought of dreaming about him as a close friend. Even more so, as a man.

Then why was she here? She had been invited to the movies. She had been invited on a date for the first time in her life. Not just by anyone, not a classmate or even an older student.

What if it was a joke? Perhaps he invited her and was now watching from some hiding place to see if she would come, like a complete bimbo. Or he decided to have a little fun: I’ll go with an ugly girl to the movies for a change, and she’ll think that I’m in love with her...

“Whatever it may be, I’ve come tonight,” thought Dina, glanced at her watch again and resolutely left the vestibule.

\* \* \*

Dina saw Konstantin Konstantinovich almost immediately. He stood apart from the crowd that milled around the ticket office and the entrance to the cinema. More precisely, he was walking back and forth, glancing around him. One could even say that he was glancing around nervously or perhaps eagerly.

He noticed Dina when she was about ten steps away, and immediately walked forward to meet her.

Konstantin Konstantinovich moved so eagerly in Dina’s direction that they nearly collided. Dina had to stop suddenly to prevent this.

“So punctual!” Konstantin Konstantinovich said excitedly, stretching his hand out to Dina. “You ought to have delayed for five to ten minutes longer.”

Dina also extended her hand, which he shook jerkily but firmly.

“You think so? Why?” She asked, staring at Konstantin Konstantinovich with unfeigned surprise.

“Well,” he smiled in mild embarrassment, “to make me worry a little about whether you were coming or not.”

“I shall have to disappoint you, Konstantin Konstantinovich, but that is not my style.”

“How interesting.” He looked at Dina seriously, but the embarrassment and fluster remained, barely hidden by his smile. “Could we continue with this topic after a short discussion regarding a burning question?”

“I’m listening,” said Dina.

“We can go to the movies, or we can go to the cafe. Hmm... We can also go to the movies and then the cafe.”

“The third option, if you don’t mind.”

Konstantin Konstantinovich laughed and looked at his student even more carefully. He took the tickets out of his chest pocket and taking Dina smoothly under his arm, headed to the entrance.

“We have ten minutes to go to the snack bar. Would you like anything to eat?” he asked.

“No, thank you, I’m full,” replied Dina. “But if you’d like...”

Konstantin Konstantinovich smiled. “I’m full too. Besides, we have dinner waiting for us afterwards. You have nothing against the Rainbow?”

“No, nothing,” said Dina.

What else could she have said? Students like Dina, who lived on a study allowance, did not frequent cafes and restaurants, unless it was for someone's birthday when they all chipped in, or for a classmate's wedding, which were occurring more and more often towards the end of university.

They walked to their seats at the very center of the room. Konstantin Konstantinovich pulled down the seat for Dina and sat down himself. He sat, almost facing Dina, and looked at her with a smile.

"So, we had stopped on your style. You believe that a woman must be punctual and true to her word?"

"I believe that everyone should be punctual and true to their word," replied Dina, staring straight ahead.

She observed the people passing by, the new, painted curtain that had replaced the old plush fabric, and the stylish lamps, for the cinema had reopened only recently after renovations.

"How about female weaknesses and foibles?" Persisted Konstantin Konstantinovich.

"Well, to each his own, I guess."

"You don't like it."

"No, I don't."

"What do you like, then?"

"Me? Naturalness."

"And directness."

"And directness."

"So, is it possible to live like this?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it difficult?"

"On the contrary, it's very easy."

"Really?" her teacher asked, still smiling.

Then the lights grew dimmer, and the noise from spectators, getting comfortable and hurrying to find their seat, grew louder. Dina's companion leaned close to her ear and whispered:

"You have roused my curiosity. May we continue this conversation later?"

Dina turned towards him. The cinema screen began to glow. Her teacher's face was very close in the gathering darkness and looked especially striking – the symmetrical, strong facial features were emphasized by the light falling from one side and reflecting in his eyes, as well as the very attentive but gentle and thrilling gaze, and the slightly parted, smiling lips.

"We may," said Dina and turned back to the screen, but she could see Konstantin Konstantinovich watching her, out of the corner of her eye.

She calmly met his gaze. He smiled again, then turned to face the screen.



## Later in the Evening

They reached the doors to the Rainbow Cafe by squeezing through a large crowd wishing to get inside. It was the most popular cafe among young intellectuals, and it always had live music and a lack of free seats.

Even when the crowd realized that these two were not rudely skipping the line but that the doorman had gestured at them in welcome, perhaps as they had reserved a table or for another reason, the desperate crowd did not deign to part and let the lucky pair through.

Dina and Konstantin Konstantinovich approached the cloak room, and he took the lady's coat, then took off his own and handed them to the attendant.

Dina was fixing her hair in front of the mirror, and saw her teacher approaching and adjusting his thick, wavy black hair, running first one hand and then the other through them like a comb, and smoothing his jacket. Yet he was looking at Dina as he performed all these actions.

Dina turned to Konstantin Konstantinovich. "You were so sure that I would come with you to the cafe?"

He smiled and said, trying to sound playful, "No, I wasn't. I wasn't even sure if you would come at all."

