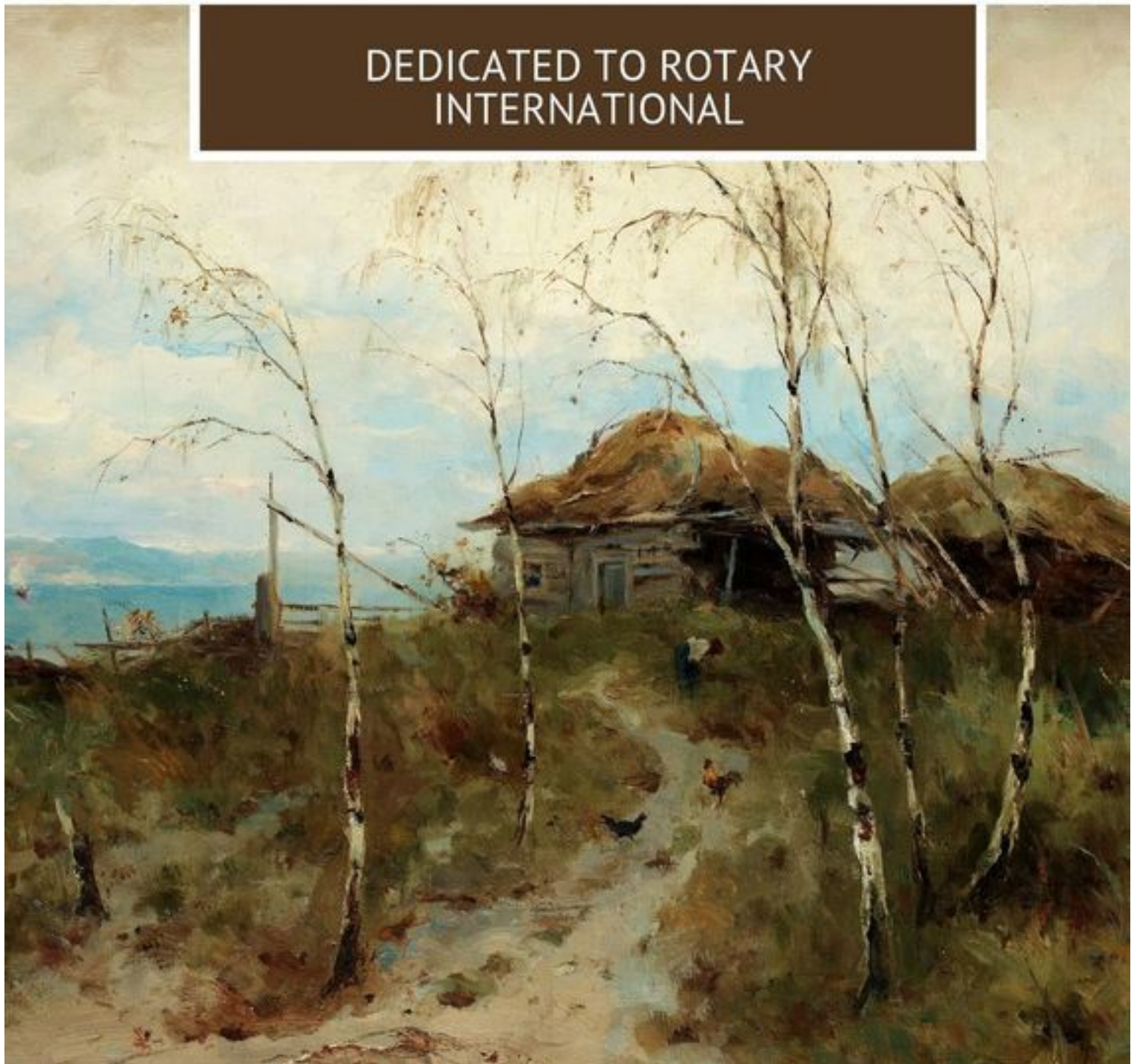


NIKITA NESYNOV

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# The Exchange Student

DEDICATED TO ROTARY  
INTERNATIONAL



Nikita Nesynov

**The Exchange Student**

«Издательские решения»

**Nesynov N.**

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The book is based on actual events. The book tells about the author's memories about his year in the United States, living at host families as a youth exchange student of Rotary. The book shows different cultures of Russia, the United States of America and Japan through the eyes of a teenager. The events are taking place in a difficult time for Russia — the country was moving to a new era and was way behind western countries.

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## Содержание

Siberia	6
The City of Vladivostok	8
The Terminator	11
The Next “Real Man”	14
The Elevator	16
Friendly Sparing	18
The Kind Policeman	20
Our Neighbor	22
Go Over the Swamp!	24
Bottles for Sale	26
Michael	27
The Phantom	29
The Funeral March	31
Icy Roads	33
The Hairdresser	35
The School	37
The School Break	40
The School Dentist	41
The Stolen Blood	43
The Robbery of the School Cafeteria	45
The Blood Brothers	47
the driver in trouble	49
The Ice Floe	51
A Moment of Life	54
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	55

# **The Exchange Student**

## **Dedicated to Rotary International**

**Nikita Nesynov**

*This book is dedicated to my American host families and Rotary International.*

*It is based on actual events.*

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## Siberia

I was born in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia. When I was one year old, my parents moved to Irkutsk city (Eastern Siberia). At first, we lived in a hostel. Looking from the window, I could see a prison. By seeing the prisoners walking in circles, I learnt how hard life was in that place. Then, we lived in our friend's studio. After a few years, the local government gave to my dad a two-bedroom apartment for his hard work at the union of artists. That's how we started living in the neighborhood named "Pervomayskiy". Almost 18 years of my life passed in that "wonderful" district.

The whole new world took me into its dreadful arms; it was the world of fear, grey nine-storey buildings, street gangs, guns and fights. I couldn't escape from this system; I became a part of it.

