



Nabokov Prize Library



Anatolii Izotov

CLEOPATRA HUNTING



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Аннотация

«Я – испорченная цивилизацией девушка, и здесь, в пустыне, мне скучно. Как послушный медицинский работник, усердно исполняю свой долг, потому что дала клятву Гиппократа и подписку секретному ведомству, которое обеспечило меня льготами на учебу в престижном учебном заведении».

Постепенно девушка втягивается в дурные компании, потому что любит развлечения, дорогие вещи и украшения. И скатывается в пучину, что заканчивается для нее трагически. Она навсегда остается в розовых песках безбрежной пустыни.

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I was born in the summer of 1940 in the Kaluga region, spent childhood and youth in the Crimea, in Bogatoye village (formerly Bakhchi-Eli), located halfway between Simferopol and Feodosia. After graduating from high school I worked in the Donbass for a year, and then entered the Novocherkassk Polytechnic Institute. After graduation, I received a diploma of an engineer-hydrogeologist and a job referral to work at the numbered plant. I spent ten years working at a uranium mining enterprise in the restricted area of Uch-Kuduk city. Then, already an experienced mining engineer, I was sent to the North Bohemia, on a business trip abroad, which ran over ten years. I defended my thesis on Czech-related affairs and then returned to my native land where I got hired at VIOGEM Institute (Belgorod), eventually becoming the chief engineer. As of now, I am the Institute's scientific consultant.

I began writing poetry since I was fifteen and got my first publication in «Kadievka Worker» and «Industry Cadres» papers

(1958–1964). One of the works of that period, the white verse «Letter from Central Asia» was then included in the «Letters from the Poplar Fluff Spring» book, published by the Rostov Publishing House in 1967.

I have been writing prose since 1965. For a long time, I could not publish my early stories – the short novel «Cleopatra Hunting», «Farhad» and «To those who are in the field» and others, due to a specific nature of my work at a restricted access facility. From 2005 to 2010, I published four books in limited editions – a collection of poems, a collection of short stories and two novels.

I am actively involved in literary research, my most prized studies being the analysis of the creative legacy of M.Yu. Lermontov and Homer.

I am an (associate) member of the International Writers Association since 2015.

In this status, I enjoy regular publications in «Russian Bell Almanac» magazine, and I already took part in the literary contests held under the aegis of IWA – Yalos 2016, Yalos 2017. I also participated in the XXXIV science fiction convention «AELITA», Jules Verne prose contests, Innokentiy Annensky poetry contests and others. I was awarded diplomas of various degrees, including «For Major Contribution to the Development of Culture», the Grand Prix Diploma for Best Publicism-2017, the Laureate Diploma of the 2nd degree of the «Russian Literary Prize» by the «Russian Bell» magazine and the medal «For

Major Contribution to the National Literature».

I published two books: the paper novel «Verka» and the audiobook «Stories».

Maya had blue eyes like chicory petals in the morning, with wide, bottomless pupils – their thick, smoky blueness mesmerized and beckoned like gentle summer sea. She might seem lanky due to her rather high stature and deep clavicular dimples. However, her slender legs, ample breasts, and beautiful posture gave her figure a special softness and femininity.

Every morning, Maya sat in front of the mirror for hours, carefully arranging her blond hair into a magnificent, intricate coif; then, with elegant movements of an artist she put shadows on her eyelids, painted her eyes and lips, and then passed on to clothes. Only after discovering the complete correspondence of her appearance to some unknown ideal, she would get out to the street. Even on her way to the medical station where Maya had been working as a nurse for four years now, she did not miss an opportunity to quickly check her full reflection in wide shop windows of the beauty salon, the music school and the furniture store, just in order to finally convince herself of the flawlessness of her figure. Then she went out onto the main road connecting the city center with the newly constructed buildings. Here, Maya would stop, making way first for the security officers with machine guns behind their shoulders and dogs on leashes, then for the escorts with machine guns tilted forward, and, finally, for a long convoy of prisoners.

The cons were escorted from the prison camp to a construction site, surrounded by barbed wire, where soldiers were already occupying their positions on watchtowers, and the officers were fussing about at the checkpoint. The men in the convoy all looked the same: dark-skinned, with their hands behind their backs, wearing heavy boots that raised clouds of reddish dust on the roadside. The cons were marching in silence, ready to obey the convoy's command at any moment: to stop, raise their hands up, sit down or even lie down, which Maya could see for herself when a drunken pothead, who broke the ranks, was shot right before her very eyes. At the sight of a young woman, the prisoners began imitating racy, luscious kisses that merged into one piercing siren of unsatisfied love. Maya was not at all scared, and these sounds did not confuse her. On the contrary, she was amused: she tried to imagine what prisoners would do if they had a young, beautiful woman among themselves.

