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SCHOOL STORIES IN
ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN
Igor Yevtishenkov

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School Stories in English and Russian

«Издательские решения»

Yevtishenkov I.

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Igor Yevtishenkov

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Learning the russian way

Moving over to the window, Peter threw his wrapper into the bin and bit into the sweet. In just a minute, the headache disappeared. Sugar helped, but Peter couldn't understand why he had to learn complicated formulas with his other classmates. In the classroom he tried to question the beer-bellied teacher about the more difficult exercises, but the large man just smiled and said that it would help him one-day... Weird!

Peter was tired, but his homework wasn't yet done. He wished that he could just answer some of the questions like «can the residual of two figures be more than their sum», for example. It seemed so easy at first sight, but he was stuck on the problem for a long time. He couldn't concentrate and soon his thoughts slid away somewhere else...

Peter closed his eyes and relaxed in the chair after his long day. He felt annoyed, but the reason wasn't his dull homework – it was Mary, his classmate. She was cute, well educated and he enjoyed seeing her eyes on him, though it made him feel uneasy and this was when the bloody surged to his cheeks. He didn't fancy her, even though she was different from other girls in their class – but the worst was that she knew it. Peter tried to hide his feelings and none seemed to notice his reaction. He didn't want to be friends with Mary, not yet. But being an acquaintance was okay... for now. Or didn't he believe his true feelings? Peter did not want to answer.

He thought about his last chat with Mary at school and sighed. She'd come up to him with a friend, the red haired Natalie, who was rather cheeky and a bit stuck-up.

«Hi Peter», said Mary. Natalie rolled her eyes as if being hit by Mike Tyson's uppercut to her jaw.

«Hi girls», said Peter, «How's things?»

«Okay, thanks», Mary replied. Natalie was holding her left elbow tightly. «I've got a few English Grammar questions – would you mind if I e-mailed them over to you tonight?», she asked.

«What? To me?», he asked. He was surprised. He knew she had some private teachers from the UK and her English was far better than others. But she never asked for help. Not yet.

«Sure! After all, who can explain English better than you?», Mary flattered him and raised her eyebrows.

Before he could think of a suitable answer to her question, the girls were already by the class next door.

It happened today and Peter thought it had something to do with the Maths lesson. A few days ago, the Maths teacher – well known alias «Teddy Bear» – came into the class with a wry smile and said, «If any of you know how to solve the problem during this lesson, you'll get A-mark for the third school term and be let out early!». It sounded like a joke and to Peter it was.

«Two ships are leaving piers from opposite river banks at the same time. They are moving towards each other», whispered Alex, his neighbor – he was good at Maths and it was a challenge to him. «Both are moving at different but entirely steady speeds. They met for the first time, 720m away from the shore, but then moved away from each other again. Then each made a U-turn and began to track back across the river, meeting the next time, 400m from the shore. What is the distance, therefore, between the river banks?», Peter wished he could find the answer, but to no avail.

«Do you know what the answer is?», whispered Mary over the aisle.

«Not a clue», answered Peter. He shook his head, not daring to look up, but instead rested his chin in his hands and pretended to think. His cheeks once again burned red through his fingers.

No-one succeeded in the lesson, but many of the class promised to have an answer by the following morning. Except Peter.

Peter e-mailed the puzzle to Robert, his friend in Manchester, but had no reply as yet. Robert must have been pondering the answer as well, no doubt, but if he did know the solution, he would

surely make contact. Peter moved the sheet with the problem away and focused on something else. He thought about his private school in the Manchester suburbs. There were a few teachers who were helpful during the afternoon classes and helped pupils with their homework. He smiled as he reminisced about his time there. Mr. McDubley was really funny – always blinking his eyes when Peter couldn't understand the Maths. Mr. Watersmith patiently explained the dull and boring grammar rules, but Peter never felt so desperate and exhausted as he did here in Moscow. He's never been given so much homework, never. It was better in Manchester before...

A few days passed and there was no lucky man to cope with the Teddy Bear's problem in his class. Even Alex failed. «Teddy Bear» exulted over them, many classmates were really upset, but Peter didn't care. He thought it was nonsense but not a challenge.