Crimes in that area were all over the place: there were fights, robberies, even murders. Up to a hundred people came to massive fights, which always resulted in people getting fractures, bruises and other wounds. For such actions lots of young people were sent into jails. My parents started to worry about me, because they often noticed me smoking with my friends and sometimes saw me dealing with illegal affairs. If it hadn't been for my music school, where I had been going to since I was six years old, I wouldn't have been different from the others.

Because of the fact that my parents were members of the local Rotary Club, which dealt with international programs, there was a wonderful opportunity for me to live in the United States for a year as an exchange student, so that I could experience a different lifestyle, meet new people and change my outlook on life.

At the age of sixteen I left my country. I knew little English, that's why, when I came to America, I had some difficulties understanding people.

I'll start my story with the arrival in Vladivostok city (Far-Eastern Russia), as I got my visa there. I flew from that city to Chicago, changing planes in South Korea. My mom accompanied me till I left Russia, and my father said, "Keep a diary!"

I made his wish come true. Hearing the roar of huge engines of a 2- storey Boeing 747 heading to Chicago, I started taking down all memories from my Siberian childhood.

*From my diary*



## The City of Vladivostok

When the train arrived in Vladivostok, no one met us and my mother ran to call someone, leaving me with all the suitcases. She got back and said, “Let’s go and look where we can rent a room for some time here.”

One bus stop later, we were in the city center. We entered a huge building. My mother ran to look for accommodation for newcomers, and I was waiting for her on the first floor. After about an hour, she came and said, “Let’s go Nick! They’ll show us apartments where we can stay.”

Having come out of the building, we got into a black car and drove away from the center. We came to an old apartment building; an elderly woman opened the door and let us in.

We came inside. The smell was disgusting. The woman showed us our new room. There were an old sofa, a bed and a TV. We paid her 10 dollars a day. She introduced herself as Tamara Ivanovna. Tamara was 65 years old.

The same day we went to see the city. It was beautiful, the fountains with colorful lights created a special spirit of the city, the spirit of the far-east. We waited for my visa for almost a month, so we had a lot of time to spare and we used it for walking along the seashore. It was my first time when I saw the sea. The view of it was magnificent: the never- ending horizon made me think about my future. Every day we left our room at 9.00 am and returned at 7.00—8.00 pm. At first glance, the old lady Tamara was fine, but after a while she became pretty annoying.

She violated our privacy quite often by turning on her favorite TV series very loud, despite the fact that we asked her not to do that. Finally one day she said, “I’ve got high blood pressure, could you please go and buy some tomatoes and a watermelon for me?”

We bought her what she had asked for: ten kilos of tomatoes and a big watermelon. After that, my mother and I thought that Tamara would leave us. But we were entirely wrong. It reached the point where

Tamara asked my mom to wash her old mother. My mom refused to wash the person she had never met.

The whole time we spent on the beach, we saw many weird people. There was one with a hole in his shorts. Before jumping into the sea, he prayed, then threw his rubber slippers into the water and dived to get them. There was another guy, whose name was Shurik. From early morning till evening he spent his time on the beach with a book in one hand, but he did not read it. In the other hand he was holding a long stick and was drawing some words on the sand.



He did all this to give girls an impression of being a smart guy. Then Shurik put on his swimming goggles and did pull-ups on the bar.

One day my mom and I were sitting on the beach. Our two-liter bottle of Coca-Cola was lying nearby. Shurik came up and said, “Hey man, can I drink your Cola?”

I looked at him, he was well physically developed. He reminded me of Arnold Schwarzenegger. How could I say no to him? “Sure!” I replied.

He started drinking greedily from the bottle. Then he said, “Thank you, now, go and play chess!”

I looked around and no one near me was playing chess. Then I thought, “What a weird dude.”

The next day we went to the cinema called “The Ocean”. We watched the “Bruce Almighty”. We really liked it. After that we decided to have a walk along the sea. It was 6.30 pm and my mom said that it was time to get back to Tamara. On our way we met Shurik. It was the first time we saw him without the book. We were very much intrigued by it, and my mom asked him, “Well, Shurik? Where is your book?”

Shurik turned and replied, “I hear that you are asking with sarcasm! You shouldn’t treat me like that!”

“Okay, but can you drink my Coca-Cola without asking me permission?”

Shurik frowned, “Your son allowed me!”

“But the Coca-Cola was mine!” my Mom joked.

After this ridiculous conversation we went back to our room.

The time passed and I had to talk with the Consul. The official interview was on the sixth of July, at 10.50. The meeting went fine. He gave me the visa and wished me good luck. At the time I couldn’t imagine how this trip would change my entire life, but first I would like to tell you a few stories from my life before I got to America.