Maya always came to work long before the impatient people began gathering at the office – to prepare her tools and her workplace, and to set herself up for seeing patients. Maya worked swiftly, her hands were delicate and dexterous, and her soul was kind. Making injections, she always picked up the best moment for giving a shot so that a person would not feel pain and fear. She would joke with cheerful patients, find the words of consolation and faith for the gravely ill, and, she gave her best to inspire optimism in hopeless ones. She accepted their thanks

with reserve, but every time a warm wave of joy would rise in her soul as she realized that her work was not in vain, and her efforts were wanted and sought after. At such moments her work seemed to be the highest and most celebratory moment of her life.

Maya willingly agreed to work overtime: she was dreadfully short of money. Almost all her earnings went to everyday expenses, and the scanty savings by no means made her dreams of escaping the burning desert and settling in the Moscow suburbs more feasible. There, Maya was promised a good job and a room in the hostel for the initial period, but she dreamed of her own apartment, that, by her humble standards, costs an arm and a leg. On top of that, Maya wanted to get good furniture and utensils. One could easily buy all of this in local shops. As things stood at the time, at least two skills were required in order for her to be able to put some money aside: to earn good money and to lead a wary life. As for the work, Maya spared no effort: she accepted paid night watches and worked on holidays, administered injections, performed domiciliary medical procedures, stepped in for other nurses. As for saving money, though, it was both difficult and humiliating for her generous soul. Maya almost did not know how to say no when she was asked for a loan, although she tried to learn how to do it because some wise guy would always try to avoid returning the debts. She participated in all charity activities and parties, made generous gifts, loved fashionable and beautiful dresses,

used expensive cosmetics, bought jewelry, books, and trinkets, and went to the seaside every year. At the same time, she did not keep good track of what she was supposed to get for her overtime work, and she hated visiting the odious accounting department, where they would often «forget» to include the extra payrolls.

Maya had an unbridled imagination that took her away from reality. She loved poetry, read a lot and listened to poems with great pleasure, having even performed several times with solo readings of poems by Akhmatova and Yesenin at school evenings. Her favorite, though, was the wonderful poem «Egyptian Nights» by Valery Bryusov, which she knew by heart, and could read it time and time again, especially in moments of daydreaming.

In her fairy-tale dreams, the young girl would often see herself as a movie star, living a Western life, abundant and luxurious, or as a millionaire, traveling around the noisy capitals of wealthy countries, or even as Cleopatra, being generous with her admirers. Allowing her mind to fly away to the ancient Egypt, Maya imagined herself arranging luxurious parties in her palace, traveling on her sailboat along the Mediterranean Sea and the Blue Nile, switching her transparent, golden and diamond-studded dresses, drinking foreign wines, accompanied by delicious foods – just like a poem would have it...

The beautiful and carefree feast
Is staged in the gardens of the Egyptian queen,

It seems as if the whole vast world
Fit into its narrow borders.
Next to the square pond
Piqued with the Memphis gold,
At the opulently set table
The pleasure circle was made ready.
On the ivory beds,
The crowned guests are lying,
Dozens of bronze lamps
Are emanating crimson light day all around;
The fans are waving silently,
Sweetly giving away the freshness,
And young boys are stealing by, pouring
The wine into crystal phials...
The music is sensually moaning...

..After reading this poem, Maya gradually returned to the real world – but even there, a small town near Moscow would suddenly arise in her mind, with a cozy apartment, a quiet river nearby and clean pine woods all around... Maya never dreamed of family and motherhood: just like the Egyptian queen, she wanted to always be free in choosing her lovers, while a crowd of admirers was there to amuse her and tickle her vanity. We have to give it to her: the girl never felt the lack of attention of the stronger sex, although the men she met did not bring much happiness and joy into her life, for, just like Cleopatra, she longed for a passionate and exalted love, while her suitors did not match her imagination.

Recently, one guy, in particular, was most successful in gaining Maya's favor – Lev Klyuchitsky – the head of a construction site. They met about three months ago at a party organized on some insignificant occasion by a handsome radiologist with good connections in business circles of the city. Klyuchitsky immediately attracted her attention with his elegant appearance and subtle request to get him a couple of dozen syringes for insane amounts of money. He finally won her over, though, when he showed his appreciation by giving her the appointed amount of money together with an elegant cognac set made of Czech glass. Then he repeatedly took Maya to the only restaurant in their town, named after one of the European cities. However, quickly getting fed up with their specialties and signature drinks, he hinted that they could have a much better party at her house. Maya did not say anything, and Klyuchitsky began to present her with gifts that were necessary both for her future and current apartment as if preparing Maya's place for the time when he would occupy his rightful place there.

One evening, a dropside UAZ drove over to Maya's place and the apple-cheeked driver brought in some boxes, bundles and other parts of a customized kitchen set to her modest apartment. The driver installed a shiny sink, hung and stowed some cabinets, adjusted the drawers and disappeared with an expression of deep satisfaction on his face. The kitchen that was empty up to that moment became radiant with crisp white enamel, suddenly turning into a cooking laboratory of some kind...