"But you bought the tickets and reserved a table at the café... I suppose you could sell the tickets to someone else, but the cafe doesn't refund the deposit."

Still smiling, Konstantin Konstantinovich looked down. "If you had not come, nothing else would have upset me further." He glanced up again. "To hell with the money that I would have lost."

Dina noted again how changeable this man's face was, and how such a simple movement of facial muscles could create so many different smiles.

She stared at her teacher in silence, as if trying to discern if he was telling the truth or just prattling.

It appeared that Konstantin Konstantinovich did not know the answer himself. His face showed a mixture of curiosity about his remarkable student, whom he had known for three years and yet, as it suddenly turned out, he did not know at all, and disconcertion before her disarming frankness, as well as tension caused by his desire to not lose this mask of a frivolous fop, and the fear that it was the mask that would repulse this girl, who refused to play games and talk insincerities.

\* \* \*

They were shown to the only free table, which stood in the prime location with a Reserved sign, by the huge window that revealed the glowing lights of the city. The table was also a good place from where to see the stage with a five-person vocal-instrumental ensemble.

Dina sat down on the chair that Konstantin Konstantinovich had pulled out for her. He sat opposite, continuing to observe his companion with unconcealed interest.

An elegant, sharply dressed man approached the table.

Seeing him, Konstantin Konstantinovich stood up and extended his hand:

"Hello, Misha! Let me introduce you: Dina... Dina Alexandrovna. Mikhail Anatolievich."

"Good evening. Pleased to meet you," said Mikhail Anatolievich, then quietly asked Konstantin Konstantinovich, "Any special requests?"

"I'll find you if anything," he replied.

"Certainly. Enjoy your evening." Mikhail Anatolievich nodded to Dina and walked away.

Konstantin Konstantinovich lit the candle in the clear red holder and looked at Dina in embarrassment. "I am currently feeling an overwhelming urge to tell the truth." He beamed another one of his numerous expressive smiles and dropped his gaze. "I didn't pay a deposit... my friend,

my old classmate, works here as the manager.” He nodded in the direction of the departed Mikhail Anatolievich, and looked at Dina. “Misha, I mean... Thus, this table is always mine.”

“Do you have a friend managing the cinema too?” Smiled Dina.

Konstantin Konstantinovich laughed with relief, finally sensing his companion’s joking tone. “No, I bought the tickets myself. Half an hour before you came.”

“I’ll say this straight up: I can pay for the ticket and dinner myself. Which I will do a bit later, so that I don’t put you in an awkward position,” Dina said quietly but firmly.

“Well, you already have,” Her teacher tried to appear offended.

“Never mind, you’ll get over it.”

“How come? May I ask?”

“Demonstrating my independence.”

“Oh my! This is serious.” Konstantin Konstantinovich rested his chin on his hands and stared at Dina. “You’re becoming more and more interesting by the minute.”

“So are you.”

“Me? Why?”

“And why me?”

“I asked first,” Dina’s companion chuckled.

“All right, I’ll tell you the truth. Although I still need to pass the state examination with you.”

“And defend your thesis!” her teacher pointed out with a cheeky smile. “I am the President of the State Committee at your Faculty... but go on! Nothing ventured, as they say.” He cut himself off. “By the way, how about some champagne? It was your last exam today! My treat.” Without waiting for a reply, Konstantin Konstantinovich called a waiter over and ordered a bottle. “So, I am all ears. Why do I surprise you?”

“Do you know what they say about you at university? Among the students, I mean?”

“Hmmm... Not all of it, I bet.” Dina’s teacher stared at her with an attentive and expectant smile.

“What do you know?” asked Dina.

“Oh no! You started it so you ought to continue.”

“All right, I will.” She paused, as if summoning the courage. “Well, they say that by the end of the course there’s no female student left who hasn’t... well, you know.”

Konstantin Konstantinovich covered his face with his hands as he laughed. “Yes, yes, I’ve heard this. However...”

Dina interrupted him. “That’s not all. Half of them are then forced to have abortions.”

“Just one small correction,” Konstantin Konstantinovich interrupted, “no bimbos... They also say that I have a child in every year level.”

“I don’t find this funny.” Dina looked serious.

“Well, it depends,” He stopped laughing and looked at Dina. “So what do you find surprising?”

“What I heard about you does not match what I am seeing right now.”

“Really? What doesn’t match?”

“Firstly, you’re not such an idiot...”

Konstantin Konstantinovich chortled. “Well, well! An idiot, but not a complete idiot! Why, thank you!”

“Don’t interrupt me,” Dina rebuked him. “You’re intelligent and have a good sense of humor.”

“One can’t look at beautiful girls with these attributes?”

“One can look, I suppose, but not at every single one...”

The waiter arrived at this moment and began removing the two extra sets of cutlery, and arranging the appetizers on the table.

“Is it OK if I smoke?” asked Konstantin Konstantinovich, as he continued to stare at Dina with the same bewildered and surprised expression on his face.

“Yes, of course.”

“You do not approve of my lifestyle then?” he asked once the waiter had left.

“What do you think?”