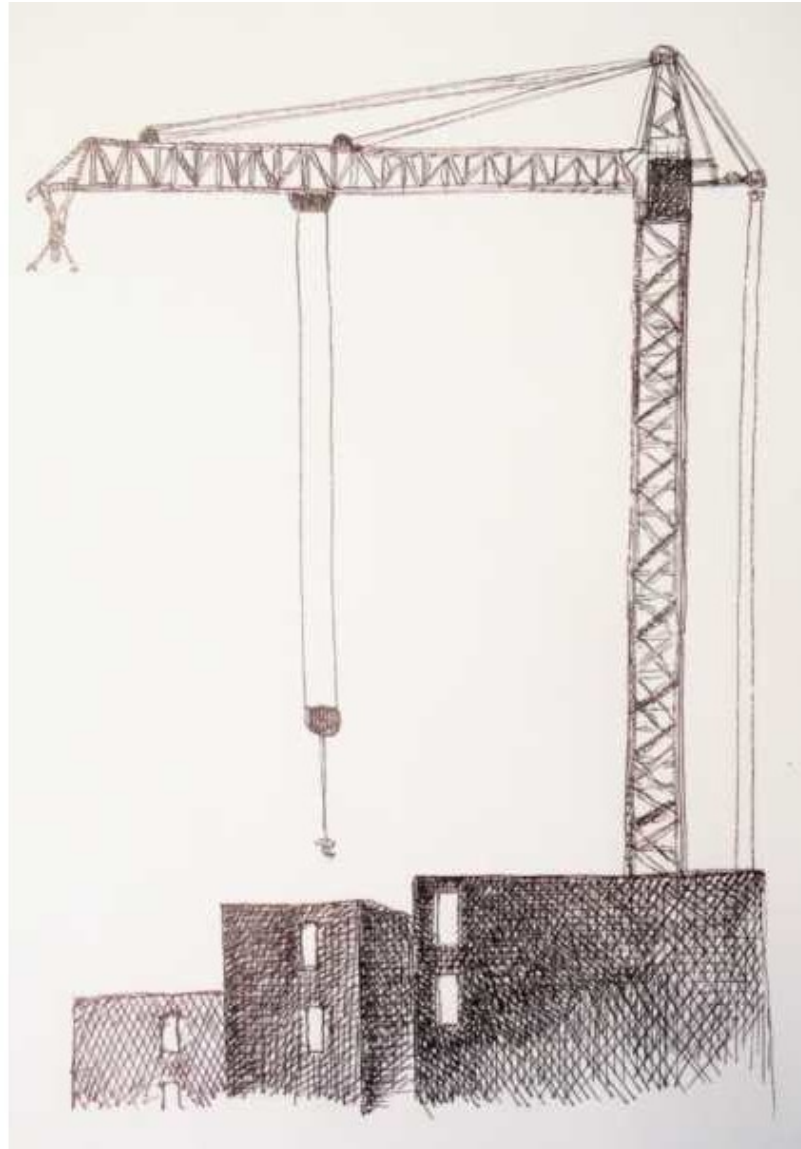
## **The Terminator**

I was about 12 years old. My friends and I constantly played war games with pistols, which fired with plastic bullets. I remember it was quite painful when such bullets hit the body, but that's where the fun was. We always played in places where big buildings were being built, in the construction areas.

Now, in our district there were two big age groups: the seniors and the juniors. The seniors were the people who were more experienced and who gave us, the juniors, advice on criminal things.

So, one day, when we were playing there, we saw the senior guys. They were standing near the building crane. I approached them and asked why they were hanging around there and whether they were waiting for someone or something. Vampire (that was the name of the guy, whose face was very much like one of a vampire) replied to me, "We are going to check, whether Ivan is a real man or not. Ivan's nickname is Terminator."

We stayed to see how Ivan would prove it. He was a true daredevil. The terminator began climbing the ladder which led to the top of the crane. At first I thought he was going to climb into the crane cabin, but when he reached the top, he turned to the crane arm. It was frightening to watch what he was doing. When Terminator was at the very end of the arm, he hung on the crane arm with his legs and turned over! He was hanging upside down at the height of 25 meters (82 feet)! He shouted, "Look at me! I am a real man!"



He waved his hands at us. Any wrong move could kill him! Then the seniors shouted to him, “Okay Ivan that’s enough. Get out of there!”

Twenty minutes later, Ivan was on the ground. Our seniors began to shake his hand, saying, “Good for you! Now you’re a real man!”

Terminator turned to us, “And you, young people, watch and learn!”

After such lesson, we threw away our pistols and began to check “who was a real man among us”. We started doing crazy and dangerous things like jumping from one garage to another.

Three years later, my friends and I were sitting on a roof of the house which was built by that crane. It was sunset and from the roof we could see the lights of the whole district and the dense smoke from the pipes of the plant which occasionally made a terrible noise much like an engine of a huge plane. We were drinking some beer (although we were only 15), playing the guitar and sang some songs. Suddenly, feeling a little dizzy from the alcohol, I looked at the house nearby and said, “I bet you guys I will jump from this house to the one over there!”

Between the houses there was a big hole, which was one and a half meters (about 5 feet). The building on the roof of which we were was twelve floors, and the one I wanted to jump on was ten.

For a moment I thought, “Maybe it is a bad idea.”

But my friends insisted, “Come on, Nikita, jump once you said!”

My task was to jump over that hole between the houses. I didn't think about anything. My heart started beating fast, I felt the adrenaline rush in my blood, I could see only the objective: to jump over it and stay alive. I took my courage in both hands, ran as fast as I could and jumped. The last thing I heard was the sound of the broken roofing slate under my legs. I lost my conscience and then, 5 minutes later, I found myself in the attic. I was lying for a minute or two and heard the guys laughed, "Are you alive, Batman? Come on, get out!"

I climbed onto the roof and when I saw the hole that I had made in the roof, I began laughing with my friends.

By that time we were only 15 years old, but we knew all the attics, roofs and basements of all 9-storey buildings in our neighborhood.

We constantly put our lives at risk and didn't think about the consequences of our actions.

## **The Next “Real Man”**

There was a huge construction area in front of the house where I lived: a new 9-storey house was being built. The working crane was like a sculptor, finalizing its work on it's another “masterpiece” in our neighborhood. That day was a day-off for the workers, and the guys from my district used this moment to check which one of them was a “real man”.

The next “candidate” was Gosha, the Terminator’s brother. You will not believe what he did! He got to the top of an unfinished house, tied the “sausage” (that’s how builders call a pipe-shaped heat-insulating material, which is put in the open spaces between the blocks and is flimsy) to a piece of metal, threw the other end of the rope out of the window and started descending down from the 9th floor! Everybody was watching this frightening and exciting show of a guy, whose life depended on that rope. As he got to the 6th floor, the guys started shouting, “Come on man! There’s not much left!”



Suddenly, something happened and he started falling down! Everybody thought that it was the end of his life, but, gladly, that wasn't the case! He flew for about two floors and, thanks to his strong hands, he managed to clutch back to the rope and successfully get down! Everybody breathed a sigh of relief that everything went fine. That's how Gosha proved that he was deserved to be called the Terminator's brother.

## The Elevator

One day, my friends and I were hanging out in the streets. The sky was filled with grey clouds and some-time later it started raining. That's why we got to one of the 9-storey buildings and had a "brilliant" idea.

We did not want to fall behind our seniors and we decided to prove that we were "real men". There were ten of us and we all huddled up in the elevator on the eighth floor. We were actually packed like sardines. It was so inconvenient that we could hardly push the button of the first floor. When the elevator started moving, we started jumping actively and all together.