Three days later, another driver – a construction battalion soldier – brought in a huge carpet into the room with a similar smiling and shining face on him, and Maya was amazed at its size and beauty, as well as the excellent quality. Having spread the gift along the plain plank floor, Maya just stood there, contemplating the autumn landscape stitched on a deep blue background for a long while, as well as the incredibly convincing maple leaves, blades of withered grass, crimson forest and black water. After that, she gently stroked the springy surface of the carpet with her palm, treaded upon it with her bare feet, pleasantly drowning in soft thick wool. With sadness, anxiety, and hope, Maya realized that there was a different life just a short distance away, the total opposite of hers: rich and beautiful, and, maybe just like the one from her dreams.

Klyuchitsky took his time with the announced party and did not insist much, but the events unfolded in such a way that Maya herself had to invite him to visit. At the beginning of summer, she received a telegram saying that her mother was on the verge of death, so she was forced to urgently come back to her native village, lost in the middle of nowhere. Upon learning of the grievous event, Klyuchitsky in no time got her a ticket to Moscow with a transfer in Tashkent. Were it not for him, she would have to bump along on the train for many days, exhausted from the inconveniences and doubts: will she arrive in time? And on the day of departure, he sent her a car, which took Maya directly to the airfield. Two weeks later, when she returned from

the funeral, Klyuchitsky met her at the Tashkent airport, which was quite unexpected for her, and booked her a single room in the Dustlik hotel. In the evening, he brought a luxurious dinner to her apartment, then disappeared and returned only early in the morning to accompany her to their plane. Maya calmly and happily slept in a cool hotel room and met her guardian angel in the best of spirits. They arrived at the airport by taxi and a couple of hours later they were at home.

From all this, Maya concluded that Klyuchitsky's business ties went far beyond the limits of their town, and this further improved her suitor's image in her eyes – she saw him more as a patron, rather than an admirer, although one who was always ready to help out, to lend a hand and to bless her with gifts. Still, the attention of a handsome man and Klyuchitsky was undoubtedly handsome, fed her vanity and, furthermore, she felt that with his help she would be able to get the key to making her cherished dream come true at last. But Maya also understood that fair's fair, and therefore on the day of her homecoming she invited Klyuchitsky to come to her place next Saturday since her flatmate – the surgical nurse – would be starting her night shift then. Generally speaking, her flatmate was not a hindrance, as they lived in a two-room section, and both had a separate room with a separate entrance, but postponing Klyuchitsky's much-anticipated rendezvous was also a tribute to her coquetry and the age-old love game that Maya played with all her wooers.

On Friday, when Maya decided to do a spring cleaning in her

apartment, a sandstorm began and the town got enveloped in a thick raging shroud of sand and dust. Maya was always both frightened and at the same time exulted by the riotous winds, which, for an instant, succeeded in tempering the heat – the key bane of the desert.

* * *

The heat season in the Kyzyl-Kum desert begins in May and lasts until the end of August. Spring here is short, bright and fast-paced. In April, the sun shines soothingly, and the gray steppe instantly comes to life, its tens of kilometers getting overgrown with light green umbrellas of ferrule, growing to a half-meter plants in a matter of a few days. Curly crowns of separate plants are spaced several meters apart, as if planted on a unique planting grid by a skilled gardener, providing each root with its own patch of moistened reddish-yellow sand. Therefore, the plain, covered with a ferrule, becomes a patchy yellowish-green carpet, resembling a giant leopard skin. The specific smell of the ferrule attracts clouds of insects: flies, bugs, midges, spiders and all sorts of strange small creatures that cling to fleshy stalks and swarm up and down the firm branches.

The sand in this time of year is fresh, nice to look at and to touch; it seems life-giving and fertile. Indeed, if you look closely at its surface, you can see the tiny little needles of grass and even tinier, smaller than a millet grain, white and blue

flowers, piercing through the reddish soil moved by an unknown, miraculous force.

The ravines are especially spectacular at this time, especially in those places where the narrow hollow-ways join them back to back. Here, they seem to escape the wrinkled mountains right into the flat plain and turn into the wide channels of mythical creeks and streams, with bottoms strewn with coarse sand and gravel, their oval banks covered with spongy loess. On this soft, dry soil, the tiny flowers are growing densely, forming conglomerations of fanciful pink, green and white patterns, resembling flower beds in the parks of southern cities, those embellished with dates and slogans. Vibrant green islands of plant life can be seen on the pink rocks of the granite massif, towering above the plain. Its ancient stones are already stricken by a mesh of cracks, formed under the influence of tectonic processes and weathering; in the course of the winter, they've accumulated the scant moisture, and the grass found it, sending down its clingy roots and fibers into the granite.

On the plain, on the slopes of the hills and in the hollows you can come across small clearings of orange tulips: they are smaller than the garden variety, but they are pretty to look at, too. There are also white mushrooms in the desert, their stout hats ungainly spreading along the infirm sand as if someone scattered pieces of melted cheese with the careless hand, and now it dries and cracks under the rays of the scorching sun. People say that five years ago the tulips covered the desert in a thick carpet in

the spring, and the mushrooms were there in spades. It is easy to believe that, because even in the first year of her stay here, Maya found both mushrooms and tulips in the neighborhood, when she wandered alone through the strange, never-before-seen lands. Now, urban folks have to drive tens of kilometers out of the city to get mushrooms and flowers.

