

IRINA BORISOVA

Lonely Place America

NOVEL-IN-STORIES



Irina Borisova

**Lonely Place America.
Novel-in-Stories**

«Издательские решения»

Borisova I.

Lonely Place America. Novel-in-Stories / I. Borisova —
«Издательские решения»,

ISBN 978-5-44-749367-7

Many women, driven by a need for change in their lives, contact a marriage agency. These are their stories — ironic, woeful, romantic, and often very funny — as varied and as wonderful as the women themselves. Working as a matchmaker in the 1990's Irina had seen a lot related to the international dating phenomenon, particularly as it was viewed through the eyes of Russian Women. The author is a Russian, but she has written these stories in a charming idiosyncratic English.

ISBN 978-5-44-749367-7

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Irina Borisova

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Editor Curt Lang

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Created with intellectual publishing system Ridero

Part I. Problems with Electricity

How It All Started

The idea of a marriage agency originally came to mind after my lady friend's request to use my post office box for her sister Galya's personal letters. Galya, a divorced lady of thirty seven with a sixteen year old son, lived together with her parents. Many people in Russia live with their parents because low wages do not allow them to rent apartments, let alone to buy them.

Living with her parents did not bother Galya much. On the contrary, she found it quite convenient. Her mother was more her son's mother than she was herself. Her mother also cleaned the apartment, cooked and washed, so Galya was occupied only with her job but her evenings were free – and boring.

Galya liked to visit theatres and other cultural events. She liked company for these outings, so she placed an advertisement in the local personals paper. She wrote that she wished to find a man for «disinterested friendship, visiting museums, theatres and beautiful St. Petersburg suburbs in summer». It was really all she wished. She was incautious enough to write her telephone number in her ad. The telephone started to ring days and nights. The greatest quantity of callings occurred just at night and night fantasies of men calling were rather far from attending theatres and museums.

Galya's parents were indignant. They demanded to switch off the telephone overnights. The uninterrupted ringing continued for two weeks. However, none of the people calling corresponded to her image of an inquisitive gentleman wishing to raise his cultural level by visiting places of interest.

Galya herself was rather cold and selfish. She had an unfortunate first marriage, and she did not want to repeat her mistake. She did not want to get anybody else to take care of; her life generally quite satisfied her and the last things she needed were marriage and sex.

She removed her telephone number from her second advertisement and asked men to write to my post office box as she did not have her own. I got letters out of the box, and Galya occasionally visited me and took them. As a reward I was also allowed to read all the letters.

Now I can share some peculiarities of Russian mens' letters. First, many of them were very short, sometimes only a telephone number, a man's name and the request to call. They were often very poorly decorated, very often written on random scraps of paper torn I had no idea out of what. Letters were sometimes written even on telegram forms picked up I suppose at the Post Office where the idea to write maybe came suddenly to someone's mind and was immediately embodied.

Some of letters were also long, trying to describe the personality and all the life of the man writing. But true feelings and loneliness were usually hidden under such a deep coating of irony that it sounded more like an attempt to laugh at life in general and especially at the man writing the letter himself.

Again, none of the men who sent letters matched the part of a gentleman escorting Galya to theatres. What all men wished was rotating around all the same, which was absolutely declined by Galya. One person even offered to repair Galya's country house stove if she had any, if their liaison would be successful. Galya snorted, she had no stove, but I had one that just needed improvement. There was a moment when I seriously thought how to manage to use that man's offer for free. Then I sighed, understanding that a free repair would hardly work out in this case.

In one letter a man asked Galya sarcastically what she really meant writing about «disinterested friendship». Hinting at something, he asked with irony what particular kind of men Galya meant? Galya understood and appreciated the idea. It was just what she needed. Her third advertisement was a straight appeal for response from just that special kind of men. And the circle of candidates immediately changed: all the men she called that time were really interested just in theatres and

museums. Galya was happy: she visited almost all St. Petersburg theatres and concert halls with them in turn. Her life became fulfilling and joyful. At last only one person of all the candidates remained, with whom it was especially interesting to talk about art. He escorted Galya everywhere she wished, they became great friends. One evening, while playing chess together in his apartment, he told Galya his story.

He told Galya about the woman who was too cruel to him when he was just a novice. That lady told everyone she knew about his first unlucky attempt, after which the young man could not try to make another. He became nervous and tense every time, understanding that someone was waiting for what he could not offer. But telling all this, the man felt that it was all quite different with Galya who awaited nothing of the kind. Galya was, in fact, thinking more about her next chess move. He sat closer to her, his voice sounded with affection and Galya did not even have time to move her pawn when found herself in his arms. That attempt was quite lucky. Galya, being a little bit puzzled, did not however forget how many theatres they visited together. Her friend was so happy that he immediately proposed. They married very soon. They said that after the marriage someone saw Galya in the kitchen cooking something. In a year they already had a wonderful baby boy. Galya somehow became his caring Mom maybe because her husband became the most loving Dad in the world.