The elevator was designed for four people max, not for ten guys jumping crazily. So, after several seconds there was an emergency stop. The light turned off. The darkness was all around us, we heard a strange noise from the upstairs. It sounded like the metal rope which was holding us was cracking and it seemed that we could fall down the elevator shaft any second possible. Everyone stood still not knowing whether we would stay alive. Suddenly, the cabin started shaking and we thought that the lift was to become our coffin in a few seconds. The grinding sound of the elevator was the final accord of our life. But, luckily, the light turned on, the lift started working properly and we got to the first floor. When the elevator doors opened, we saw people waiting for us. We pushed each other out of the cabin. They started yelling at us, saying, “Because of people like you, we had to walk up to the ninth floor, idiots!” We were laughing, got out of the elevator and ran into the street. We were happy that we stayed alive and started enjoying every single moment of our precious lives

## **Friendly Sparing**

As the time went on, we were growing up. In our neighborhood we had a lot of young people. The district was like a machine, creating more and more small and large criminal groups from twenty to one hundred young men. Their parents were ordinary people. The children, seeing their parents work hard for a small salary, wanted to find a better way of life. So, it was easier to steal a pager or to beat up somebody and take the money than to find a job.

There were only twenty-five people in my group. At that time, most of our senior guys were in the army and some of them started drinking and using drugs. By the way, those people who were drug addicts had always been punished to the fullest extent of the “street law” in our neighborhood.

There was a guy in the senior group, whose nickname was Bugs Bunny. He got such a nickname because of his teeth. They looked like ones of the famous American cartoon character. The guys got the information that his friend Bunny was taking drugs. The whole gang (about 10 people) caught him in the streets the very next day. The guys started beating up Bugs Bunny so furiously, that they knocked out his cartoon teeth. He screamed, “I won’t do this anymore, please, forgive me!”



But they did not listen and went on kicking him. They stopped only when he lost his consciousness.

I asked Ivan (the Terminator), “Why did you beat him up so severely?” “For being hooked on heroine, he replied.”

I remember that we always tried to lead a healthy lifestyle. Quite often we took our boxing gloves and went to a place, where there were no people. We had real sparring over there. The rules were: as soon as the first blood appeared, the fight was over. Usually the fighting did not last long, because everyone was trying to hit in the nose, so that it would start bleeding. Such way we prepared ourselves for more serious fights.

## The Kind Policeman

You may be asking yourself why there was so much crime in our society, but the answer is quite simple. It was after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 90s. The system of law-enforcement agencies stopped working properly and corruption was all over the country. Russia was actually divided into 2 groups: the law-abiding workers and the criminals. In our dangerous district there were only 3 patrol militia cars and there were hundreds of criminals against them. So, they hardly could do anything to make the situation better. That day my friend Dima had a birthday party which I went to, but had to return back home at 22.00 p.m. Our guys continued celebrating his birthday all night long. The next day they told me what happened that night.

They all went to buy some beer, Dima stood outside the store and waited for the other guys. Suddenly, he saw three huge figures coming towards him. Dima knew that something bad was going to happen. Apparently, they liked his leather coat and they wanted to steal it. He hit the huge guy as hard as he could, but that guy only smiled thinking that Dima was alone, grabbed Dima's arm and said, "Well, you are dead now!"

He hit Dima right in the face! Somehow, my friend managed to whistle really loud and in about 10 seconds they could see the running crowd of twenty people with bottles and sticks in their hands. As a result: the big guys were lying on the ground getting beaten by the crowd of our guys. Two minutes later the patrol car arrived, and two policemen got out of it. Having seen them, the guys immediately stopped fighting. The cops greeted the guys and one of them said, "Hey guys, could you take those three away from these apartment buildings and beat them up somewhere in place far from these buildings? The people are already sleeping and you are making a lot of noise."



Our guys and the birthday boy followed the advice of a kind policeman. They dragged them to a deserted place, where there were no people, and continued what they were doing. They also took off their jackets as a punishment. After that they merely continued celebrating the Dima's birthday and their glorious victory in the fight.

## Our Neighbor

I would like to tell you about my apartment. It was in a usual 9-story building, it had 3 rooms ( plus a kitchen and a small bathroom). The worst thing about this place was that we had really noisy neighbors: some were listening to loud music at nights, the others had scandals quite often. People were packed like rabbits in a warren in those 9-storey buildings, there was hardly any privacy. The walls between the apartments were thin, therefore it was almost impossible for me to play the piano and get prepared for school. Sometimes, it was hard to sleep. My apartment was on the 4th floor, so I usually took the stairs, although we had an elevator. One morning, my mom asked me to buy some bread from the store outside. When I got out of my apartment to the stairs, a terrible scene appeared in front of my eyes. The walls, the ceiling, and stairs: everything was covered in blood! I suddenly saw some blood was still dripping from the ceiling.

In the middle of the day, I learnt, that last night our neighbor, who was a bartender in a restaurant, was returning home. He was said to owe someone a large amount of money. When he reached his apartment on the fifth floor, he got attacked by Afro-American men who started hitting him with their axes!



## Go Over the Swamp!

The sun was shining bright and I was hanging out with my gang in our neighborhood. There was a guy, whose name was Vadik. He was the leader of our street gang, everybody listened to what he said and treated him with respect. We were really bored at that time, we had nothing to do. Suddenly, Vadik said, "Follow me!" Our district was set on a mountain and there were basically 3 parts of the neighborhood: the top (the part where we lived in, was called Nagorno-Karabakh), the middle (The Sicily) and the bottom (The Pentagon). So, all five of us followed our leader down the hill not knowing what was going to happen next. The air started smelling awful and it only got worse. "We are almost there!" said Vadik. A few moments later we could see a huge swamp (about 300 meters (1000 feet) to the other side. It was disgusting! Dirt was all around us! We were wondering what we could possibly be doing in that horrible place. "What I want you to do is to cross this swamp," said Vadik.

"You guys go first, I will follow you and don't you dare stop or refuse to do that!"