In April, the air is clear, the sun does not burn yet, and the desert tan is every bit as good as the seaside one. For Maya, every April weekend was a holiday. With a book and a little cold water in a thermos, she went to the mountains and there, hiding out in some dead gorge, she would strip naked and bathe in the gentle sunlight. Within two or three days, her skin acquired a pleasant golden-bronze color, much to everyone's surprise during her future holidays at the seaside.

Once, when she was sunbathing on a small plateau near the watershed, Maya discovered a way to feel the infinity of the universe. In order to attain that feel, she had to lie on top of the mountain so as to see the sky everywhere: not only above, but also from the sides and under her body, and imagine that the Earth is just a small ball, and she lies on it and covers up most of it with her back. And then she would start to feel her body hovering in the real emptiness, surrounding her from all sides, with neither top, nor bottom, nor end, nor edge. And this space is not imaginary, no, it is right here, by her side! Infinity begins already where the flat surface of the warm granite ends, she could feel it there, she could feel it below, under her body,

and everywhere else – on the left, on the right and at the center; bang! And you are floating effortlessly and flying into the azure abyss...

In spring, the most numerous, and, perhaps, the dominant inhabitants of the desert come to life – the turtles. In Maya's opinion, these did not dwindle in numbers in the last few years. In April, the turtles can be found everywhere. They are crawling slowly through the sand, rolling over its thin ripples, dropping into building pits, falling under the wheels and caterpillars of passing cars, but, nevertheless, keep moving steadily towards their favorite pastures. There are huge turtles, of the size of an entire telephone set, with a roughened thick shell and deep black and yellow patterns pressed into it as though made with a powerful pressing engine. Their paws are thick and strong, with a comb of blunt, blue claws. This large reptile is very cautious: at the sight of humans, it quickly hides its head and paws in its shell, keeping them inside even when being turned on its back, which is the most uncomfortable position for a turtle. These giants usually become the prey of connoisseurs of pilaf and turtle soup.

There is, however, a rarer, smaller variety of turtles with a soft bluish shell. Like all kids, they are very energetic and careless, and never hide their heads after falling into human hands. Children capture them, bring them home to play, walk with them, feed them grass and green onions. But, in the end, a turtle held in captivity dies.

The medium-sized turtles – the most common ones – are

used in the production of ashtrays – the exotic souvenirs of the desert. Maya was not keen of their look: the imprint of a spinal column on the inner side of their shell made her cringe and immediately recall the barbaric way of killing animals: once she saw an electric welder familiar to her plucking bloodied flesh that was still alive out of the corneous carapace with a steel electrode...

The abundance of turtles soon becomes habitual: they cease to catch the eye and stop to be seen as living creatures. The shell of the desert tortoise is not strong enough: it cannot even withstand the weight of a car, bursting, exploding with blue intestines, quickly drying out and dissipating under the hot air and sand, while shell fragments turn white and lay there under the scorching sun for a long time, without causing neither irritation, nor regret. The turtles are getting killed not only by fans of their sweet meat and lovers of patterned ashtrays but also by anybody and everybody, who do it just for fun, because the animals are mute, because they can be kicked, whacked with a stone or dropped on asphalt, thrown into the water (now, let's see if they can swim!), put on hot coals (will they manage to get out in time?) No one protects turtles and no one stands up for them, as though they are complete outsiders in this desert...

By the end of April, the air becomes unbearably hot, as the plants quickly wilt, dry up and become scarce. Here and there, you can only see smooth, as if polished by the glass-dust, stalks of dried ferrule, that stand up like white bones covered with sand

dust. The turtles also disappear: they burrow into the sand and sleep until the next spring. The active life of turtles lasts for ten to twelve days a year. For such a short period of time, people never get a chance to wipe them out, so, all the cruelty of civilization notwithstanding, most of these reptiles manage to lay eggs, stock up calories and fall into a long hibernation, in order to appear a year later and once again indulge in plowing the hot sand with their clumsy paws.

The desert fades and becomes hotter and hotter. In May, the sun-warmed land no longer has time to cool down overnight. It becomes infernally hot: somewhere between forty and forty-five degrees Celsius in the shade every day.

Hot, hot, hot! The breeze does not refresh, it just comes in heat waves, each one of them hotter than the one preceding it. Sometimes, it seems that the heart would fail under this infinite heat buildup and break out of the chest cage. The nerves get frayed; the body gets soft and flabby. Sweat pours in buckets – the face, neck, and back are constantly wet... The handled objects quickly become wet and slippery. Salty sweat makes scratches sting, tickles the swollen eyelids, and corrodes the metal in areas where it is most often touched by the naked hand. The iron gets hot and sears the skin the same way it would burn in the biting frost. The skin pores get wide open, like windows, and you constantly feel them exude the excess heat, removing it from the body. If you decide to take a cool bath, then you'd better stay there as long as possible, because, until the moment you sweat

again in the open air, you will suffer from internal stuffiness, the terrible pressure growing in every cell, bursting from within, like a premonition of a heat stroke. Sometimes you cannot stand it and just start running round in circles, not knowing where to hide or find shelter from this endless heat.