All that happened from just a letter dropped into my post office box. And it was the first thing I thought about when I needed to start an additional business when our basic one went through bad times.

Anna

When Anna was twenty, she had a Swedish boyfriend, a student working on the construction of a new St. Petersburg hotel in summer. That young man was in love with her and asked her to marry him and leave for Sweden – but Anna also studied at the medical Academy at that time and promised to come to him in a year after her graduation. But an awful misfortune happened to her family that summer. Her sister's two month old son fell sick in the country where her parents usually spent summers in their small cottage. Anna's parents and sister drove to the city to buy medicine and be back soon, they left the baby with Anna. The accident happened on their way. Their car collided with a truck, and everybody was killed at once. Anna lost both parents and her sister, the baby lost his mother, Anna's brother-in-law lost his wife. He remained alone with a baby in his arms and Anna could not leave a desperate man without any help.

They settled in his apartment together looking after the baby in turn. That year was very hard for both of them. All the hardships made them closer, and when Anna graduated her brother-in-law asked her to marry him.

Anna loved her Swedish fiancée who continued to write her regular letters full of love and melancholy. But she also had become very attached to her little nephew and felt sorry to leave him. Her brother-in-law insisted, and her Swedish fiancée had to leave for work to America. Anna had to decide something, but the Swedish man could not come and take her and the child who already started to call her Mom. Besides, when he cried at nights, he smiled when she held him. She gave up and married his father.

Having married, she immediately understood what a mistake she had made. She could not make herself love her husband. She thought that habit would substitute for love but it did not happen. Her husband was a successful journalist with a legal communist newspaper. He worked much, often went on business trips, and seldom was at home. He spent a lot of time in the society of party functionaries, attending their parties, often returning home drunken. He usually was occupied by his own affairs, did not pay much attention to Anna's mood, and wondered why she was so tired and irritated coming from work.

She was a dentist. Her husband did not know that her patients considered her dentist chair to be «magical»; nobody it seems felt either pain or stress there as Anna was not the kind of doctor asking only «to open/shut your mouth». She always listened to people, cheered them, trying to take upon herself all their pains and fears. She started to carry out a scientific program, but two events did not allow her to get her scientific degree: perestrojka and her own son's birth.

Perestrojka also ruined the political career of her husband. He could not believe that party values would be destroyed so fast. He gambled wrong, and when he tried to change his political orientation it was already too late. His habit of drinking increased, and very soon he found himself without good work, without money, always drunken.

Anna had to provide for the two boys and non working husband. She was lucky to have a profession by which she could earn something for living even in the new hard times. But she had to work too much. Her elder boy was independent and industrious, helped her a lot looking after his little brother till she came from work. He did not know Anna was not his real mother, despised his always drunken father and when Anna divorced her husband he stayed with her.

Anna was already thirty five when she came to my agency. She was too tired of twelve hours work every day and of living with her ex-husband since they all still had to live in the same apartment: Anna and the children in one room, the ex-husband in the other. She was tired of his drunkenness, awful scandals with broken windows and the visits of police.

Filling in her application form, she indicated only one son, laughing that in five or ten years when I maybe at last manage to give her in marriage her elder fifteen year old boy will be already an adult. «And I do have only one own son!» she smiled, leaving.

But she was lucky much sooner. A respectable Finnish gentleman had great interest in her, visiting St. Petersburg several times to meet with her and at last inviting her to visit his house in Finland.

Anna could leave her work only for a short time, but it was enough for the gentleman to understand she was just the right woman. Anna happily accepted his proposal, but there was one more problem – to explain to her fiancée that she had been flippant to indicate only one boy in her application form and that though her elder son was really her nephew she could not leave Russia without him. The gentleman became very upset. He told Anna that he himself sometimes felt overcrowded in his fifteen room house, that it was quite impossible to accommodate there even two boys, especially since the second boy was not really Anna's son but had his own father in Russia. The gentleman reproached Anna that she should not be so frivolous: if she mentioned two children from the very beginning this would surely have alienated him at once and would not have brought so many sufferings and troubles.

Anna asked to think but already knew her decision. She returned to St. Petersburg and when her smiling elder son asked her at the station: «So do we go to Finland?» she replied: «No». And she stayed in Russia. Life is a little bit easier for her now since her former husband died from vodka and she does not need to call to the police every day as she did before. She still works constantly, and her application form is still kept in my marriage agency. But not only her elder boy is indicated there now but also their dog and cat – pets without which, as Anna said, she would not go anywhere.