There was nothing we could do but cross the swamp as our "Boss" said. Apparently, he really enjoyed yelling at us and watching us fall down right in the mud. The quarter of our dirty journey was done. I was in the middle of the line, behind me was my friend Ruslan and Vadik. Vadik was always hurrying Ruslan and suddenly Ruslan lost his balance and accidentally dove with his head first, so, as a result, he got stuck with his legs dangling in the air.



I was afraid that he would start choking, so, I immediately started pulling him out of the mud with the help of the other guys. When we succeeded in that, his face was dirty and all we could see was the fear in his eyes. We looked at him and started laughing. We decided to turn back, because it was dangerous to continue. We were glad that everything ended up fine. When we got back to our neighborhood we started telling the story about our walk through the swamp and about Ruslan, who nearly got stuck in the mud, to all our friends.

## Bottles for Sale

At that time there were lots of poor people in Russia, they barely had enough money to survive in the streets of Irkutsk. The main source of money for them was collecting empty glass bottles and giving them to the recycling stalls. A bottle cost about one Russian ruble, so the more bottles there were to give, the more money they were to receive. I was ten years old when this story happened. We had a recycling stall in the basement of my house, so after the major holidays, I always took the empty bottles there and got some money to buy candy and gum in the grocery store nearby. One day, I heard something cracking really loud. I looked out of the window and saw the store being on fire!

*J*



My friends and I immediately ran there to see what happened. We could see the shop assistants running like ants to save the goods. They simply threw all the products outside the building. Having realized what a great chance we had, we immediately started putting the candy, chocolate and gum into our pockets and ran away. Although, the chocolate was a little melted and the gum smelled like fire, we were still very pleased and ate everything we took. It was like a child's dream come true.

## Michael

I had lots of friends in my neighborhood and some were really weird. Michael was one of them. Our guys called him “the intelligent”. He was very kind to everybody, although I noticed that he behaved strangely, when he was close to animals. One day, I saw a huge stain of blood on his shirt. I couldn’t help but wonder where he had got that stain.

He said, “Oh, that’s because of the experiment that I recently conducted. You see, I was always wondering whether the organs of different breeds of cats look the same, so I merely caught a couple, cut them open with my axe and checked.”

“Isn’t that a little crazy??” I asked.

“Not at all,” he said. “It’s mere science. I have also found out how many lives a cat has!”

“What did you do?”

“Well, I caught a cat, which was lying on the corner of a street, got to the roof of a 9-storey building and dropped it on the ground. It was pretty cool! I realized that the fact that cats have 9 lives is a myth! Isn’t that awesome?”

He spoke with such excitement, that I thought that he could easily conduct such experiments on people.



Everyone from my neighborhood knew that he had mental disorders because of the constant scandals between his parents. That's why everybody tried to be more polite and delicate with him, we tried not to annoy him. Looking at his appearance, he seemed to be a normal teenager. He wore glasses and looked like a smart person. But it was only his appearance. From the inside he was totally different. When he was eighteen years old, he was sentenced to 6 years in prison! I still don't understand why he got to prison, but I think, definitely not because of experiments on cats, there must be something more than cats, something serious.

## The Phantom

If you go inside of any house entrance in my neighborhood, you can immediately feel the strong smell of different food that comes from flats, especially, when someone cooks fish. Such smell is much stronger than other ones. In each stairwell there is a garbage chute, which is often clogged up and the stench spread all over the floors. Every single day, when I got back home, I could see dirty walls and broken windows. Barely working elevators made horrible sounds, it was impossible to use them because of the awful smell of dog's urine. Almost all the buttons were burned and you had to use some force to push the button to the floor you needed.

The elevators in these houses got stuck quite often and I was once in a situation like that. I had to sit for three hours in the cab without any light until the lift operator came and opened the doors. If the elevator was out of order, you had to walk the stairs. Going upstairs, you immediately heard a crunchy sound of seed shells being broken under your feet. A large number of smoked cigarettes and beer bottles under the stairs didn't surprise anyone. Occasionally, some tenants got tired of this garbage and cleaned the whole staircase. There was twice much dirt in the stairs when winter came. In many entrances there was no glass in the windows and the temperature was pretty much the same as in the street, -30 degrees Celsius or even lower. But in some of the stairwells all the windows were saved. In such staircases it was much warmer than in the others, but there was twice as much trash as in the cold ones, because when winter came, all the young people went inside of the warm buildings. We sat on the stairs between the first and the second floors, because the heating radiators were there. We drank beer and smoked there. When we were smoking, the floors got immediately covered in a fog of tobacco smoke. The tenants, entering the house and knowing that the first and the second floors were filled with young people smoking and drinking, covered their mouth with scarves and mittens and waited impatiently for the elevator, in which it was also hard to breathe.

It was always dark in the staircase of my building. When I was ten years old, I went for a walk and came home late quite often, when it was already dark. I was always scared to go into the building. It was too dark and the staircase reminded me of an ominous cave. In winter, the entrance door was always covered in snow, and clouds of steam were pouring out of the building to the street. I didn't know what would happen to me on my way to the fourth floor where I lived.

I always waited for someone who would accompany me to my apartment. But sometimes no one appeared and I had to go there myself. With my heart beating fast, I jumped into this cloud and ran up to the fourth floor as fast as I could. I was really scared, because at the age of ten, I knew that there were people who caught children in the dark hallways and kidnapped them, then rape them or sell into slavery.

But there was one scary thing than every other: there was a drug addict, who lived directly opposite our door.



I was afraid of him, but I was always polite to him said hello, “Hi, Yasha, how are you?”  
He barely moved his lips, pronouncing, “H-e-ll-o...”

His eyes were like glass and it was scary to me than ever. In 20—30 seconds my mother opened the door and I quickly ran inside, locking all the door locks.

## The Funeral March

There was a tradition in our neighborhood. When someone died, the funeral began with the bringing of the coffin in the staircase, where the dead person lived. His family gathered around the coffin and mourned the loss of him. I saw this ceremony every single time when somebody died.