The sky is frightening: it is dominated by blazing, dazzling whitish tones. The Sun is getting closer to the Earth, filling up the sky above with a fiery mass, burning and burning relentlessly, uncontrollably and unrestrainedly. The stones, sand, and concrete – everything gets hot, and you cannot figure out where this tormenting heat comes from.

Mellow, half-asleep people are working according to a schedule made to last by the authorities of the country, without any regard to the heat. They stare bluntly at the production processes and resolve other issues, pull the levers of excavators, steer heavy cars and drink, drink, drink... The most experienced ones prefer hot green tea, others drink black one, the amateurs and women drink iced water, while those with no means of making drinks stand in the lines for a mug of kvass. And everyone is counting the moments until the evening, the time when the scorching sun above disappears and they can finally come out into the streets, breathing again.

In the evenings, the asphalt and the buildings continue to radiate sweltering, unbearable heat. At night, no one can sleep: it gets too hot to breathe, to lie, you feel thirsty, but if you drink something, you start bursting with excess moisture, pouring

sweat. The bed gets wet, everything sticks and it is impossible to fall asleep even in the early morning. Then the new day begins, and with it, a new round of the useless struggle with the heat.

The work is distracting, but body accumulates the internal tension and fatigue from insomnia. Everything becomes annoying. And only a strong wind that will come without failing and carries a cloud of sand and dust, can tame the heat for a little while and bring a short relief.

The winds are different in the desert, and they are blowing constantly. Even on a quiet, scorching day, when the air is viscous, like hot treacle, and motionless, and it seems that all living and non-living things fall into a lazy trance, every now and then a little mischievous gust of wind comes seemingly from nowhere.

It dances like a madman, squirms, jumps, and rushes everywhere, snatches small objects from hands, overturns everything that is unstable, splashes sand, laughs in your face, whistles, puffs, and zigzags away.

Often, larger whirlwinds – the sandstorms – come rushing along the streets. They move with certainty and are noticeable from anywhere in the city. Their prey is paper, pieces of plywood, fragments of foam, hanged or abandoned clothes. All of this gets sucked in a huge spinning whirl, rises rapidly up its narrow neck and is thrown high into the sky. The most striking are the rectangular paper sheets that swirl over houses, like a flock of hysterical ravens.

The winds, like street sweepers, eliminate garbage from the streets and spread it across a large area, so that even far outside the city you can see the scraps of some official papers in the sand, sheets torn from the school notebooks, letters and mailing box lids with the addresses of various cities and villages.

To be in the chaos of a raging sandstorm is unpleasant and terrifying: the whirlwind, like a devil, plays with a man in mean ways, painfully lashes with biting sandblasts from the sides, from above, from below, at random, relentlessly tortures your clothes and stuns you with loud hisses, squeaks, and squeals. The moments spent in the embrace of a whirlwind seem excruciatingly long, and the feel of being short of breath increases the fear.

Several times a year the desert gets shaken by storms. Their approach can be seen from afar: usually from the north, across the horizon, a towering black wall starts approaching the city, gets inevitably nearer and nearer, absorbing everything in its path. A tense silence reigns upon its path and you can clearly see the hundreds of small, protruding tornados «marching» in dense rows. Like a row of Roman legionaries, escaping from underground, they are striding confidently, without a fuss, united by one goal: to raise into the air and destroy houses built by man. And yet the hurricane hits the city unexpectedly, immediately trying to lift it into the air. In the beginning, you can hear the slamming of doors and the ringing of broken glass, then the rattle of roofs, the banging of broken slate, the whistling of wires and

balcony grades, joined by the deep groans of houses, and finally, everything merges into a hellish roar and continuous rumble. The day gets replaced by twilight, which turns into night. The hurricane rages for hours, sometimes for days.

No matter how well the windows and doors are caulked and plugged, in the middle of the hurricane storm, the wind still discovers all the cracks and searches every part of the house up and down, filling it with the fine-grained sand. The sand gets everywhere: a dense sand veil hangs in the air, it lies in even layers on the floor, on furniture, on faces of sleeping people and covers the souls of those who are awake. Especially disgusting snowstorms come in winter, bringing with them the cold that invades houses and takes residence, reigning over people, despite the powerful heating. Every apartment at this time gets dirty, dusty and uncomfortable. When the storm subsides, there comes a short period of stunning purity and calmness in the air. And this is not a deceptive perception caused by the contrast between the lingering noise and the long-hoped-for silence – not at all, the eye is pleased with the high dark blue sky, the colorful horizon with the predominance of yellowish tones up close and the violet ones in the distance, and with the transparent air, electrified by the already fading lighting strokes. Unfortunately, the sky soon becomes opaque, the horizon gets gray, and the tornadoes rise up in the air again, with moving clouds of dust that bite your nose. The desert returns into its usual state.