He had a few classbooks about Maths on his desk now, as well as two or three on History and Geography. He'd heard that there were more than twenty by different authors on English grammar that had been approved by the Ministry of Education – unbelievable! – those Russians are nuts about this stuff and they like to exaggerate. In his early days, he thought that there were exams for each class book, but was really surprised to find out he was wrong. It was only one exam. He wondered how he could choose the right course to take and books to pass the test successfully. All his efforts though were in vain – no-one could explain, simply relying on teacher's knowledge, experience or simply a «hit and miss» answer... Oh those Russians!

Peter came back to the Maths again. «Teddy Bear» usually explained exercises for ten to fifteen minutes, as it took the other kids a little longer to understand his speech. Two or three more exercises took them another twenty minutes – why the hell did this man demanded a further ten to fifteen more exercises for homework? «Teddy Bear» didn't care how long Peter spent on this boring work and nor did the other teachers. Each of them thinks they're the Lord of the manor and the pupils are mere slaves. Of course, they know more than the pupils, but homework always seems to be more than the lesson – why? Why should they do homework three-four times longer than at school? Again, there's no-one to explain.

Tomorrow they'll have six lessons, two of them would be PE. Alex told him once how long it would usually take to do this «boring Maths shit». However, Alex was a geek – one of the best in the class, so Peter could only imagine the efforts that, Mary or Natalie, for example, would have to go through to do the same. Awesome. If they really tried to do homework they'd have to do it well into the night. And no night clubs and parties, of course.

Peter imagined a teacher making all these exercises alone. He wondered if there was anyone who could endure it? Highly unlikely. He thought of Dad's stories about his old good times when they had only one teacher. The man taught them all the subjects for the whole year and there was another one who «inherited» them in the following one. Peter thought if there were such a system in this Russian school, the teacher would not be able to give them so huge home exercises. He simply wouldn't be able to check up the following day. Too much for one person. Even for «Teddy Bear». Peter tried to gauge how long it could take him to check up their exercise books. The result was shocking: three hours per each class daily. Five classes meant fifteen hours. It was impossible. Even if a teacher were a genius and were never tired, even if he could read faster than any ordinary person, even so he wouldn't be able to spend less than five-six hours per day for checking their home work. Without any coffee break and smoking! It was impossible to imagine. He understood now why his home works stayed unmarked so often. «If they do not care of what they ask for, why should we do then?», he sighed and fell to thinking.

It was China he reminisced about. Two years ago Dad convinced Mum to go altogether to China. He had some partners over there and planned to set up a business with Government in the South of China. It took him two years to understand it would be not so fast and his partners could not do all routine job without him. But life in China was a nightmare for Peter. Dad was crazy about his own childhood and the way he was educated in a John Dewey's school. He wanted Peter to follow his

way. He made Peter work at a factory in China for a while. On Sundays. There was no air conditioning and the food was lousy, always. But Dad said Peter had to learn life the way it was: no sugar, no sweets, just pure water, hard work and perspiration all over the body. The humidity was always 100% and the temperature was over 30 Centigrade all the day long. It was a disaster. Peter barely survived. At school they studied six days a week and almost ten month a year. But there was no home work at all in there. Strange. And now he was in Russia. Not much better but he had no perspiration every day at the very least. Dad said the future would belong to nuclear energy, and he was sure the Russians had some good ideas on that. Dad is a very smart man. But he's as stubborn as a mule. So, he even convinced Mom to teach in The University of Foreign Languages in Moscow to move about.

Peter smiled and eyed another pile of papers. Damn, Geography! In the afternoon he hesitated about how to fill in the maps and how to find the coordinates of some cities and mountains. He didn't, however, now. He knew Google Maps would never-ever let him down. He entered the data and got the first reply. With a safe conscience he jotted down all the necessary latitudes and longitudes on the maps and gave a stretch with delight. Even though he was against the boring homeworks he did not want to upset his Dad. Doing too much was not the right way to success, he thought. Peter was tired. He'd be better off leaving all this behind now. He was thirsty and died for some tea. But he kept one eye on the monitor. There was a flickering envelope in the right down corner. New incoming mail? His heart missed a beat. It was like email apnea. He could not say how but he was sure it was Mary's email in there. He clicked the icon. Damn, it was her!

«Hi Pete, could you help me to translate the text below, please?» – was number one in her «list of wishes».