The invited musicians always played the funeral march. I could see all this from my window. It was hard for me to see the dead and the weeping people near the coffin. When his relatives and friends went away to the cemetery, they always left a lot of flowers lying in the yard. Those flowers

lay for weeks in our neighborhood roads. They didn't allow everyone to forget the funerals of people, who most of the tenants didn't know. I still can't understand why the relatives of the deceased could not start and finish the funerals in special places in the cemetery. But this tradition was accepted in our society.

## Icy Roads

Siberia is known for its severe winters and every single year there is a lot of snow on the roads. At that time there were pretty much no services to clean it, so eventually all this snow turned into ice. All the guys from my neighborhood took that opportunity to go sledding.



We often raced on our sleds with each other, not being afraid that there was a risk of being hit by a car. The main thing was to reach the finish line first at the end of road, which was in the form of a long ice hill. When I was 10, I got a cool sled, which was really fast and I won the races quite

often. Before the start of our race, we waited until there would be no cars on the road. We sped up our sleds, jumped on them and flew on the road. Sometimes there were cars that appeared on our way. So, we had to react quickly and turn away from cars to avoid getting hit. After such dangerous and cold competitions my hands and feet were totally frozen. My eyes often got stuck together because of the ice on my eyelashes. On my returning home, my arms and legs began to warm up causing pain and tears. It was a wonderful time of the year, but it was insanely cold.

## The Hairdresser

I decided to have my hair cut. I took my father's car and drove to the barber shop nearby. The hairdresser who invited me to the chair was very tall and was always smiling. He put an apron on me and asked what kind of haircut I wanted. I said that I didn't want a short haircut. The barber, shaking his head said, "Okay." Could you please wait a minute? I'll be back shortly".

I thought to myself, "Well, I can wait for a minute, there is no problem." The barber went somewhere. I waited for five minutes. Then another five minutes passed, and I started thinking, "It's Okay, maybe the guy is sick." Even fifteen minutes later my hairdresser did not show up.

So, here I was, sitting on the chair with an apron tied around my neck. I continued waiting for my barber, looking at myself in the mirror like a complete idiot. Half an hour had already passed when I began to get angry. I asked myself. "Maybe it's a TV joke and I am being taped on a candid camera that had been put directly in the mirror, which I look at for thirty minutes. Maybe they were checking my patience, watching and laughing at me behind the door with that hairdresser?" But, finally, my hairdresser got back. I looked at him and said, "Oh, you're quick!"

And he asked me quietly, "What kind of haircut would you like?"

I answered, "Oh, you have already forgotten what kind of haircut I want after you hung out somewhere for 30 minutes, haven't you?"

He did not respond to my rudeness, as if he had not gone out. I immediately noticed that his movements were not adequate. His eyes were big and shiny. So, I thought that he was drunk, although I did not smell the alcohol.

The barber took the electric cutting machine and started trying to plug it in. It was unforgettably spectacular. His moves were really funny and, as I learned later, all that time he spent outside he was taking drugs! After about a minute he finally managed to plug the machine in. His coordination was horrible and, consequently, he almost entirely shaved the right side of my head.



After that, I exploded with anger. I stood up, pulled off the apron and screamed on every single person in that barber shop and went away smashing the door behind me. I got into the car with my half cut head and went to a different hairdresser's.

When I walked into the new salon, all the girls looked at me and laughed loud, then asked, "Oh, my god?! Who ate the half of your hair?"

I told them what had just happened to me. They laughed and listened to my story till the very end. They felt sorry for me and fixed my haircut. While they were working, they told me that the guy who wanted to shave me was a drug addict and that the barber shop where he worked, belonged to his mother.

## The School

My school was quite usual. Some people called it “The Prison” or the “Jail”. There were criminal leaders all over the school and we lived by criminal rules. Even some schoolboys were friends with criminals and ex-prisoners. Because of my illness, I missed a year of school. So, I had lessons at home. Then, when I came back to school, I got into correctional class for weak students. That year was the most vivid and unforgettable for me. There were bullies, smokers, drunkards in my new class. I can remember one of my Physics classes. That day we had a new physics teacher, who was 70 years old. She could difficulty seeing and hearing. I was sitting in the middle of the class, and at the back of the class I could see the guys smoking something, apparently it was marijuana. They slightly opened the window, crawled under the desk and started smoking the cigarette. The whole class realized what was going on there except for our new teacher. At the end of the lesson she asked, “Who was playing with matches the whole lesson?”

The bell rang and our “stars” got out of the class laughing a lot.

One day there was a new student in our class. His name was Kostya. Unfortunately, our “stars” hated him from the very first minute. Every day they beat Kostya so much, that sometimes he could not even get up on his feet and he was always late for lessons. I was very sorry for Kostya, but I couldn’t do anything to help him.

Soon, Kostya couldn’t bear such beatings he called his dad for help.

They were standing at the main entrance of our school. Kostya’s father wanted to give a lesson to my classmates, who had beaten his son. When the bell rang, our class went out of the school. I was behind everyone, shaking hands and saying goodbye to classmates. At the main entrance, I noticed Kostya and his father saying bad words to our guys. The classmates didn’t like it and reacted very quickly. They came down to Kostya’s father and started beating him. When he fell down, they turned their attention to Kostya and beat him up too. Seeing that the father and the son were lying on the ground, they stopped kicking them and went home.

All that happened right in front of the windows of the principal’s office. The very next day, Kostya took the documents and moved to a different school, and I never saw him again.

Our teachers were not very kind either. It was Geography, and the teacher got angry at the student, who did not know something; she came up to him and hit his head with a wooden school pointer, so that it turned into chips. He stood up, yelled at the teacher and smashed the door behind him. We gave him a nickname “The Priest”. I remember that he loved eclairs.

One day we were sitting at class, and the teacher went to have lunch. The Priest made a bet that he would break the desk with his head. If he won, he would get two eclairs. Everybody, who was in the class, stopped and watched the show. The first hit on the desk did not give the wanted result. The second one was a little more powerful and the desk cracked slightly. The third hit was the most powerful and he finally broke that desk and won his bet. Everyone applauded him. They shouted.