* * *

Today's sandstorm was unlike any other: it brought a rain that began late at night, when almost everybody was already asleep, and ended in the morning when almost everyone had not woken up yet. Maya woke up suddenly because of the deathly silence, coolness and a feeling of impending joy. Sometimes she managed to escape the heat and rest in the maternity ward like this, thanks to the only operating air conditioner in the entire hospital. But to sleep in your own apartment is way better indeed!

Discovering a thin layer of dry soft dust everywhere, she did not feel upset, like she used to. On the contrary, the perspective of upcoming housecleaning seemed pleasant. She brightened up, and asked herself: «Do you want to marry Klyuchitsky?» – and in the next breath she realized the absurdity of the question, and laughed loudly and decided that she feels so good today due to the wonderful weather, because the nature has brought the time when she will live in the Mainland a step closer, the time, when she will have her own apartment, furnished with her own furniture.

When Maya came out into the street, she saw a couple of small puddles and immediately imagined how she'd pass over the wide streams of muddy water in the spring flood season, merging into the majestic rivers filling up the vast seas. Suddenly she felt like she was already living there, in that bright future, while what was happening now, was in fact just a fleeting reminiscence of this

hot desert and all the things that happened to her while she was here.

Maya looked forward to seeing Klyuchitsky with a sublime feeling of sorts. She carefully wiped the books, the fridge, the armrests of the armchair, the headboard of the sofa bed and all the surfaces which might gather dust; she moped every floor in the apartment and on the wide sunroom balcony, prepared the ingredients for the Russian salad, cold snacks and the pot-au-feu stew, which was her specialty. That done, Maya took a bottle of Georgian «Five Stars» cognac from the cupboard and put it on ice, then checked out the sweets brought from Moscow, and, satisfied with the results, set to work. Maya wanted to treat her guest to a delicacy, but after getting started, she suddenly lost her inspiration, so she only mixed the salad, deciding to cut the ham and cheese upon Klyuchitsky's arrival. All the fuss with meat and potatoes she decided to keep for a later moment, hoping that the feast would take longer and she'd get in a proper mood.

Yet, things went not as Maya expected. Klyuchitsky dropped in with two huge heavy bags – they seemed to burst at the seams with all the groceries stuck there. First of all, he carefully arranged the liquors and put them into their designated places: he put cognacs in the pantry, the white wine bottles and the chilled champagne he stuffed into a large saucepan, then covered them with ice and placed on the bottom shelf of the fridge. He then put vodka and non-chilled champagne on the side shelves of the fridge and placed the beautiful bottles of golden Czech beer in

the freezer, muttering that they should pick up the beer in an hour. Done with the bottles, and in the same scrupulous way, he arranged the cans of caviar, sprats, jellied tongues, pate and salmon on the fridge shelves. He even found a space for cervelat sausages, cheese and glass jars full of salads.

Closing the fridge, the guest opened a tin can with the red caviar with deft fingers and asked Maya to prepare sandwiches. Meanwhile, he went ahead with the roasting of butterflied grilled chicken. To do so, he took a couple wide pans from his bag, as well as tailor-made pressure weights with wooden lids adorned with practical handles. A cutting board carved from the dark wood with a bizarre pattern of growth rings came next – this thing not only could serve as a magnificent decoration of Maya's kitchen but also as a precious exhibit in a museum of hand-carved souvenirs made by prisoners of the strict regime colony. Putting the dressed chicken on a board, Klyuchitsky easily squashed it with his heavy palm, rubbed it with salt, peppered, sprinkled with garlic juice, and then placed it on the pan with already melted fresh butter, covering it with pressure weight.

Soon the kitchen got filled with the scent of fried garlic chicken, fueling Maya's appetite to the point of her hand reaching involuntarily for a pink sandwich. Klyuchitsky immediately seconded Maya's initiative and poured champagne into glasses, gulping a good half of his drink with a toast: «To our union!» Maya took a couple of big sips – the wine pleasantly tickled the nostrils and burned the esophagus, as Maya began to eat

the temptingly delicious sandwiches. They quickly emptied the wide blue plate, leaving only a few grains of caviar, sparkling like precious gems, and finished off the wine bottle. Klyuchitsky turned the stove with chickens on and suggested to sample the chicken salad he brought, while the poultry was being roasted. Maya put the soft meat, marinated in thick green sauce, on small plates, and Klyuchitsky uncorked a bottle of Georgian wine. The salad turned out to be spicy, with an ever so slight smell of garlic and some nice, and yet unknown to Maya, spices, that evoked voracious appetite and raging thirst. Taking a sip of wine, Maya marveled at its wonderful taste and bouquet while an involuntarily thought had crossed her mind – this must be how the divine nectar smells.

Then Klyuchitsky brought the freshly roasted chickens and served more wine. The chickens were a total success: of tender golden color, with an appetizing crust, savory, soft and juicy. Klyuchitsky smeared the meat with a thick garlic sauce, as Maya did the same. She started eating and it felt like she fell into a blissful trance of gluttony to the point of losing the sight of her guest. The girl woke up to reality when her glass got empty, and only the carefully picked bones remained on the plate.