H-m-m, she could do it herself... But after looking through the pages Peter understood their English teacher alias «Dragon» was in a very bad mood today: the text was about fiber optic glass and its physical characteristics. How could they translate it from Russian into English? Even he could not... For some time this job absorbed him and he did not notice the second question in the message. After pressing the «Reply All» button he saw Natalie's email in the address line too. There were also a few words about it down there: «Please, help us with Natalie because she is my best friend and we won't translate the text without your help. I owe u a lot, Pet!» My aunt! It was unfair. Peter wanted to delete the message but decided to scroll it down. And in the end he found one more thing.

«Peter, u know, I have a problem. A friend of mine asked me to translate a few words for her. Could you have a look, please? I'll email you all the questions in the second message,» she was really a «hoo lee» as the Chinese used to say. «A cunning fox». He did not want to help Natalie but he did want to help Mary. They, women! What kind of secret did she want to keep from Natalie but reveal to him? He was intrigued. Peter didn't delete his message. He waited for a while and all but pressed «Send» button. It was through. But another one appeared instead on the message bar. It was a mail agent notification about one more incoming to his second account. Peter chose «download» option. In a few seconds it was on the screen. And it was from Mary. What could she hide from her «best friend Natalie» in it?

«Evening, Peter», she began in her Russian way. She was nervous for sure. There were too many mistypings in her second email. He smiled; she usually made a lot of thumbos when texting, too. «I have a very unusual question to you. You see, I have a very close friend. She lives in Saint Petersburg. We have been close since childhood. It's a very long story. But now she is in trouble. She has a boy-friend in the UK. They met at Malta last year. And unfortunately, she fell in love. But he does not reply to her emails anymore. That guy even changed his Skype account and she cannot call him now. So, she wrote him a verse. Could you be so kind to have a look at her version that I also tried to correct a little bit, please? Please, do not comment and no jokes. It is a sensitive matter.»

Peter smiled. He was obviously flattered. Mary's words gave him quite a thrill. He no longer thought why Mary kept this a secret though girls usually adored to gossip about such stories. He felt the inspiration overwhelming him. Here, he began to read:

No matter if it's day or night,
Your glance is no longer bright
As it was seven days before...
But you are right: what is it for?
Why am I begging for a kiss?
Why do I wonder if you miss?
Why am I talking so much
And do not dare even touch?
Who am I now? Who are you?
Are two too many or too few?
If you don't love me, nor do I!
And saying this I want to cry...
But if I hate again to meet
Why feeling pain is so sweet?

And nobody helps reply:
I can't help suffering... but why?

Peter fell into deep thought and entered his own world where time stood still. Even though there were very many mistakes in the verse, it touched him. He was typing and thinking, and noticed nothing around him. His father knocked at his door twice and even half-opened it, but Peter did not turn around. «Hard worker as I am' – thought Dad and went back to his room. Peter meanwhile kept on doing his unusual «homework». Finally, he was through. He relaxed and read the lines from the very beginning:

Effulgent day or stygian night,
Your ardent glance, no longer bright
As it was seven days before...
Pitiless pain! What is it for?
Why am I begging for the kiss?
Why do I wonder if you miss?
Why do I dream and dare not touch;
Yet, overwhelming fear I clutch?
Who am I now and who are you?
Is two too many or too few?
If you don't love me, nor do I!
My sin in blood-red tears I vie...
But, if I hate again to meet,
Why is this poignant pain so sweet?

Beloved, this is my gutted cry:
I can't help suffering... but why?

Peter was satisfied. It sounded good and Mary's friend's guy is likely to be surprised. Undoubtedly. That's what they wanted and they'll get it. Email disappeared from the screen and dropped into Mary's incoming box in the north suburbs of Moscow. She started when the speaker beeped loudly, and clicked the envelope icon with a trembling hand. As she was reading it brought

tears to her eyes. She was looking at a young boy's picture in her hands and whispered his name. It was the guy she met at Malta the year before. She could see nothing but his face and was quietly crying.

But Peter couldn't see it. He was far away. His throat was soaring. He wanted to drink. So, he rushed to the kitchen. Mum and Dad waited for him over there.

«Sonny, you look a little odd», said Mom.

«Yes, I am», Peter agreed and smiled.

«Was your homework so interesting?», wondered Dad with a witty smile. «I opened your door twice but you even did not react.»

«Oh, yes, it was. You're right», Peter said with a happy smile.

«I told you», he nodded to Mum. «He is clever and can adjust to any circumstances.»