“Hey Priest! You’re the desk breaker! Good for you!”

Three minutes later the teacher came back, and immediately paid attention to the bruises on the priest’s forehead and then to the broken desk. She asked, “What happened?”

The whole class was silent, some people were giggling. The Priest thought for a little bit and replied,

“I was running and accidentally hit the door in the cafeteria!”

“And how many times did you hit the door?”

Everybody started laughing.

“Okay, now what happened to your desk?”

“That had been broken before we got to class!”

Everybody started nodding to convince the teacher that the desk had already been broken.

“You’re savages!” the teacher concluded.

It was impossible to go to school toilet. There were clouds of tobacco smoke. Because it was winter, the students did not want to run outside to smoke in -30C. So, everybody smoked in school toilets.

## The School Break

I was a first-grader when that happened. The kids were playing catchup. I was sitting on a branch and saw my friend Sergey run into another boy's head. The hit was really bad and Sergey's tooth got stuck in the forehead of the other boy. They both fell and started crying. The teachers called the ambulance.



## The School Dentist

One day, I had a toothache and went to the dentist's, who worked in my school. The dentist's office was located on the third floor. I knocked on the door and entered the room. Once I got inside, the doctor told me to sit on the chair to be examined. When she found the bad tooth, she said, "Unfortunately, we'll have to remove the nerve."

It was the first time I had ever gone to the dentist's. I was very nervous, but my tooth hurt very much and I was tired of the pain. "Will it be painful?" I asked.

"It'll be pretty painful. Unfortunately, I don't have any anesthetization, so, you'll have to bear the pain or I will have to remove the tooth later."

I nodded and the doctor began.



It was unforgettably painful! Doctor started winding the nerve on the needle. The pain was pretty bad, but I didn't know what was going to happen next. Suddenly she pulled out the nerve so hard, that I hardly managed to stay on the chair! Just imagine how horrible and painful it is to pull out a nerve without any anesthetization! After that sweat appeared on my face. Every time the doctor pulled the nerve, my hands clutched to the handles of the chair, and I prayed for it to be done as soon as possible. This terrible process last for about an hour! At the end I almost lost my consciousness. I felt relieved when the "surgery" was finished, but my tooth was bleeding for two days! I can still remember the doctor's face and her dreadful instruments that caused so much pain!

## The Stolen Blood

At the age of ten I was going to a medical checkup at the hospital, which looked much like a post-war military hospital. There I could see spring beds in my room, dilapidated walls, creaking doors and people were coughing everywhere. The food over there was disgusting. It was absolutely forbidden to go out of this terrible place. So, I had to spend two weeks there like a prisoner.

My room was on the third floor, and mentally ill people were placed one floor higher. Almost every night, I could hear horrible screams from the upstairs and I couldn't sleep.

I had a lot of different health tests and treatments. That day they tested my blood. I came into the doctor's office; she put the needle into my vein and began to pull out the blood. For such analysis doctors usually take no more than one full test-tube of blood from the patient. I didn't know that, so when I saw the doctor take out the full box of these test-tubes (about 12 of them in the box) I wasn't surprised, I thought it was supposed to be done like that. So, the doctor filled up the second, the third and fourth one and so on. When she was filling up the seventh one she asked me, "How are you feeling, my dear?"

"Dizzy pretty much."

She brought the cotton wool soaked in ammonia to my nose and asked me to smell it. By that time I almost lost my consciousness, but after that I felt a little better and she continued stealing my blood. Finally, she managed to take twelve test-tubes of my blood.



I was returning back to my room like a drunkard and immediately fell asleep. The very next day my room neighbor had to go through that blood test. Before went to the doctor, he said, “I’m a little worried.

How did that procedure go? How did you feel at the end?” I explained him what had happened to me in that room. He got scared, but he had no choice and left the room. I decided to wait for him. One hour had passed, but my room neighbor still didn’t show up. Then I thought to myself, “How much blood they have taken from him after such a long period of time? It’s been two hours and he still hasn’t returned from that terrible procedure!” Finally, I saw the doctor, who was checking the medical condition of all the patients and asked her, “Did you see my friend Alex? He went to the blood test two hours ago and still hasn’t come back.”

The doctor answered, “Your neighbor lost his consciousness during the test. He is lying on the first floor and we are waiting for him to come round.”

Then I thought that they must have stolen Alex’s blood too!

## The Robbery of the School Cafeteria

One day, my crazy classmates got a “brilliant” idea: to rob our school cafeteria. They broke the windows and entered the building at night: it was as simple as that! They started looking for money, but didn’t find any. Although they did find something: it was just a bag of flour! So, our “heroes” decided to take it home to make some pancakes. They dragged the bag all the way to their house, but they didn’t realize that there was quite a big hole in it and the flour was pouring out of the bag, indicating their direction.



The school security guard noticed the broken window and immediately called the police. They arrived soon and found the trail of white flour.

The policemen followed it and found where the robbers lived. Then police entered the apartment of my classmates.

At the end of the ninth grade, the half of my classmates had already been convicted of various crimes. I tried my best not to be like them. Sometimes it worked, but I immediately began to feel that I was falling into contempt from all the people in my neighborhood. So, I had to become just like my friends again: I had to dress like them, speak with swear words and break school windows. I couldn't change anything.

There was a special mechanism working like a watch. If something was broken, everyone noticed it immediately. The guy who did not want to live like the others was put in his place, or was thrown away as a broken detail of the watch, leaving him with no choice but to leave the group and become alone, which means putting his life at risk in those dangerous streets of Irkutsk city.

## The Blood Brothers

As our life in the neighborhood went on, we were growing up fast. When that happened, we were 15 years old. It was quite a usual day: many dead drunk people were lying on the benches and fights took place in the streets of our city.

It was getting dark and my mom and I were drinking tea on the balcony of our apartment, when we saw a very frightening “show”: a burglar professionally climbed to the balcony on the 4th floor of the opposite building and got inside the apartment! “The acrobat” was doing that at an altitude of approximately 17 meters!