«Let them take me with all my children and animals!» Anna says laughing. «I don't care if they don't want to, I will survive myself!» and she cheerfully leans to me, sitting in her «magical' dentist chair in which patients never feel either fear or pain.

Brave Russian Policeman

Hey, brave Russian militia-man, policeman, where are you, what do you do this moment? Do you enter an ominous apartment where four terrible dead bodies lie for already a week or more? Or do you steal along a dirty cellar investigating the reason of the recent explosion? Or do you hide from shots of a horrible assassin which made all the city to tremble and whom you have traced at last? Or are you having the strongest coffee in a rare minute of relaxation as you have not been sleeping for already.... do you yourself remember?

And do you know where your ex-wife is? She is sitting beside me on the couch at my marriage agency office and is showing me the picture of herself. In the picture she is kneeling on the carpet of the bedroom in bright red underclothes and red stockings and smiles a tense unnatural smile which has to display how shapely and attractive she is.

«My ex-husband was a very good person,» she says looking firstly at me, then somewhere through the window into the dark avenue where lights are not burned this evening. «We spent together ten years, he was a policeman, a very skilled professional. He earned comparatively good money before 1991, but it is possible to buy only potatoes and bread and maybe note books for our son for what he gets now!»

Yes, brave Russian policeman, everyone knows of course there is no money in our state either for the police, or for any other government employees! Mafia people drive Mercedes 600, the police drive ancient funny jeeps chasing the criminals and however managing to catch them sometimes. It is some way possible as many other incredible things are somehow possible in Russia!

«When his wage became too little for normal life I asked him to leave his work as he spent there twenty eight from twenty four hours for that miserable wage,» the policeman's ex-wife continues her story. «Yes, it's not a joke, especially when terrorists from Chechnya appeared in the city, when all these explosions in the metro began. He came back from work (if not stayed there till the next day) late at night, ate as much as he could because he had no opportunity even to have a bite there for all day long. He was not even capable of talking with me let alone any sex, fell asleep as the dead till six in the morning and all over again. No days off, no holidays. Such was our life. Was it possible to continue so?»

No, brave Russian policeman, it was impossible of course. You should know your wife loved «good sex» as it was written in her application-form. You could not offer her such after your terrible work and it was also a reason it could not continue.

«And when you asked him to leave this work, what did he reply?» I ask.

«He replied that he could not do anything else except catch criminals. He replied he was just a high level detective. Where else might he find a suitable job? Only to join the mafia! Yes, they would certainly enjoy having a professional like him, but he said he appreciated his police honour!»

«Would you really prefer him to join the mafia?» I ask.

«I don't know!» she exclaims. «I would prefer to have a normal family life! I would prefer I could buy my child any treat he asks in the street! I would prefer to have enough of different food in the fridge and not only potatoes! I could put up with misery when everyone was miserable but when some children do not look at strawberries in the winter and I cannot buy even an apple for my son! When I see that other people travel and see the world and I cannot go to the street in a windy weather as my only boots leak! Then I understand that there are also other men besides my husband and let him appreciate his police honour as much as he wishes! But I start to look for my fortune myself!»

«But he probably hoped for something?»

«He did,» she says nodding. «He asked me to wait a little more, he hoped this absurdity could not last forever, that some day everything would become normal again and his work would be good paid and honoured.»

«And I replied,» she sighs, «that in twenty years or more when it maybe happens, I would become an old woman (if still alive) and already need nothing...»

And she gives me the picture of herself in her red underwear and red stockings and I cautiously ask if she thinks the picture is really suitable.

«Why not?» she wonders. «I sent the same to Germany and had some proposals. But I did not accept as I would like to marry only a good man.»

Good man like you, brave Russian policeman! I think. Good man plus quiet comfortable life and enough money. Who will blame her? I will not. You, it seems, do not either as according to her words you have already agreed to give her the necessary permission for your son to leave the country too.

«I would not like to leave for Finland as the climate there is also wet and rotten. I would like to go to Germany or to America where climate is dry,» she says and her eyes look somewhere through me, sparkling, as if trying to see her unknown future and certainly good fortune.

And she leaves and her picture in bright red stockings lays on my couch.

Sigh, brave Russian policeman... Have you still been doing your hard job just for a song however keeping your honour? What else may you hope to keep in this life? Do you really think anybody will reward you sometime? Maybe indeed you should not care and join the mafia and become rich or leave this unhappy country for any other place in the world?

Sorry, brave Russian policeman. I would prefer you did not hear my words. Cheers. And don't give up.