Dina lowered her eyes and began inspecting her pearly nails shimmering in the candlelight. She felt awkward as it sounded like she was lecturing her teacher, who was a grown man and free to live the way he wants.

“I am beginning to fear that you came on this date with only one goal, and that is to lead me back onto the right path. Hmmm?”

“Oh dear,” thought Dina. “Now I’ve gone too far.”

“No, that’s not true.” She stumbled over her words a little, but immediately regained her composure. “I came because I like you.” She was silent for a short time as if gathering her courage again. “The more I speak with you, the more interesting you become.” She looked up at him.

Surprise flashed across her teacher’s face, and he kept staring at Dina.

“Just don’t think that it will be the same with me as with all the other girls. You didn’t invite me to the movies and to dinner just for nothing, right?” Dina continued.

“No,” Konstantin Konstantinovich replied gravely.

“Well, you won’t get anywhere.”

“Get where?”

“Anywhere.”

“Can we have dinner at least?” He smiled. “I’m starving.”

Dina felt the tension drain away from his easy transition from a serious to joking tone, and said:

“Yes, we can have dinner.”

“Shall we start then? Bon appetit.”

“Bon appetit.”

They began eating their salads.

Konstantin Konstantinovich suddenly stopped. “Oh! The champagne! Where is our champagne?” he called to the waiter.

The waiter apologized and immediately returned with a bottle in an ice bucket, opened it in one smooth movement, with only a short hissing pop and some light smoke from the cork, and filled their glasses, again wishing them a pleasant meal.

Konstantin Konstantinovich lifted his glass. “To you, Dina... Aleksandrovna. Congratulations on completing fourth year.”

“Thank you, Konstantin Konstantinovich.” Dina took a sip of the sparkling wine and placed the glass back on the table.

Konstantin Konstantinovich continued to devour his salad and very soon finished it all, even picking up the crumbs. Dina ate a little lazily, as if she was not hungry at all.

“Do you smoke?” asked Konstantin Konstantinovich, taking out a cigarette.

“Sometimes,” said Dina.

He extended a packet of Capital cigarettes towards her. “Please.”

Without replying, Dina took a flat brown packet of imported ladies’ cigarettes from her handbag, took one out, and brought it to her lips.

Konstantin Konstantinovich, expressing admiration by kinking his eyebrow, lit a match for her.

Dina smoked by barely inhaling and releasing the smoke as an impressive thin trickle that drifted upwards.

Music started playing as the musicians returned to the stage after a break. They were all quite young, with slightly longer hair than what was allowed by the unwritten rules for Komsomol youth – and there was no other kind of youth in the country – but musicians were probably permitted these liberties, in order to create a stage image. Two of them had handlebar mustaches, with a pair of

tinted Diplomat glasses perched on the nose of one, while one of the clean-shaven guys was wearing skin-tight, white, completely white, pants. Jeans were only starting to become fashionable and were a rarity, accessible only to the “golden youth,” who found money who knows where for foreign clothes and expensive restaurants. White jeans were exceedingly exotic.

“We hadn’t finished our conversation,” said Konstantin Konstantinovich when Dina looked away from the stage and began to extinguish her cigarette in the ashtray.

She glanced in surprise at her companion.

“Have you said everything that you wanted to say about my person?”

“Yes, everything,” Dina replied.

“Let me summarize. I am an idiot.”

“Stop, that’s not what I wanted to say.” Dina tried to interrupt Konstantin Konstantinovich.

“Wait, wait, wait!” he waved at her. “I am an idiot, but, luckily, not a complete idiot. I’m a womanizer. An incurable womanizer, it seems. On the other hand, I appear to have some rudiments of intellect and a good sense of humor. This is what surprised you the most.” He looked at Dina with a smile.

Dina lowered her eyes to her plate and inspected the green pea stuck on her fork: when and why did she do that?

“Why are you silent now? That’s exactly what you said to me.”

She looked at Konstantin Konstantinovich and said firmly, “All right. That’s exactly what I said.”

“Well, then,” he laughed. “Does that mean that I have grown a little in your eyes?”

“I suppose.”

“Excellent! From this moment on, I will do everything in my power to if not score more points, at least avoid losing the ones I’ve gained.” He picked up his glass. “Hmmm?”

Dina raised her glass in silence.

“Well, then,” repeated her teacher. “Now it is my turn to express my surprise. May I?”

“Please,” replied Dina.

“Can I be honest?”

“As much as is possible for you.”

Konstantin Konstantinovich chuckled at these words and continued, “I understood that you were clever over the three years that I have been teaching your group. I only began to realize that you are beautiful, today, at the exam.”

“You’re joking,” Dina interrupted.

Konstantin Konstantinovich shook his head in disagreement. “And I am further persuaded with every passing minute.” His voice changed and started to vibrate slightly with emotion.

“Don’t,” Dina spoke up in the short pause. “I’m far from Rimma Yakovleva and those other beauties.”

Konstantin Konstantinovich got himself under control and continued, “You have correctly pointed out about the beauties. A ‘beauty’ and a beautiful woman are two different things. Didn’t you know?”