«Sure, you did», smiled Mum. «Like father like son.»

«Come on, honey, do not exaggerate», said Dad. «Nowadays they have completely different homework. They know so much. It's fantastic. I do envy them. And their homework must be also interesting.»

«Oh, yes, it is», Peter confirmed candidly. «I wish I could have it always as much interesting as tonight!»

All three sat around the table and began to talk merrily about their family matters. Everyone was happy in his own way. The homework was done.

Teaching english at school or all is not gold that glitters

The mild and tender autumn wind hasn't yet turned into a penetrating and icy one. Air petted face and touched it as carefully and softly as if it was afraid of frightening it. Every next morning seemed to be nicer and more charming than the previous one, and Andrey Ivanovich was fascinated with «the golden days' of that autumn. At the very least in the mornings on his way from home to the local school he has just begun to work for as an English teacher. As soon as he stepped across the school's threshold his mood has changed dramatically. Two months have passed and more or less the pupils got used to him and his requirements. But, half of them didn't want to learn, no matter what he did.

Young Larisa Ivlev burst into blossom much earlier than any of the other eighth form girls. Meeting her in the street, all 'made up' in an abundance of «paint and feathers', he'd hardly recognize her as one of his pupils. Now, dressed up in some fashionable but cheap clothes like a young starlet she raised her brows high and her hair almost hid them. Her eyes, wide-open, were naive and sincere. If he hadn't known this girl before, he'd say she was a Virgin Mary's sister or her sister-in-law at the very least. She zipped her jacket down a little so that zip-fastener stopped fifteen centimeters below collarbones. Until she stood straight, it was OK. Meanwhile Larisa leaned forward and planted her elbows on the desk. Her chin rested cosily in her palms. He was sitting at the desk and filling in the class register. The girls and the boys stopped chatting and watched her out of the corner of their eyes; heads forward, idiotic look on their faces, hoodies and headsets in the ears. He shook his head thinking his view was one-sided.

«Andrey Ivanovich,» she half-whispered half-curred in a seductive voice. «You know, I have to admit...» she made a short pause like a good actress and went on, «I haven't done my home work, unfortunately.» The last word was pronounced with so low and mourning voice that it took him all his power to stop laughing. He pulled himself up, anyway, and looked up.

«That's really a very deplorable fact,» he copied her intonation. «My condolences... But let me ask, Ms. Ivlev why did you fail to do it?» he exuded charm.

«Oh, that was a very sad story. But in short, I was at a hospital.»

«Sorry. And how long did it take you?» He was as kind and caring as her own father couldn't be at that moment.

«Half a day. Why are you questioning about that? Did you see me somewhere?», she smiled with a silly smile many young girls used to thinking it makes them look more irresistible and intriguing.

«No, I didn't. So, you were back in the afternoon, weren't you?», he raised his brows and she let hers down.

«Yes, I was. I don't remember exactly... But you're right. Sort of.»

«Did you have dinner yesterday or did you miss it because of this unpleasant visit, Ms. Ivlev?», he asked with sympathy.

«Yes, I did. No problem,» she leaned her head down to a shoulder a little bit.

«Did you have your supper as well?», he kept asking.

«Yes, I did, Andrey Ivanovich. What are you implying? That I should be on a diet?», she pushed out her lower lip and gave a disgusted laugh.

«No, not at all. But let me ask you the last question. Did you get to bed on time?»

«Oh, now I see what you're getting at,» she smiled openly. «Yes, I did. Alone and happy. I dreamt wonderful dreams,» she began to whisper again. «And I even dreamt about you. Imagine that..?»

«I'd rather not,» he narrowed his eyes and whispered in return. «I can't find any excuse for you being so unprepared, Ms. Ivlev. «I don't want to hear about your nice, long dreams. If you had

time for sleep, you had plenty of time to do your homework beforehand. Give me your assignment book, please.»

«Maybe we can talk about English in another way? Why don't you call me Larisa?», she did not give up. She threw back her shoulders and a thin line between two sides of her zip opened up much wider than necessary. She arched her back and looked at him, raised her shoe-heel up waving it as a banner over her skirt-tightened buttocks.

«Hardly we can', he said sharply and moved his head forward as if he wanted to look into her eyes deeper.