The Telephone Call from Sweden

Some of our customers often order to do a personal search for them. I do it usually through our local newspaper publishing their advertisements, receiving letters from girls and forwarding them to the customers. I forward only letters with pictures but some girls send letters without pictures though the picture is always asked for in all ads. Customers usually ask me not to forward them such letters except when they are extremely interesting. I usually put all the others into a special box, keep them for maybe some special case. Once I have received such a letter without any picture.

«If you are really the person you give out to be you are probably waiting for the letter of a European girl. Maybe you will be surprised or quite the contrary saddened that you hold an Asian girl's letter in your hands. My name is Ainura, I am twenty five, have arrived to St. Petersburg from Kazakhstan in a hope to arrange for my life in Russia. But according to many, many reasons I am experiencing great difficulties this moment living in this unpredicted country. No, you are mistaken thinking that I offer some sort of liaison in exchange of your sponsorship. No, I am Christian and my Christian morals do not allow me this, but I am so tired of this grey boring life, I wish to have something more: a real home, coziness, warmth, love and family. And I want to leave this country.

Let's return to myself. I am not pretty, alas, my pictures are much better than I really am, so I do not send them not wishing to adorn myself and to deceive you from the very beginning. I graduated from the construction college, but there is no work on my profession and to be honest I do not like my profession either. I like movies, theatre, like to study languages, but I don't speak any language except Russian. I like sports, traveling, I do not like to live at the same place for a long time. I have to lead a very modest lifestyle now. My clothes are also very modest. My appearance may be nice sometimes but more often it makes me feel upset. I do not send my picture to you but I think if we met maybe you could still see something in me, something that could make me a real beauty if at least one man in the world would see it at least only once.

One small offer more if you have not passed my letter to the bin yet. I know, there is not much probability for me to become your mate, then I might become the homemaker in your house, in your country, only to get away from here.

Happy New Year to you! Ainura»

Such a letter. It was also diligently decorated with a fir tree branch and New Year toys on it. Alas, men wish to get acquainted only with pretty girls so I did not send it but put it into my box.

And some days later there was a telephone call from Sweden to my office. «Irina?» some confident lady's voice asked in Russian. «I knew your phone-number through Internet. I am married, live in Sweden, I need an au-pair for the spring and summer. Maybe you have somebody among your acquaintances who would be interested in this offer?»

«Sorry,» I replied, «I seem have nobody among my acquaintances who would be interested.»

«But maybe one of your customers?» she asked. «I may tell you about all the conditions.»

«I am not sure I will be able to help you, my customers look for husbands, not for a job like that.» I interrupted.

«For husbands?» asked Russian lady from Sweden. «Do you really find them husbands?»

«Sometimes,» I replied.

«So you are sure nobody would like...» she concluded. And then I remembered. I asked her to wait a little bit, found Ainura's letter in the box, found the telephone number, gave it to this lady and asked to try to call.

After that I called to Ainura myself. Her voice was low and shy, just what I expected to hear. I explained that the person to whom she wrote had already found his special lady and though I should not decide for her, I still thought she might be interested, that's why I gave her telephone number to that Russian lady from Sweden.

Ainura thanked me more than my offer deserved.

When I called her after a while to know what happened some man's voice told me that Ainura has not been living there any more and that he himself had no more information about her.

Children and Parents

Members of families take an active part arranging their close people's good fortune. They often come to my marriage agency or send letters.

Once I have received a letter from a mother of a seventeen year old school-girl. «Dear Madam,» was written in the letter. «My daughter graduates from school this year. She is a very good girl and has only good marks for all ten years of her studying. I tried my best raising her, put a lot into her education, and now I think it's time to find her a husband abroad. I have a favour to ask you. I would prefer to view all the candidates myself and to have the possibility to decide to what extent this or that one is suitable for my daughter.» A picture of her daughter was enclosed, and there was also an amplification that men should send their letters firstly to the mother for her preliminary decision. Nobody took the risk of such a way of acquaintance. The girl did not receive any letters and the mother called me afterwards and blamed my bad work.

Another mother rushed into my office and looking at her watch told very fast that she had to visit two more agencies that day. She added that her daughter herself was in Italy that time but the man she visited was boring and greedy, worked much, did not entertain the girl enough and did not buy her enough presents and that's why her daughter did not wish to accept his proposal. «What for?» the mother agreed, «We ourselves have a grey life here, what for to change for the same?» When I asked if she really thought that men in the West could care only of entertainments and presents the mother said that there was no reason then to leave for abroad, it was too boring for girls to live there without even presents as a compensation.