Klyuchitsky ate with the same gusto and self-abandonment. Putting aside the plate with the bones, he quickly refilled the glasses, which were immediately drained, and filled them again. After finishing the wine, Maya felt a slight intoxication, but the nourishing did not end there. Klyuchitsky reached for the

cognac, and Maya pushed the ham, aspic, and cheese closer. They effortlessly emptied a bottle of five-star cognac, then moved to a three-star Armenian one. Now the Russian salad, sprats, and liver pate came into play. They ate and drank slowly, obviously prolonging the pleasure.

Maya could drink a lot. Having reached a certain state of inebriation, when her body became light, the head became lucid, and her thoughts and actions bold, she ceased to get progressively drunk. When this happened, only a glass of strong alcohol tossed off in one draught or a whole bottle of strong wine could knock her down. To knock her down, but not to shut down her consciousness. For this talent, Maya once paid with her virginity...

After the second bottle, Klyuchitsky suggested to boil the water for some coffee and come out to the balcony to get some fresh air. They stood side by side on the warm cement floor, leaning against the concrete grate and raising their heads to the sky – the enormous stars shone above them, and it was possible to make out the Milky Way. After a few moments of silence, Klyuchitsky surprised Maya by uttering not quite what Maya expected to hear:

«Let's enclose the balcony with glass! And here,» – he pointed to the middle of the loggia, – «we'll put up a table and some wicker chairs. We will install a rotating frame, and turn this corner into a real solarium, and you'll be able to sunbathe here even in winter.

– I cannot make heads or tails of what you do for me already...

– Maya, come on! I can build you a palace... Look at me, do I look like some kind of shallow talker or philanderer? I'm just a man who has more money than you! The things around us need to be improved, and our life needs more comfort, as simple as that.

– Well, in this case, let's set up our nest.

– Let's drink some coffee. I'll send you some professionals the day after tomorrow.

– Here's the coffee, – Maya passed Klyuchitsky a can of instant coffee.

– We'll need this later. Bring the cups!

Klyuchitsky rummaged in his bottomless bag, took out a small glass jar and unscrewed the lid – the room got filled with the aroma of freshly ground coffee beans. Spooning coffee grounds into the cups, Klyuchitsky filled them with boiling water so that a soft foam coating formed on the surface of the intense brown liquid. He then passed one cup to Maya and began to sip the burning drink from the other one, taking one small sip at a time. When he had finished his cup, he filled the glasses with liquor, cut a lemon into thin slices, sprinkled each slice with sugar and spiked them with a little bit of instant coffee. After appraising his work, he smacked his tongue and, raising his cup, offered: «Let's chase the liquor with «nikolashka.»

Maya had already drunk enough for it to show in her behavior: she became bolder and more relaxed, she felt the sudden wish to be naughty – she wanted to do something, so that her self-

assured, rich guest, who did not perceive a woman in her (or as she thought), would feel embarrassed.

Leo proposed to return to the balcony, and Maya readily agreed. He took a bottle in one hand, a glass into another, nodded in the direction of the snacks and, stepping over the low threshold, sat comfortably on the balcony floor. When Maya sat down next to him, Klyuchitsky, once more, started by saying something completely unexpected:

– Maya, my dear, I want to offer you an extra work at the feldsher's station located in the old town.

– I did not even know that there's a station there.

– Actually, it's not even a station, just an empty room. But why should you care? You will get your two or three hundred a month, and work for an hour a day.

– Do the deportees live there?

– Yes, and they rarely need medical help.

– Why can't they come to our infirmary?

– They can or they can't, for all I care. Let's make a deal: you work without getting officially registered, and if you like it – you stay, if you don't – you leave.

– And are these killers no longer dangerous?

– It all depends on how you behave. If you try to pry into their lives, then anything could happen. If you just work with them, then no harm should be done. They are like any other average person. Of course, they are still all psychopaths, make no mistake about it, and even their appearance bears the stamp of

years spent in camp isolation. Just don't focus on that, or, better, do not notice anything at all.

– Will I be allowed to work part-time, then?

– Let me sort it out. But, for a start, you will work regularly.

Deal?

– Deal. Excuse me, I'll be right back.

Maya slipped back into the room, and Klyuchitsky looked up at the sky. He looked at some marvelous constellation and could not remember its name. He thought that it looked like a steel farm, the Milky Way resting on its corner. Time passed. Suddenly Klyuchitsky felt someone's presence next to him. He turned his head and saw a sight more amazing than the stars: nude Maya was standing in front of him.

Klyuchitsky was not one of those men who centered all their life around women, but at the sight of a really beautiful form he immediately recovered from his sudden oblivion and even scrambled onto his feet, as if the warm cement under him suddenly turned into the red-hot iron, and, then he snapped to attention all at once, as if upon receiving a command. When he came to his senses, he came closer to this smiling naughty woman, bent down, took her in his arms and carried her into his room with deft, confident movements...