«Why are you looking at me like that?», she was embarrassed, obviously. She blushed but came back fast. The girl had too far gone to be brought back that easily. «What can you see in my eyes, Andrey Ivanovich?»

«Nothing, unfortunately. However, let me have another look,» he furrowed his brow, looking like he really wanted to find something good in there. Then a previously unseen taste for sarcasm overcame him. «Yes, I can. I can see the back of your skull and nothing else. Do I make myself clear, Ms. Ivlev?»

«You are humiliating me!», she yielded. «You are traumatizing my soul!.. You are trying to psyche me out!...

«Wow! You know such words! It's praiseworthy,» he smiled.

«I'm telling my mother and our form mistress!»

«It's up to you. You may report to the Prime Minister or the President, if you like, but your assignment book should be on my desk right now. This morning I saw you smoking with your classmates around the corner. One of them was Alex from the tenth form. He swigged from a bottle of beer.»

«So what? It's none of your business!», she spoke out of turn. He just gave a «who-cares' kind of shrug.

«Sure. However it confirms the fact you weren't short of time yesterday, or today. You should either get up earlier or go to bed later. And you'd be better off studying than smoking, you know. So, there's no excuse. No mitigating circumstances.» At that moment the headteacher came up to the door and asked to talk to him. He went out. The girls and boys didn't think he was close to the door, so, they couldn't hear him coming back after his talk with the headteacher. But he could hear them.

«He must be crazy. He talks too much. I know what to do myself. He'd be better off not teaching me. You smoke, you don't study, you can't read. Who cares what I do? I'm not his daughter. What the hell does he want?», this girl was bursting with anger.

«Maybe he's a sort of do-gooder?», another one asked.

«What? Bollocks! Tell it to my old aunt Fanny! There are no saints in this world, my mother says. And she really knows such kind of things, believe me!», she couldn't calm down.

«Of course, she does! We've heard all about her. She's living with her nephew now, right?», the latter one said with a poisonous tone.

«I'll kill you, you bitch!», the first girl screamed.

«Spare yourself, stupid. Kill your Mom first and kiss my arse!», the other girl seemed so self confident. Andrey Ivanovich guessed who was who. Then the bell rang.

«Hey, you, both, stop that! Right, what's the next lesson?», someone else stepped in to interrupt.

«Biology.»

«Shit. We've got to hurry. Come on, let's get out of here!»

A dozen of pupils swept away from the class and disappeared down the stairs. Andrey Ivanovich looked at the quiet classroom and began to prepare to the next lesson. The sixth form was supposed to be there in ten minutes.

It was a remarkable day.

The sixth form guys were very excited with some PE exercises and could not calm down for a long time. When they did, he sighed and repeated his standard phrase «Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen!..» In vain. «Ladies and Gentlemen!» he increased his own volume: «Good MO-OR-NING! Cut the noise and let's begin our wonderful journey. Who is on duty today?»

One more lesson has begun. It was little different to his previous lessons but there seemed to be no sign of improvement either. «So, my friends, how's things? Where have you been? What have you seen?», half of class began to shout loudly and he could not recognize a word. «Let's begin' with «oysters', so to speak,» he smiled. «Ms. Loginov, how are you?»

«I'm fine. Thank you. And you?», a chubby girl answered quickly. She got her face made up and a thick layer of Mascara rested on her eyelids even though she was twelve.

«I'm fine too. Thanks. Tell us what your rest was like?», he wondered.

«Pardon?», she asked in Russian. He had to repeat the sentence more slowly, «Have you had any rest?»

«What Everest, Andrey Ivanovich?», the girl was completely confused. «I was at dacha. Are you joking? I've got no money for Everest!», she chuckled and he looked up expecting a loud laugh but nobody even smiled. «My God,» he thought, «how can I go on? And they are in the sixth form now...»

«Ms. Loginov, not «Everest' but «any rest'. Got it?», he tried to explain her mistake with a sad smile. Only then some of her friends laughed a little. He shrugged.

Half of the lesson has passed by and Yuriy Ilyasov, a quiet and an industrious pupil with thick-lens glasses, was desperately fighting against the army of unknown words in his text book. He joined this class last year and had studied in another city until his parents moved to Moscow. Andrey Ivanovich patiently waited for him to make mistakes and then corrected him. He turned his eyes for a second but still kept listening to the pupil's reading and translating. Suddenly a word grated on his ears. He turned around and asked him to repeat.