Dina started examining her nails again, now trying to get her flustered emotions under control.

“Indeed, you weren’t one of those beauties, at least, according to my classification. I saw in you a bookworm, a bluestocking, and a future career woman.”

Dina looked up at him with interest.

“Today, as you might have noticed, I realized that you have very attractive legs.” He smiled. “But when you put me in my place with just a look, it made me study you more closely.” Now Konstantin Konstantinovich’s emotions were reflected in how much his eyes shone. He took a drag of his cigarette. “And now,” he exhaled. “I can’t stop being surprised.”

“And what surprises you?”

“Your extraordinary life position. It’s the first time I’ve heard that it is easier to live by being sincere and natural than being contrived... sneaky... Or by flirting.”

“What’s so complicated about that?”

“Well... A person always wants something from others. So they have to adjust... play along... sometimes change themselves, or in better cases, bend to the rules.”

“Not everyone wants something from other people,” Dina said with her usual confidence.

“Do you think so? You don’t need anything from anyone else?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Hmmm,” Konstantin Konstantinovich said thoughtfully. “Well, perhaps at your current age and position, you need less than what will soon become the absolute necessity.”

“What do you mean?” she asked incredulously.

“Right now, you are a student. A smart one. You earn your position as a top student and your family’s pride using your brains, persistence and drive. But time will pass, and you will fall in love...” He stopped suddenly. “Love will come to you...” He stopped again. “Or are you in love already?”

Dina dropped her gaze to the candle flame and said, “Please continue with your thought.”

Konstantin Konstantinovich continued. “A person falls in love with another person and starts to demand reciprocal feelings from them. This becomes a performance... a game. Sometimes mediocre, and sometimes simply vile. I suppose you cannot even imagine what love or infatuation can turn into.”

He spoke in agitation, and Dina suddenly remembered the scene between her mom and Uncle Tolya, although she didn’t know what this had to do with what her teacher was telling her.

“Then comes your career. It is an even dirtier beast. If you stay yourself, ‘natural and direct’ as you call it, you won’t get anywhere. At best, you will stay in the lowest position until you retire. If your directness will get in the way, they will fire you in a flash.” He took a long drag of his cigarette, then breathed out the smoke and continued much more calmly, with a slight smirk, “So, young lady, perhaps you should reconsider your principles before it is too late.”

Dina took a deep breath and said, keeping her voice even. “I’m already in love,” she added after a short pause, “with you.” She was silent for a second, but before her companion could say anything, she added, “But I don’t intend to demand anything from you. Do you understand?” She looked directly at Konstantin Konstantinovich.

“Is that so?” The clearly embarrassed Konstantin Konstantinovich tried to maintain a playful tone.

But he was taken aback, discouraged, and didn’t know what to do with this confession.

The hot food arrived very conveniently at this moment, and Konstantin Konstantinovich started to eagerly help the waiter, who was surprised by such keenness.

Dina was also glad for the reprieve, so she turned to the stage and looked at the musicians and then at the area in front of the stage, where a few couples were dancing the still popular twist to the beloved tune of *The Black Cat*<sup>2</sup>. She really did not want to tear her gaze away from Konstantin Konstantinovich, but she could not look at him without feeling emotional – maybe it was the effect of the champagne?

Her favorite teacher looked quite different tonight from his usual image as a strict and unapproachable teacher, the way he was at university. Tonight, he was stylishly dressed: narrow trousers, a light brown tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows and leather buttons, and a turtleneck cream sweater, and his whole appearance spoke of lightness, holidays, a game.

“He is so handsome!” trilled Dina’s soul. “And tonight he is with me.” Her feminine vanity timidly piped up, without any expectations for the future, and not thinking about the past.

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<sup>2</sup> The Black Cat – A popular song of 1963, composed by Y. Saulsky, lyrics by M. Tanich (*trans*).

“Do you dance?” asked Konstantin Konstantinovich when the waiter had finished his job and left, and the ensemble started to play *The Moonstone*<sup>3</sup>.

“Yes,” replied Dina.

“May I ask you to dance?” Her companion stood up and reached for her hand.

Dina thought that she could not possibly get any more flustered, that she had reached all possible limits that were compatible with life, so she barely touched her teacher’s palm with her fingers. Her heart was ready to stop altogether – it had deviated from its normal rhythm so suddenly that it simply couldn’t remember it, and was thus in complete disarray.

Konstantin Konstantinovich led Dina to the center of the dance area and held her right hand in his, while his other hand rested ever so gently on her back.

Dina’s breathing had become almost even and her heart had calmed down somewhat and continued its work, albeit in very unusual, hitherto unknown rhythm... No, it recalled that something similar had happened when Arthur Davlatyan had invited Dina to slow dances at student parties – his touch had been just as pleasing. And yet everything was different this time and even more intense.

One of Dina’s hands lay against Konstantin Konstantinovich’s chest, feeling the soft woolen fluffiness of his tweed jacket. The other hand absorbed the heat of the man’s palm, sensing the slightest movement of his muscles as he squeezed and released Dina’s fingers. It seemed as if streams of energy were flowing from his hand... entering her, filling her up. His breath touched her cheek... Dina could hear it, loud and uneven... and it stirred something up inside her.