The third mother came to me and told a sad story about her thirty year old, very shy and lonely daughter to whom she could not even hint at such a place as a marriage agency. The girl would be astonished and would certainly refuse and her mother came in secret promising to settle it somehow if there was somebody interested. She brought a picture of her daughter in a national Caucasian suit taken ten years ago where only a third of the girl's face was seen out of an extremely high cap. When I asked to bring another picture the mother promised to take it somehow secretly also as if for another purpose. She thanked me, wished my agency good luck and never came back.

Once a little girl with a school bag appeared from behind my door. I asked her if she confused my office with something else but she shook her head negatively and said she knew where she had come. The girl came in, sat at the couch as an adult and told that her Mom had cut my advert from a newspaper, that Mom would dream to get acquainted with somebody but was shy to come herself, that she was always such, I should know. The girl took a picture out of her bag and showed to me saying: «This is all our family.» A lot of people were presented at a group photograph. Three looking-very-similar ladies, as the girl explained, her Mom, Granny and Great grandmother, the girl herself, and two wonderful baby twins being held each by Granny and Great grandmother. The girl's Mom was in the very center looking into the camera as the group leader. «Our family is very amicable,» said the girl confidently. «We need only Dad. And please write there that we can go abroad only all together.» I nodded, wrote everything she wished and the girl left very satisfied finally asking me just to delay a little displaying of the picture as she had to finish the school term before their departure.

I remember also two ladies in large fur-coats, the mother and the aunt, furiously blaming their daughter's and niece's ex-husband, enumerating his crimes from which I understood only unsuccessful selling of a good apartment somewhere in the North. And an old man looking for a ready-made husband for his pregnant great granddaughter just to her childbirth.

They were all very different but similar in their sincere wish to arrange their close people's happiness. And leaving me after filling in the forms they all seemed quite sure that indeed only a few steps separated their relatives that moment from their happy future.

Dreams

She was a shy gentle Russian girl, she dreamed just about a quiet family life in a cozy home, about nice beautiful children, strong confident husband who would take care of all of them. She did not hope to find all that in her large Russian city where dark windy streets were full of sad worried people, where one could guess only for the next day, where life was full of uncertainty and fear, where young men preferred to remain alone than to have someone else to take care of.

He was a skilled programmer, a young Russian immigrant living in California. He had a good job in the US, his life style was not comparable with what he could afford having stayed in Russia, but it was not the only reason he loved America. He loved America for its energy, for its respect for business and order, he loved it for its hospitality, he felt tears in his eyes when he saw American flag and when he heard the American national anthem because he was so grateful to that generous country thanks to which so many people's desires could be fulfilled. Most of all he wished maybe even not him himself but at least his future children to become a pure part of America and though he did not expect to marry an American girl he decided that the Russian girl he would like to marry should also love America the same way as he did and should try her best together with him to approach as close as possible to original American image.

They both met through a marriage agency. He arranged a business visa for her and invited her to visit California. He found her nice but too shy and reserved, too «Russian» as he thought, and he would prefer her to look more American and aggressive. He bought some how-to books for her, explaining her that while living in a new country she had also to accept its main traits.

The girl was intelligent, she understood what he wished. She liked him himself, his cozy home and sunny California with smiling people in the streets. She studied the books and tried to do all they advised. She tried to smile and shake people's hands energetically, to look always happy with herself but as she really remained shy and close it looked rather tense in spite of all her effort. She learnt to drive but being too much afraid of traffic once collided his car with the pavement barrier. She looked for job to start her own career but as her English was not good enough employers did not want to accept her.

She was too upset with all her failures, her boyfriend was also becoming more and more disappointed and once they talked and decided that she would better return back home to Russia. But she already could not forget the wonderful country she visited. It was like a dream that did not come true which she still would like to embody. She thought she had time yet to change to a real American style. She entered some marriage agencies more and spent all her evenings writing personal letters.

And there was an American businessman, living in a large noisy American city, too tired of his permanent rush for success and money, tired of friendly handshakes and victorious smiles of independent American ladies who were too strong to need anybody. Sitting in front of his computer he looked through the personals web-sites, guessing if all these men and women might be really serious. But once he saw that unbrave girl's face on one of the pages and thought that maybe there really existed someone in Russia who could really need his care, who could in turn sympathize him when he was tired and unlucky, with whom he might not pretend to look always happy and successful, with whom he could be either strong or weak and not to worry.

And he arrived to Russia to meet the girl. But she remembered her sad experience too well, she again looked most thoroughly through all her American «how-to» books before the meeting, she tried her best to look just American style, she managed to hide her real personality as if it never existed and her handshake was so strong and her smile was so triumphant that it seemed to him he did not even leave America. And all the three of them are still lonely and still dream. A Russian programmer loving America most of all dreams to become a part of it together with an energetic independent lady whom he has not yet met. An American businessman dreams about someone shy and dependent

to take care of, whom he also would like to find sometime. Shy and dependent Russian girl still writing letters, dreams about sunny California, trying to display herself in her letters pure American style, sometimes forgetting, writing just the opposite and mixing up all she wrote previously.