«Lord Baron,» Yuriy said blinking his eyes.

«What?», Andrey Ivanovich was surprised.

«Lord Baron!», Yuriy repeated in an injured voice. «Can't you see, Andrey Ivanovich, it is written in the text. I'm reading it as it is!», he pointed out down to the page with his finger. Andrey Ivanovich began to laugh and the laugh turned into dry cough with tears on his eyes.

«Yuriy, my dear friend,» he whispered hoarsely, «it's «Lord Byron'. Haven't you ever heard of him?»

The boy shook his head. Andrey Ivanovich looked around the room. The guys and girls looked puzzled. He felt perplexed as well.

«Hey, little monsters, no ideas?!», he raised his brows and waited. No-one replied. He nodded and sighed. «OK, just for your information «Lord Baron' as you said,» he pointed out to Yuriy, «or Lord Byron was the greatest English poet.» He shrugged in disbelief and asked the next boy to go on with the text. A quiet voice began to read the next sentence, and he sat listening to it. Ten minutes left before the bell rang but «that was not the half of the story', though. The pupil read the sentence a bit disconnectedly and finally has begun to translate. He was slow but OK. The first half of the sentence took him two or three minutes and the second part was supposed to kill the rest of the lesson time. The boy mumbled to himself before speaking loudly... and finally said, «The Queen Charlatan was presented,» he sat thinking about something nobody but him could know about. Andrey Ivanovich opened his mouth thunderstruck with the translation and asked «What? What did you say?»

«Queen Charlatan was presented,» the boy was embarrassed but he could not understand his mistake «What's wrong?», he asked in an offended voice again.

«Buddy, it's written «Charlotte'. Can you pronounce in Russian «Sharlotta'? Hey, you, class, have you heard the name before?!», he looked at them. No one nodded.

«Andrey Ivanovich, is that different to say «Sharlotta' or «Charlatan'?»», the «offended boy' wondered. «It sounds very similar.» He was quiet and sincere. There was no joking in his voice.

«Not that much indeed,» Andrey Ivanovich smiled. «Charlatan, shalopay, scapegrace, who cares? It's similar to *sharmanka* and *sharlatanka*. Right?» The class burst into laughter. «OK, guys and girls, not much time left. Let's sort out homework.» He could not stand it anymore. But he had to. Life was supposed to go on.

December saw the first meeting with parents at school and it wasn't easy. Not for the parents but for him. He had been told the pupils' parents mostly considered a school as a temporary shelter, a lodge for their children from 8.30 a.m. till 2.00 p.m. Pure and simple. He thought, however, that some may feel differently and have an understanding of what he did.

Initial greetings and smiles didn't seem to matter much tonight, even though he felt that a first impression was the most important thing. He didn't know what impression the pupil's parents had, but his own wasn't a good one. Tired, estranged faces with empty eyes, wooden stares and some unclear sounds like sighs or indistinct mumbles were in the air. And dark hopelessness from the thirty or so adults simply spoiled the atmosphere. They listened to him and nodded, mostly in silence. Some women tried to encourage him, smiled then sank back into their immovable detachment again. Andrey Ivanovich despaired, but went on describing the way their kids learnt English and every pupil's virtues and shadows but nobody seemed to care even when it concerned their own child.

«We try to learn some more or less common things, for example, in geography. But they know little about these points in Russian, let alone in English,» he tried to explain why the kids were not so successful. «For example, Ms. Ivanova said we could go to London and Washington by train. Can you imagine that? Ms. Ivleva sincerely thinks Dali and Deli are two brothers from a blockbuster film. Great Britain and England are two different countries. One is in Europe and the second somewhere in the hell. UK and the US are OK, they think. You see, a lack of basic knowledge is scary and it'll be difficult for them to get to the airport, let alone a foreign country.»

«Ha!» a woman's voice interrupted him. «We'll never get to the airport «cause our salary is only enough to get to the closest bakery!», apparently it was her mother. Some nodded with sympathy. Andrey Ivanovich was stunned. There was nothing more to add. How could he dare call their children brain-dead, beer-addled or an airhead? What a cheek! It wouldn't be unfair on their parents though...