“You’re so light,” Konstantin Konstantinovich said in her ear.

His voice had become low and slightly husky. She glanced up and her whole being was enveloped in the light radiating from his eyes.

“Really?” She asked, bewildered, not meaning to say that at all.

“Really.” He laughed and pressed her close to him.

He released her at once, but that quick embrace, the passing touch of cheek to cheek, and his low laughter, almost made Dina swoon.

“Bring me the moonstone... bring me the moonstone...” the lead singer uttered, then the music subsided, the saxophone player and guitarists put down their instruments, and the musicians went off for a break.

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<sup>3</sup> The Moonstone – A song composed in 1966 by A. Ostrovsky, lyrics by I. Kashezheva (*trans*).

## Spring Rain

Dina and Konstantin Konstantinovich walked slowly across the bridge towards the tram stop.

They had spoken so much and so eagerly at the café, amid the noise and music, that it seemed strange that both were silent now, when they were alone in the silence.

The silence felt awkward as each one evaluated what they had said before and tried to decide if they had been too open or said too much.

Dina noticed a crouching kitten between the bridge pylon and the railing. She came closer and squatted down to stroke the ruffled back, covered in speckles of moisture. But the kitten fled unexpectedly, slipping out from under her fingers. Dina watched him go and stood up again. She put her hands on the bridge railing and looked over the black dense surface of the slow-moving river, which played lazily with the city lights.

“Do you love all animals? Or just cats?” asked Konstantin Konstantinovich, using it as an excuse to break the silence.

He approached the railing and stood next to Dina.

“Just cats,” said Dina.

“You exhibit an incredible combination of female and male traits,” he said and smiled at Dina. “Today has been an endless revelation for me.”

Dina turned to Konstantin Konstantinovich and stared at his face. She suddenly felt that it was not her looking, that she did not exist, and that this man, a completely unknown man, was standing next to an unfamiliar girl, and Dina suddenly wanted to burst into tears for some reason.

But the feeling lasted only a second. In the next moment, she was back in her body, and her hands could feel the cold of the iron railing. Beside her stood her teacher, who had assessed her at the exam this morning, then sat next to her in the movie theater, and, while following the trials and tribulations of the characters, played by Nakhapetov and Vetinskaya, she could nevertheless constantly feel his presence... and then... and then she danced with him at the cafe, and he was so close, and he hugged her...

“You continue to mystify me. You’re acting so odd for a woman... for a girl your age.” His voice betrayed his agitation again. “You admitted how you feel about me, after all. Which is no joke, as I understand... Aren’t you interested to know what I think about it?”

She turned away again and looked down at the wave rising at the base of the bridge – just as slow and sleepy as the river itself. When she felt that she could speak calmly, she turned back to Konstantin Konstantinovich and spoke, looking into his eyes. “Of course, I would like to know what you think... But I don’t want any lies. I don’t want you to reciprocate my words for any other reason but one – if you feel the same way. Which is impossible.” She dropped her gaze but then stared at her teacher again. “Since your relationship with Rimma Yakovleva has just finished with her having an abortion.” Konstantin Konstantinovich tried to say something but Dina ignored his reaction. “You haven’t had time to figure out your feelings for me, because my knees, which you had noticed this morning, is not the sum of me... and people don’t fall in love with knees. So it’s better if you say nothing. If you say right now that you’re in love with me, it’ll be the end. It will mean that you really are just a womanizer, and that you’re willing to pay any price to acquire another... another mistress.”

She turned away again, watching the black water speckled with gold, with only one thought in her head: don’t cry.

Konstantin Konstantinovich very carefully took Dina’s hand – it was cold and wet from the night’s dew. Seeing no resistance, he took her other hand and held them between his palms to warm them up. Dina didn’t fight him but neither did she look at him as she was still afraid of bursting into tears. She didn’t know and couldn’t understand why.



“All right,” said Konstantin Konstantinovich, “I will not say anything for now... except one thing: You seem to be cold.”

“No, I’m not cold,” said Dina, “It’s just my hands.”

Konstantin Konstantinovich breathed into his hands, where Dina’s fingers lay.

“Thank you.” Dina smiled.

They passed the bridge and stopped at the tram stop.

“You’re going home already?” asked Konstantin Konstantinovich.

“I don’t want any trouble at the dorms.” She looked at her watch.

“Yes, of course,” Konstantin Konstantinovich looked nervous. “But I... I don’t want to leave you... You don’t have any relatives here?”

“I do, but I don’t want to intrude on them. Especially this late at night.”

“Do you at least stay over there occasionally?”

“Very rarely, when my mom comes to visit.”

“Hmmm... You could tell them at the dorms that...” He suddenly laughed. “My God! Who am I advising to lie! Forgive me. But I truly do not want to part from you. I hope that you trust the sincerity of this?”

“Yes,” Dina said simply. “I believe you. No matter what you say.”

Slightly puzzled, Konstantin Konstantinovich asked, “What do you mean? I don’t understand...”