Email

They met in Internet by chance, she advertised the product of her company, he inquired, she replied. He was curious about Russia and Russians, asked a couple of questions, then asked more. Little by little their weekly exchange of messages became habitual, she liked that habit to retell him many things well-known in Russia but quite strange in America, his amazement was often funny. He also told her many things unknown for her, it was also interesting to be in touch with a person from another part of Earth, from another world. Firstly she was amazed by his openness and ability to share. Very soon she knew both the romantic story of his acquaintance with his wife and the sad story of their separation. People in Russia usually do not share so easily unless they consider someone to be their close friend. He also told much about his religious aspirations, he was very religious, she was not at all.

Then she started to get accustomed. She started to begin her day with switching on the computer, looking into the mailbox if there was any email or not. More often there was. She liked to read those small white letters on the blue screen. Reading them she felt a shadow of far life just there, so close to her. It was quite unknown life with unknown pleasures – black tie dinners and parties, unknown advantages – security, comfort, they did not have in Russia.

Her Russian reality was busy, uncertain, unstable. Every day she had to take often illegal decisions for her company's survival. She could never be sure her business would be still working next day and she would remain safe.

Her private life was also rich. She had complicated relationship with her boyfriend who wished her give up her business and share his interests and life on the whole. He did not take her business seriously, worried that she was so tired, demanded that she would give it up and rely completely on himself. But she already had a sad experience relying upon men in her previous marriage, she preferred to be independent and she did not give any promises to her boyfriend for the future.

She had a daughter for whom she always had lack of time. Her old parents reproached her that she was working too much, they also tried to remain independent, not burdening her with any requests. She was helping them financially but she also felt she was not giving them enough time and affection while they were so much missing her.

Her friends also told her that she had forgotten them. But to pay more attention to all her dear people meant to take away time from her business which she considered quite impossible.

However, email from a strange American entered somehow her busy life and managed to take an important there.

Late in the evening when her daughter already slept and no telephone calls could occur she sat at the computer taking away time from her even so short sleep and composed email messages. She used to write about the events of her day, about all the fears, about everything that came to her mind. On one hand she wrote a diary, on the other hand, realizing that someone quite unknown, a person from a stable and secure – as she thought – world would read it, she felt as if a thin thread connected her with that world and she also got from there her own small part of protection.

She understood that it was surely a pure illusion but very soon she really began to feel that imagined protection. When after a strange telephone call she suspected if it was racket investigating the financial position of her company or when her bank suddenly appeared bankrupt she did not already feel desperate as she would do in former times. Remembering that she could write about it in the evening in her email message she felt as if the real danger receded. She as if built another parallel life in which only those things existed which she described in her messages, but things described seemed already not so awful as theatre scenery which could not frighten anybody. Very often when she had to solve real problems she sat with her thoughts far away deciding how to describe those

problems better. She preferred to move into an invented email reality resisting every time when she had to return into the hard actual one.

Sometimes she wondered how it could happen, wondering if it was a subconscious wish of self-defense because the tension of all those real and imagined fears became sometimes too strong and any kind of relaxation was necessary. Very soon however she started to worry and think that although that habit to write email became so beloved and strong, something should be done about it.

As to the person she corresponded with he did not seem less alien to her after several months of correspondence than on the first day of email acquaintance. Very soon she understood that his openness and frankness did not mean what they would mean in Russia, that warm sincere words of real sympathy that she maybe awaited would not be said, not because he was hard and silly, but just because he was not capable of understanding the feeling of everyday uncertainty, the feeling of life at the railway station before the train departure, that they all constantly had in Russia. He was a successful businessman appreciating luxury, good restaurants and hotels, acquaintance with famous people, traveling – he was so much excited telling about his and his wife's voyage to Venice in Orient Express in costumes of twenties. She could not know if she liked all that or not – she never experienced anything of the kind – but it seemed to her if even she had she would not take it all so seriously. Every time receiving his messages she felt a slight prick of dissatisfaction because what she wrote was not understood as she would like, more and more she made certain that she wrote mostly for herself, she thought that she had become very foolishly addicted and had to quit.

However, she felt that her day was empty, though it was full of events, when she did not receive an email message and had no opportunity to reply. She was thinking how to manage to get rid of that delusion when her American informed her unexpectedly that he had to visit Russia on business and that they would meet.