From that moment, Klyuchitsky took over their amorous foreplay, leaving no chance for his partner to take the initiative and almost never picking up on her hints and signs. Maya was flattered by an unusual attitude toward her body at the hands

of this huge, strong man and was thrilled by the endless kisses that scattered over the skin like burning stars until she made out certain purposefulness in Klyuchitsky's actions, clearly aimed at exploring her female assets. The more attentively she listened and looked, the more she became convinced that Leo explored her while caressing: he measured her, weighed and scrutinized as if she was a beautiful heirloom. Maya felt offended and upset.

Klyuchitsky only fell asleep as morning came in, but Maya lay awake for quite some time, staring into the darkness, and listening to the snores of this weird man. She tried to understand him, but, alas, unsuccessfully. One thing Maya knew for sure, though: there was no trace of love today. Why Klyuchitsky, such a charming and passionate man, who clearly felt drawn to her as a woman, and who was so amusingly confused at her sudden nakedness, behaved so unambitiously between the sheets? Maybe the wise classic was right, saying: «With womankind, the less we love them, the easier they become to charm...?»

She tried to remember the rest of the stanza, and succeeded: «The tighter we can stretch above them, enticing nets to do them harm.» But Klyuchitsky was not a philanderer! Maya had neither patience nor wisdom for a deeper insight into the last line, especially since she was not sure of the word-for-word accuracy, so she decided to write it off as her wounded female pride. After all, she had rushed into the arms of this man who turned out to be both kind of decent in bed, but at the same time frighteningly non-standard. Nevertheless, she invited Klyuchitsky to her place

not only as a token of gratitude, or after the latter's hint at the restaurant, but, above all, following her own, selfish motives. But what's next? They could not just eat and drink all night long. Maya remembered another quote she had read in a wise book: «When left alone, a man and a woman would hardly indulge in reading paternoster.»

For all intents and purposes, deep down inside, Maya was plagued by not feeling the flush of love, which she, Cleopatra, wanted so badly from her admirer. She felt both passion and contentment, but no inner satisfaction, no comfort. It was like winning the battle, but losing the war. Deep down inside her, Maya did not get closer to Klyuchitsky in the slightest, although she all but threw herself into his arms, like a hypnotized rabbit would get into a snake's jaws.

This comparison made Maya feel uneasy and creepy...

«Maybe it's better to keep it simple?» – She thought. – «Maybe Klyuchitsky is a real man, who is not into sentimentality, but, on the plus side, he will help me to put my plans in place. The trick is not to follow any momentary moods! He offered me an extra work, which means extra money. Isn't this what I need right now? But for what price? Better not to think about it. Everything is fine! My faithful vassal and lover is by my side. The bottom line is not to pry into his heart, just like one would do with a deportee, and to leave all sorts of questions behind. But still, why am I still awake at this late hour then?»

And once again, Maya remembered the lines from the

Egyptian Nights:

...And only on a bed of gold
The proud empress is not sleeping.
She listens carelessly to distant noises,
And looks onwards with a cloudy brow
At spouse of hers, who's laying on the couch.
Ah, only yesterday she poured
the passion into veins of his
with all the lustiness of her female frisson
All for her lord. – Alas!
He settled, fell asleep, and still is sleeping.
The queen looks gloomily
At dreams so dispassionately calm
And in her breast, a sultry alarm sets in.

Finally, she calmed down, put her head on Klyuchitsky's broad, muscular chest and fell asleep...

* * *

Prison compound, fenced with a barbed wire, was both a gold mine and a honey pot for Klyuchitsky. His talent of addressing the urgent needs of prisoners brought him no less profit than his fairly good salary – along with all bonuses, benefits and dodgy additions. Over the years of working in this compound, Klyuchitsky fit in perfectly, or you could even say, grew into it

and learned to easily maneuver between the cons, the security, and the authorities both inside the prison fence and outside of it. With the skill of a fakir, he moved from the ordinary world to the world behind the barbed wire and back, carrying with him the things that filled the voids of both of these worlds and added to the earnings of Klyuchitsky himself. He began his business with the honourable Samaritan aid for the builder's tea addicts – the chifirists, who, in his opinion, suffered most, were hardworking, humble and undemanding people. All it took to cater to their needs was ordinary black tea, which was freely sold in all the food stores of the city. After downing a brown, thick, tar-like fluid, a chifirist works frantically, without eating and drinking, without scandals, riots, and fights. He would never rat out those who gave him his pack of tea, for betrayal can deprive him of his venerable medicine forever, and he will do everything possible and impossible for the sake of his benefactor.

But chifirists are not the only ones who need tea in the compound. A tea-pot full of green tea is worth no less than a pack of black one in this exhausting heat. For the patients, green tea is both food and the balm for the soul. For the weak, it is a source of cheerfulness and for strong people it brings confidence. The tea unites people of different beliefs; it pulls together the like-minded, loosening the tongues of taciturn people, softening cruelty, sharpening the hearing, clarifying the thoughts and invigorating the body. Those who have the tea, are confident in their future, believe that their sentence can be

commuted, that they will not get killed here and that they will get out soon...

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