“What’s not to understand? I believe you,” Dina repeated forcefully.

“You believe me? After everything that you’ve found out about me?”

“Especially after everything that I’ve found out about you.” Dina explained, “You’re a sincere person. You’re a sincere womanizer. You sincerely love women... They throw themselves at you... It’s a perfect match. At least, you don’t lie to them that you’re going to marry them.” She stared at him. “Right?”

Konstantin Konstantinovich hung his head in embarrassment and laughed.

“Well... very rarely,” he continued, as if needing to justify his answer. “You’re all so different! You want the truth, the others want a lie! And the fancier, the better!” He looked at Dina again with the expression of curiosity, astonishment, and confusion, that had followed him all evening. “But this a first for me. I’ve said all sorts of things to women!”

The tram thundered as it approached the tram stop. Konstantin Konstantinovich looked questioningly at Dina.

“I’ll take the next one,” she replied to his unspoken question.

“Will we see each other again? Tomorrow?” he asked as the tram shut its doors and was swallowed by the damp darkness.

“I’m going home tomorrow for a week.”

“And then?”

“Then I have a placement until the end of July.”

“Where?” Again Konstantin Konstantinovich became nervous and made no attempt to hide this.

“Here.”

“Great!” He grinned in relief. “How wonderful that you are a perfect student! Otherwise, they would have sent you to the back of beyond for a month and a half.”

A few single drops suddenly fell from the blackness and immediately turned into a total downpour. Konstantin Konstantinovich opened his jacket and covered Dina with one half, just like a mother hen covers her chick.

“Stop it... I’m in a cloak. There!” Dina nodded towards a shop on the other side of the street.

They ran under the store’s overhang.

Dina began to wipe her face with a white batiste handkerchief, which immediately became soaked. Konstantin Konstantinovich also took out a handkerchief, which was large, checkered, and

had unusual colors not seen at the shops, and wiped his wet cheeks and forehead. He suddenly took Dina's chin in his hand and said, "Shhh, don't move. You have a drop of water on your earlobe, like a diamond earring."

Dina froze, staring at Konstantin Konstantinovich. He moved his gaze from the sparkling drop to Dina's eyes and also froze. Then he carefully wiped away the drop, let Dina go and began folding up his handkerchief in fierce concentration.

Dina leaned against the dark glass window and watched the rain as it flashed in the light of the streetlamp.

Konstantin Konstantinovich, continuing to carefully fold up his handkerchief, spoke quietly. "I really wanted to kiss you."

Dina didn't reply at once. "So what stopped you?"

"For the first time, I was stopped by something that I've never experienced before."

"What was it?"

"Well..." He kept turning the piece of fabric over and over in his hands. "Fear? No. Concern."

"What were you concerned about?"

"I was afraid to offend you... to incur your displeasure."

"Funny."

"Indeed. Before today, I was sure that I knew female nature as well as I know my own five fingers. I was certain that I knew when and what women want. I always knew how I should act." He smiled wryly. "I would never think to question whether I should kiss a woman or not. I knew that a woman must be kissed at every convenient... and even inconvenient opportunity." He suddenly became serious and asked worriedly: "What if I had done it? Would you have..."

"I wouldn't have run away," said Dina. "And I wouldn't have slapped you."

Konstantin Konstantinovich chuckled and shook his head. After a brief pause, he asked, and she could hear the nervousness in his voice, "Can I try again?" He turned to Dina.

"Not anymore," she replied calmly. "I don't like men that I have to manage: You can do this, you can't do that... Here comes my tram!" She turned up her collar and got ready to dash to the stop.

Konstantin Konstantinovich took her elbow and turned her to face him. "But we haven't said goodbye or planned our next date."

Dina said, a little sternly, "I'll be late."

"I'll take you back in a taxi!" he suggested.

"The last thing I need is to appear at the dorms in a taxi, together with you!" Dina grinned.

"True," Konstantin Konstantinovich laughed. "So when will we see each other again?"

"When I come back in a week. If you don't change your mind by then."

"Where and when?" He chose to ignore Dina's last remark. "Can I call you? Tell me your number." Konstantin Konstantinovich fumbled around in his breast pockets in search of a pen.

"We don't have a telephone at home."

"Good grief!" He looked at Dina in bafflement. "Does that still happen? Could you..."

"Don't fret. I'll come back and we can meet up again."

"What date will that be?"

"The third."

"The third!" Konstantin Konstantinovich exclaimed ruefully. "And what if it is the second? Or the fourth? Is it really possible? No telephone! Well, can you call me when you come back?" He started searching for a pen again.

Dina took a notebook and pen from her handbag and Konstantin Konstantinovich wrote his number on the open page.

A tram rumbled in the distance.

"Goodbye, Konstantin Konstantinovich," said Dina and held out her hand.

He shook it and said, looking deep into her eyes, "Until next time, Dina. I will be waiting for your call."

\* \* \*

The room was dimly lit as the ceiling light was off, and only the table lamp stood on the table, with a newspaper covering the lampshade. Rimma was asleep, facing the wall and with the blanket pulled up over her head. Vera and Valya sat at the table with the books and notebooks spread out in front of them.