And he turned out to be a person with a friendly, easy-appearing smile, he curiously looked around out of the taxi, their meeting was taken up with fussing but when they at last sat in front of each other and talked they had pauses in the conversation remembering if they already wrote about this or that in their email. Then they familiarized themselves with each other and their personal acquaintance it seemed had nothing to do with their correspondence. She showed him theatres and restaurants, they talked and again he listened attentively when she described her reality but he was much more excited sharing his own cherished thoughts about perfecting himself for God's approval, his concern that the world was overpopulated, plans and projects for future business. And she also listened to all that, thinking that she was taking away time from her most necessary affairs, feeling a kind of irritation, counting days till his departure, missing something important, being unable to understand what it was.

But when she saw him off to the airport she understood what she was missing. It was the absence of the possibility to write email during all the time of his visit. Having seen him off she was happy to think that he would be back home soon, would sit at his computer and it would be possible to write email again.

Having realized it she knew what she should do next. At home she resolutely switched off her modem, took a taxi to her boyfriend's, and having entered his apartment immediately proffered her modem to him and asked him to hide it as far as he could, not to give it back to her keeping it away as long as possible, whatever she would say and however ask him.

Frank

His name was Frank, I translated his letters. He wrote them to a petite girl with a low voice. Though he could not know what really her voice was as he could not phone her because she did not speak English at all and he did not wish to use an interpreter considering that such a conversation of the three would be awkward.

His letters were honest, sincere and nice. His letters quite came up to his name. He carefully chose a girl to write to but, having chosen, unconditionally decided that she would be the only person to whom he would tell the story of his life. But there was also someone else, me, who had a possibility to learn it.

I was thrilled by his letters. I read how lost he felt gardening in the yard of his house alone on weekends. I knew that he had the only friend far away. I learned the story of his previous marriage, of his ex-wife, who did not wish to have children in her younger age as she had a very evil step-mother herself, then understood how wrong she was and presented all her not-called-for tenderness to her nephews. He wrote also that he himself would be happy to have children in his new marriage, or could do without them, he let decide that question to the person who should become the most important for him, the girl he wrote to.

The letters of his girl were rather featureless. Though modest and respectable, they were descriptive but poor for feelings. But a lot of room in her letters was devoted to the descriptions of St. Petersburg's beauties. Some places in her letters were written in such a magnificent language that I even thought that she attended a literary studio and was happy to exercise while corresponding with Frank. It was difficult to say what a person she was according to her letters.

Frank, however, seemed happy to entrust his destiny at least to someone. He wrote about his problems with work, he decided to leave his job and to take another, he described why that previous job did not satisfy him any more. To read about work in the US was certainly interesting for me. Having translated what he wrote I usually told about it to my family during our meals. I also told my friends what was the situation with work in America, and we all were amazed to find common traits in it with ours in socialist times. And of course both my family and friends knew that all I told them was happening with a person called Frank.

At last Frank abandoned his old work but very soon understood that the new one did not match him either. Frank remained without any work after all.

Letters of his girl of that time did not have any peculiarities. As earlier she did not write much about herself though she shared such an important feature of herself that her favourite meal was poultry. It was as if she lacked imagination to understand what really was going on in Frank's life. She unhurriedly began her each letter with invariable «Dear Frank» and finished it with a splendid description of the season's beauty or the beauty of a city landscape. Meanwhile Frank experienced hard times. Little by little he started to share with me writing about unlucky interviews and about times of complete silence, complete absence of any offers. I encouraged him as I could. Both my family and friends knew already that Frank was without work.

Once, when I visited my mother overnight, my son called me from home to tell that there was a desperate email from Frank in my computer at home where Frank asked to write him back as fast as I could. My son told me also that Frank was preparing himself for an interview, very important for him, and being a little superstitious wished to hear a few encouraging words.

Spending night at my mother's I could not email Frank right away. But having arrived home next morning I threw the bag from the groserie in the lobby and immediately emailed Frank that I wished him good luck before putting food into the fridge.

The first thing my son asked having come home from school that day was how Frank's interview passed. My lady-friend called in the evening and in the end of the conversation asked: «By the way,

has that your American, Frank, got a new job or not yet?» My husband, having returned from his business trip, also asked: «What about Frank? If I was at his place I would prefer to become an independent entrepreneur!»

Frank's interview passed unlucky but he got another job very soon. His girl, it seemed, did not notice what happened with Frank, she sent him a long letter with the description of St. Petersburg's beautiful bridges copied, it seemed, from a local lore book. She also promised to describe St. Petersburg monumental sculpture in her next letter.

There is much more splendour to describe in St. Petersburg and a lot of books where from to take descriptions in its libraries too, so Frank's girl has much more ahead. Frank continues to write to her about his lonely life, I continue to translate. It seems Frank and me are already good friends. My family and friends are also aware of Frank's existence and often ask me how Frank is. And even though his girl currently passed to describe all scientific discoveries ever done in St. Petersburg, Frank – it seems – is already not so much lonely in this world.