My mom said, “I’m calling the police!”

“Hey, why don’t we wait for a little bit and see what will happen next?” But, in spite of my suggestions, she still did what she wanted.

While they were coming, we watched him commit the crime. The very next minute the burglar opened the window and pulled out the bag of stolen things, tied it to the rope and lowered it to the ground. Suddenly we heard the police siren, so the thief was in haste.

The very next second the rope snapped, and the heavy bag fell on the ground, breaking stolen equipment and expensive things. He must have been very upset by that fact, because he immediately started swearing loudly. A few minutes later the thief got out of the building, took the bag and ran out of there as fast as he could.

The police was late, as usual.

The next day I wanted to spend some time with my friends Kostya and Gleb and tell them about the acrobatic thief. When I walked into the apartment building, I heard them speaking very loudly, which was quite unusual. So, I was pretty intrigued. But what I saw next was a shock to me. The guys were discussing something and I noticed a big kitchen knife in Kostya’s hand! They did not pay any attention to me. I waited for a minute and asked, “Hey guys... What you’re up to? Kostya, why are you holding a knife?”

“Hmmm, you’ll see. Well, we are going to have a blood relationship!” They answered.

I wondered how they were going to do that and they showed me the whole process.

Firstly, they swore, that they would never leave each other in any trouble. Then, to prove the oath, Kostya cut his palm with the knife.

The wound was pretty deep, so the blood appeared immediately and started dripping on the floor. After that, Gleb took the knife and did the same thing!

I quietly watched that show.

Kostya put his palm into his friend’s palm, cut to cut, so that Gleb’s blood got through the wound into Kostya’s blood and mix. That way they became the blood brothers.



As a result of this ritual, the whole floor was covered in their blood. Then the problem appeared: they couldn't stop the blood! The wounds were too deep! I ran down to the first floor and asked people for help. We found some bandages and used them.

They were satisfied with the ritual being finished; they thanked for helping them and went home.

Anyway, they were happy to be the blood brothers.

By the way, their friendship lasted for a long period of time, until Gleb got into jail.

## **the driver in trouble**

At the end of autumn, the yellow leaves were falling from trees, it was getting colder and colder, the wind began to blow more furiously. Over

and over again, I could hear that terrible noise from the pipes of the plant nearby, so even the windows started vibrating. One day, I got tired of that and put on my coat and went outside for a walk.

The streets were grey; the dilapidated nine-storey buildings were making me melancholic. Not having walked even 200 yards, I noticed a group of about thirty guys breaking into a garage in the middle of the day. It was pretty funny and seemed as if the ants swarmed all around a sugar cube. They were doing it in front of all people in the street. I kept thinking, “In how many minutes will the police come?” The people were shouting from the opposite houses,

“Stop it! I’m calling the police! It’s outrageous!”

Those guys didn’t pay any attention to the angry people.

They drove out Russian car “Zaporozhets” from that garage and put one of their friends behind the steering wheel. Then, all the rest began to push the car down a small hill.



Suddenly, when they were in the middle of the hill, they heard the sirens and saw police cars. Everyone fled leaving the poor driver in trouble. The door in the car got stuck, he couldn't open it and the brakes didn't work.

As a result, he was convicted of car theft and was sent to prison.

## The Ice Floe

It was spring. My friend Ruslan and I were walking along the Angara River. White snow had just begun to melt. A meter away from the coast there were some “islands” of ice and a “brilliant” idea appeared in our minds. We made a bet that the person, who jumped on an ice floe and returned back to “the land” without falling in the cold water, would get 5 rubles.

A minute later, Ruslan found a suitable ice floe, and said, “Now, I’m going to jump on it!”

He jumped and landed the floe, he stood a minute on it with a smile on his face. Then jumped back to the beach and asked me to give him five rubles. I gave him the money and began to search for my floe, on which I could jump without the risk of being in the water.

I found such one pretty soon it was a meter away from the beach. I ran, jumped and landed on the ice, which immediately broke off! I grabbed the other side of the floe with my hands, but my legs were already in the cold water. I made a big effort to pull the legs out. Then I stood up on the ice and looked at myself. The half of my body was covered in ice.

Ruslan was standing on the shore and tried not to laugh.

Suddenly, I noticed that the ice started going with the flow of the river!

I got panicked and began to shout, “Ruslan, help me! Tell me where to jump!”

Running along the shore, Ruslan started checking where I could jump without any risk of getting into the water. The ice was soft in all the places that were convenient for me to jump. A gap of several meters appeared between me and Ruslan!

At that point we both realized that I would never jump that far to the shore and it was not funny at all. I started to draw pictures in my head, imagining the ice floe starting to melt, the distance to the shore getting longer and longer and me getting frozen in the water.



Luckily, some people were working in the construction area not far away from where we were. Ruslan realized that I was about to have a long trip on that piece of ice and ran to ask the builders for help. After a few minutes I saw him running back with people and holding a long stick in his hands. He shouted, “Nikita! Catch it man!”

I managed to grab the stick only at the third attempt and they started to pull me. When I finally got to the shore, I did not know how to thank my friend and the builders. I remember how my feet got cold and pants got covered in ice.

We came home; I immediately ran to the radiator to get warm. My mom asked me, “Where did you get your pants soaked?”

Unfortunately, I lied to her and said that I had fallen in a puddle. I didn't want her to know what had just happened to me.

## A Moment of Life

It was getting late when that happened. I was on my way home with my friend Kolya, and we noticed two people screaming at each other: A guy barely standing on his feet and a woman, who was holding him. Suddenly after drunk one had noticed me and my friend he quickly pulled out a gun and aimed it at us saying, “What are you looking at?”

I’m going to shoot you now!”



We literally got scared to death! We couldn’t move at all. My heart started beating rapidly. There were 2 outcomes: either getting shot by that man or staying alive just because of a lucky occurrence. I didn’t know what would happen with me in those seconds, which seemed to me like hours. I could imagine the man pulling the trigger and everything instantly becoming dark.

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