Both turned to Dina as one when she entered the room.

"Hi," whispered Dina.

"Hi," they answered in unison.

Dina changed clothes, took her toothbrush and toothpaste out of the bedside table drawer, and stepped out.

Vera pointedly tapped the glass of the alarm clock with her nail. The clock was showing five minutes past midnight.

Dina came back. She changed into a short silk robe, sat down on the bed and took from the bedside table a pharmacy jar containing a thick white cream, which she spread thickly over the face and hands. She leaned back onto her pillow and closed her eyes.

Vera's loud whisper broke the silence. "How was the evening?" She asked.

"It was good," Dina replied softly.

"Where did you go?"

"Have a care!" Rimma's tense voice rang out. "It's night already!"

"We're not yelling so why are you?" Vera snapped back.

Dina said softly, "Sorry, Rimma, we'll keep quiet."

Rimma threw back the blanket, put on her robe, and grabbing her cigarettes from the dresser, left the room, slamming the door.

Vera decided that now they could talk openly, and turned to Dina. "Well, tell us, then!"

Dina said calmly, without moving, "I am not going to tell you anything. All you do is gossip and annoy other people. Don't you feel sorry for Rimma?"

Vera turned away and pulled a face, but so that Dina could not see it.

The more simple Valya did not know how to react to Vera's tricks, so she simply looked down at her notebook, although she kept glancing at the other two.

Vera couldn't keep quiet and pounced on Dina again. "You're such a good girl but you still paint your nails and bleach your face."

Dina didn't reply.

Vera kept going. "Good girls don't doll themselves up."

Dina replied coolly, without opening her eyes, "Chekhov said 'Everything should be first-rate in a person, their face, clothes, soul and thoughts.' Have you heard that before?"

Vera pulled a face again. "Gee, you know everything, Turbina."

"Every person knows what they want to know... what they need to know."

"Why don't you go off and be an actress then, Turbina?"

"Why's that?" Dina smiled.

"So that we would have a second Dina Durbin," Vera pointed out. "Turbina! You were named after her, weren't you?"

"Yes, after her, but I am no good at acting."

"Oh! That's right! You're incapable of lying. In the movies, if you can't lie, you can't act."

"You're wrong. Playing a role does not mean lying," said Dina and began removing the cream from her face using cotton wool.

Rimma came back in. “I don’t know what you’ve been saying behind my back...” She started.

Dina interrupted her gently. “Rimma, we know about everything that’s happened, but it doesn’t mean that you’ve stopped being our friend.”

Valya, who had glanced up in surprise at Dina, immediately looked down at her books again, while Vera sat frozen in shock.

“Personally, I feel very sorry for you, Rimma,” said Dina. “But I wish that you could just forget everything and start a new life... Well, not forget, but not repeat your past mistakes.”

Dina stood up from her bed, came up to Rimma, and hugged her. Rimma unexpectedly burst into tears. She awkwardly hugged Dina back and continued to sob loudly.

“We often think,” Dina said, “that the first man who pays attention to us, or the first one whom we fall in love with, is the perfect man for us. But it can’t be so, and isn’t always the case. The most important thing is to ask yourself: am I sure of him, of myself and of my feelings?”

Rimma had calmed down and sat on her bed, wiping her face with a towel. “Where did you learn all that from?” She asked Dina.

“From my mom,” Dina said.

“Did your mom say all that to you?” Rimma stared at her in surprise.

“No. My mom actually something completely different. But I saw her life and understood a bit more than just what I heard.”

## Home

Dina stretched out on the top bunk of the sleeper carriage. She had almost 24 hours of travel ahead of her, a day and a night. She would be home tomorrow evening.

Dina liked the road, no matter where it led: to the sea, to the pioneer camp, home, or back to school after the holidays. Yet for the first time in her life, she was boarding the train regretfully. But she couldn't not go. Firstly, she had promised her mother, who had acquired some new clothes for her daughter for the summer. Secondly... secondly, the Inner Voice had told her, "Of course, you can cancel the trip," It said. "Or leave tomorrow... or the day after tomorrow... But you should go today. Let the impressions settle, both yours and his." The Inner Voice knew that Dina knew what it meant. "Don't rush things. Calm down and let him calm down. A week is the perfect length of time to look at what happened more soberly. Hmmm? What do you think?"

"I agree," said Dina and sighed a little sadly.

She went to the railway station and stood in line for the tickets, secretly hoping that there would be no tickets left. But there were tickets, although they were for the top lateral bunks. Which once again convinced her how right the Inner Voice was, which Dina had become accustomed to trusting unconditionally – Dina suspected that when this mysterious Someone gave her advice, he knew that it would turn out just as he had suggested. Or maybe he arranged it all himself... just the way Dina needed, always what was best for Dina... It was a daring assumption: You don't honestly think that everyone and everything revolves around you and your interests! Well, why not, thought Dina, I certainly hope that I am not getting all this at the expense of someone else.

Dina paid for the ticket and boarded the train.