Next morning it was bright and fresh. 6.00 a.m. and the coffee machine has begun to spread it's charming aroma around the room and even though he knew he'd be better off without caffeine, the delicious coffee smell made him feel good. He couldn't refuse a cup of coffee that morning. He narrowed his eyelids, sipping the black liquid with pleasure and thinking of the pupils. The tenth form ones seemed to understand the Sequence of Tenses and Present Continuous Tense. The previous grammar rules weren't as difficult to practice. However, «PCT» was more difficult to grasp and hard to compare with something similar in Russian. There was a short advertisement for bed-linen on the TV with a naive love-story plot. He took a pen and jotted down a few sentences:

I've been gazing at the dawn
I've been staring at your gown
I've been looking at the street
Where we failed to briefly meet
I've been watching stupid ad
With two gorgeous girls in bed
I've been wasting precious time
«Cause time wasting is a crime
And I have to say again
I was suffering in vain

He opened his laptop and switched on the TV card. Ten minutes later the commercial was on again and he recorded it onto his hard disk. Great! Practice makes perfect, indeed. The lines he wrote didn't seem good, but weren't bad, but he hoped they were different from the book's long and boring explanations anyway. His pupils were supposed to enjoy them.

The lesson began with a lot of jokes, smiles and laughter because it was one girl's birthday. This definitely didn't fit the general mood. They didn't listen carefully, and Andrey Ivanovich forced himself to carry on. He stopped explaining grammar and tried to smile. His idea to attract their attention with his «brilliant advert poem» failed, and it hurt his feelings. The girls sitting at the front desks often turned around to chat and by the middle of the lesson they hung onto the backs of their chairs. Low-slung jeans slipped down below their coccyx – a new kind of teens fashion – and the T-shirts and short blouses hiked up at the back. He had a gallery of the violin-like waists with half-naked hips and S-vibrating spines. All of them had tramp-stamps – «the-state-of-the-art» lower-back tattoos, which they ensured can be seen by wearing a short top and low-rise pants. There were dangerous scorpions, bizarre flowers, falling rose-leaves over a girl's languishing gaze, something else and... two men feeding coal to a stove to keep it going. Both men were supposed to actively shovel when the picture owner would pick up her feet nicely.

«Girls, listen,» he tried to attract attention to himself. «Could you be so kind to turn around, please?» Some looked around and stopped their chatter. «You know, your picturesque tattoos made by modern Gogens, Rafaels and Da Vincis, have nothing to do with our lesson. Believe me, it is much more pleasant to talk to you than to your... second faces, so to speak,» he chuckled.

«Andrey Ivanovich, if I translate correctly what you've just said you don't like our tattoos,» one smiled. «But they are both very beautiful and expensive!», she pouted her mouth and rolled her eyes meaningfully.

«It's not really my field,» he replied, «however these masterpieces have less meaning than your look now,» he wanted to put her back into her place but she reacted immediately.

«Excuse me,» her voice was bitter as she could make it, «what do you think we should do then? Should we tattoo a crossword or Pythagoras' theorem down there? And who for? For Isaac Newton or Perelman?», she gave a long laugh and the class seemed to support her. «Sorry but you can hardly understand the deep meaning of each tattoo.» The girl flicked their hair and grinned more inanely than before. They might have forgotten they were at school. Seemingly all of them were happily indifferent rather than actively hostile.

«You're right, I know, but I guess I'm just old and can't understand what's «fun» about it,» he had to avoid the more difficult part of the conversation. «But, I'm happy that you know these artists' names. At least that's something.»

«We don't. We've only just heard of them, so who are these people?», she gave an «I-don't-care» shrug of her shoulders, and they all gave a knowing laugh. He felt uneasy. He tried his best to open up the world he's seen and known – although it was vain, he knew secretly he could give them more than others.

«No the slightest, girls,» he answered with the same intonation. Naturally, it made no sense to continue with the lesson. «Although a fact may sound interesting to you.» They all stopped talking and he could finally see their faces instead of the backs. He thought that they liked to listen to his stories, which pleased him, but he knew he was wrong in general, so that was a great disappointment. «Around your age, we celebrated a girl's birthday at her house... Later that evening, we all decided to make a wish, so to speak. And eighteen out of twenty of us, had the same one.

«Which one?» he was immediately asked.

«It may sound a little odd to you,» he made a small, but not deliberate pause as thoughts of past events filled his head. «But we only had one wish, which was «let it be anything but war». That's all'. He could see their expressions fading, but he'd predicted that already.