She stretched out on her bunk and timidly asked her Inner Voice:

"Can I at least think about him?"

"Of course! Of course you can think about him!" replied her trusty counselor. "The more, the better! Go over every word, every gesture... analyze what you liked and what you don't like about him."

Dina was overjoyed to hear this response, so the first thing she did was take out her notebook, open it at the right page and let her eyes roam over the letters KK, the telephone number, and the small heart drawn beside it. She pressed the page to her lips and sent a mental hello to the hand that had left this precious memento of the long day, which had started at eight in the morning at the exam and finished after midnight, when she had returned to her dorm room.

Dina remembered the touch of this hand on hers. And the way this hand lay on her back for a long, endlessly long time... when they danced to the Moonstone... and then briefly, but firmly pressed Dina to him...

Konstantin Konstantinovich. What would be a more affectionate name? Kostenka... My darling Kostenka... Kostyusha... Kostik. Kotik... Or simply "my darling."

No, all this made her head spin.

The way he looked at her knees. No, the way he looked into her eyes. Yes, eyes are much better. He sat so close to her there, in the cinema, and looked at her. Then she had turned to him, and his face was so close... His eyes sparkled and his slightly parted lips were smiling. And later, he wanted to kiss her... His face was so close again, close enough to cup his face with her hands and press her lips to his forehead, cheeks, his lips... touch her lips to his...

"Can I think about this?" Dina asked, embarrassed that she first imagined it all and only then asked for permission.

"Yes, yes," grinned the Inner Voice. "You can think about whatever you want if it's love."

"Well," Dina said. "It is love."

“Just remember that this is about your love,” said the Inner Voice, emphasizing the word *your*, “you don’t yet know anything about his feelings. Right?”

“Yes,” agreed Dina. “I will only think about my love for now.”

“And don’t go too far, don’t expect what you simply can’t... have no right to expect from him. Or you’ll cry bitter tears later on.”

“All right,” promised Dina and went back to thinking about Konstantin Konstantinovich... Kostya’s lips.

They were so lively, so mobile... it was so nice to look at them whenever Konstantin Konstantinovich... whenever Kostenka said something... when he smiled... It must be so nice when these lips kissed you...

What would it be like? Dina had only seen kisses in the movies. Arthur Davlatyan’s kiss did not count – he had barely touched the corner of Dina’s lips with his lips. That was when she had helped him with the first project. He had said, “Thank you so much,” and kissed her.

“You’re welcome,” Dina had replied. “But don’t ever do that again!”

So he never did, even though sometimes Dina wanted him to repeat the kiss. But he was waiting for her permission, and Dina did not like that.

“Look at yourself,” thought Dina, “He kissed you without your permission, you didn’t like it, and when he waited for your permission, you also didn’t like it.”

Valera Revyakin did not wait and did not ask for permission. He kissed her for real, but that was a very long time ago.

Konstantin Konstantinovich had also waited for permission... No, that was different – he was not waiting for permission, he was simply being considerate. He did not want to offend or upset her. That was something else.

If he had decided to kiss her, what would it have been like?

Dina did not know the answer to that question. She did not have enough experience. But she wanted to find out. She dearly wanted to know... She was willing to pay with bitter tears for it, only to find out how it feels to be kissed by her darling Kostya...

Darling Kostya?!

Yes, darling Kostya. Dear Kostya. My dear, darling Kostya.

## Mom

Dina's mom stood on the platform, a little distance away from all the departing and arriving passengers. Dina hadn't told her the carriage number, she had passed a message on through Aunt Ira that her mom didn't need to meet her. She could find her way home with no problem, she wasn't a little girl anymore. Although she knew that her mother loved train stations and loved welcoming and saying goodbye – it was always a big deal for her. In all these years, she hadn't seen Dina off only once.

Her mother saw Dina immediately and waved to her.

“Dinochka! Daughter!” She hugged Dina.

And Dina felt the indescribable warmth, sensed her mother's love – so clear and simple, like drinking water when you are consumed with thirst.

“Mom... why are you here? I'm not a little girl.”

But her mother just beamed and couldn't stop gazing at Dina.

They got on the bus. It was only three stops until home and her mom only had time to ask about the semester and the work placement.

“My clever girl. I am so proud of you!” She held Dina under the arm the whole way, pressing her close.

The house smelled, as always, of comfort, warmth, and delicious food. As always, Dina's mother had made her daughter's favorite dishes. The table was set and while Dina showered after the trip, her mom warmed up the hot food and put a bottle of champagne on the table.

“To you, darling!” Said her mother as she raised her glass.

“To you, Mom!” Said Dina and for one elusive moment, she saw herself sitting opposite Konstantin Konstantinovich: with a glass of champagne slightly raised above the table, his laughing eyes, a lock of black hair falling onto his forehead, the parted mouth, and the attractive large fingers holding a glass.

“Dinochka, what's going on with you?” Her mom looked at her closely.

“Nothing, Mom! Everything's fine!” Dina tried to act natural and even laughed. “Why do you ask?”

But it's hard to hide from your own mother. Especially a loving mother.

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