«Maybe this was the only problem during your time,» one boy politely asked as an excuse for their lack of compassion.»

«Perhaps. But what do you wish for?» Allow me to do a short test – just a few questions. I'll dictate and you just answer, marking your responses with one, two or three. Okay? The first question – «what is your biggest wish?» The second question – «Who would you most like to look like?» Thirdly, «how much money do you need to be completely happy for the rest of your life and what do you actually need to be happy?» Lastly, but by no means least,“ he smiled, „what attributes must you have to be successful nowadays.“ He sat back down at his desk. A deep silence hung in the air and everyone had their heads bent over their answer sheets. He took his thermos and took a long swig. His coffee was cold, but still good, proving it was worth paying extra for „Lavazza’. Half an hour later, the test was over and the bell rang. All his pupils left the classroom with embarrassed smiles, but not looking directly into his eyes. It was as if they'd got into mischief and were afraid of being punished by their parents. Having looked through the sheets he thoughtfully ran a hand through his hair and opened a drawer.

By the seventh lesson all classes had answered the same questions and he put their replies on the table to sort out.

«Hello – can you hear me?», he listened to the voice and couldn't help but smile again. No-one else would greet him like this on the phone.»

«Good afternoon, Anna Ilyinishna,» he said. «How are you? Are you OK?»

«Oh, nice to hear your voice, little Andrew,» she switched to English, «I haven't heard from you in ages. Thanks for your concern. What's up? Why are you calling?»

«Anna Ilyinishna, you are impossible. Can't I call just for a chat?»

«No, you can't. So, what do you want?»

«You see, er... I'm a teacher now.»

«My condolences,» she commented. He simply sighed.

«I started teaching in September and tried to make my pupils interested in English any way I could... I did my best to tell them what they could achieve providing they sat and learned for their last two years at school, but to no avail. More importantly, they're from troubled families, they're disadvantaged children, so to speak. I asked them what they'd want to hear about Paris, London, Taipei, Berlin, Frankfurt, Vienna, Beijing, Shanghai, but even this prompted no reaction from them. I said, «Right, boys and girls. How do you think people get to know each other in China, the UK, France or Germany? Silence – absolutely no reply at all. So, I decided to give them a short questionnaire. The first question was what they dreamed about, the second, what they'd need to be completely happy in their lives and the third, who they'd like to look like.

«Hmm. I can tell you what they answered without hearing your results, I'm afraid.»

«Really?», he was unpleasantly surprised.

«Of course. They need nothing and don't care. You're going to attempt to change their path to a better life and to help change them.

«Er... Sort of.»

«What I do understand, is that neither you nor I can do anything to change them. One or two will be okay by our reckoning; others will learn nothing, read nothing and do nothing but play games and waste time. So, there's nothing left for them to wish for or actually need. If they don't need education, books or to use their brains, it doesn't necessarily mean they need nothing. Mostly, they do what they're asked to by parents or other adults. However, adults don't usually ask for anything, because they're tired, so the only wish they have is to get some peace and quiet from the kids in the evening. So, if they don't need to wash, cook, scrub or dust as these functions are performed by consumer electronics, what could they wish for? Humans go back to being simple animals without having ambition.»

«Do you want me to list their ambitions?», he asked, sounding puzzled.

«No, not at all. Just give me the one that's common through all of them,» she asked it as quietly as when she'd taught him many years ago.

«Hmm...» he pondered, «I'd say that it's money – all their ambitions surround having lots of money and having it could make their ambitions real. Ha! That's all us adults think about too!», he added with a note of sarcasm in his voice.

«You're right. I dare say that it's become a universal requirement, hasn't it? Look, my feelings about money haven't changed dramatically over the last twenty years but (!) now I'm far happier when I receive money instead of a book or a box of chocolates from my pupils. Whether you admit it or not, it lets everyone buy their slice of the happiness pie.»

«I don't understand where you're going with this, Anna Ilyinishna', he sighed. «I'm confused. I tried my best to teach them a better way, but I've failed. It looks as if we're from different planets, but none of them will succeed in business without a certain level of knowledge. They all dream about having money, without the responsibility of a job. I'm beginning to sound like my grandparents sounded to me when I was a pupil. They never mentioned money though and you do. Do you really think that money is the root of all evil?»

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