Her Bad Fortune

Nadya comes to my office in her best dark cherry suit. She comes straightly from a photographer and shows me pictures of herself which the photographer has just taken. One picture is for the resume that she asks me to translate. The other picture is for a marriage agency personal form just in case; it is not what Nadya counts on seriously. First she wishes to offer her resume to some foreign companies though there are not many foreign companies in St. Petersburg that would take an accountant from the street. Though if they even took they would take someone younger and with the knowledge of English. Still one must try everything while looking for work.

She lost her work three months ago. She was very lucky to get the place of the vice-chief accountant of a large factory. It was a rare chance for an engineer of middle age without special education but only three weeks book-keeping courses. When I found out that she had got that work I proudly started to tell everyone that while most engineers could hope for nothing at their bankrupt factories, the lady with whom I had sat at one desk at the book-keeping courses, did not give up, managed to change her profession and to find a place with a good wage.

But she lost it. Formerly she believed that the main factor of success was diligence. Nadya was a very diligent pupil at the courses. She never went out for lunch at the breaks, ate her sandwich just at our desk turning over and over the pages of the lectures. She neither chatted nor giggled during lessons, just looking reproachingly at a merry lady from the front desk and me, who did. She herself tried not to miss even a word of the teacher.

She acted the same way at her work. Her book-keeping was always in an excellent order. Her knowledge of laws and taxes was always updated. She tried her best and demanded the same from others. When it seemed to her that her boss was not enough responsible, Nadya honestly informed him about it, as she piously believed in the predominance of sense of duty over everything.

Her fast discharge ruined that belief. But she still continued to act like previously.

Every morning, not missing one, she visited Unemployment Bureau to look for opportunities. Then she went back home and started to call. Sometimes she put on her best dark cherry suit and went for interviews. She returned back and her son met her in the doorway with a question in his eyes.

«They never refuse at once,» Nadya tells me. «They usually promise to call. They say «We will call you next week,» or «We will surely call you.» But when I call myself they apologize, «Sorry, that place is already unavailable'»

Once or twice however it seemed to her that her diligence would be rewarded again. Nadya came to a company and, while waiting for the boss to invite her, got into a conversation with a lady. The lady was an accountant there, it seemed to Nadya her professional knowledge impressed her colleague. The lady encouraged Nadya and promised to apply for her. The boss was affable, promised to call, but he did not. When Nadya decided to visit that company again the same lady did not even recognize her.

Nadya cannot understand why it all is happening that way, she tries to investigate laws according to which good fortune leaves a person. It seems to her things will change if she learns it.

«In the very beginning of my search I came for an interview together with other candidates,» Nadya says. «It was a place with a good wage, a lot of people with higher economy degrees came there. An elderly lady in a shabby dress, also a candidate, came up to me and said: «Failed again. Can you imagine I am looking for a year yet?»

That woman looked like a real failure!» exclaims Nadya. «I wish I would not talk to her, I am sure it was she who conveyed her bad fortune to me!»

Nadya is looking desperately as if she hopes I will tell that it can't really be this way;

I am telling her it can't really be this way, I am telling Nadya I am sure there is neither bad or good fortune, but maybe only unfortunate circumstances. I tell her that currently there is already

less opportunities and more accountants than when we finished the courses, that's the simple material reason why she cannot get a job. But if she has a little bit more patience she would surely be a success. It is only time and patience that is needed. I convince her trying to look honestly into her eyes. She asks me if I really think so, looking at me longingly. I make myself smile with confidence, encouraging her.

I translate her resume, fill in her marriage agency application form, and while filling it in it seems she becomes a little bit livened up, even smiles speaking about her possible future partner, coquettishly tidying her hair, and I notice in sun rays white hair in her hair-do and how worn her best cherry coloured suit is.

I see her off to the door, she seems comforted, thanks me and leaves hopeful.

I close the door, return to the table and am going to continue my work. But I can't do anything as if something bad settled in my office after her departure.

His Old Red Cat

That Finnish man saw her picture in our personals catalog. She was a thirty year old Russian girl of an average appearance. She wrote in her application form that most of all she wished to take care of somebody and to have children.

He invited her to visit him to Finland, she agreed. She came by train, he met her at the railway station. She had seen his picture while corresponding, still he turned out to be smaller and thinner and his eyes were frightened though he smiled.

He lived in a small one-bedroom apartment in a little town and worked as a milk-man at a large farm. He offered her his bedroom and he himself settled on the sofa in the living room. Every evening he wished her good night, closed the door and never tried either to open it or even to knock. Every morning he left for work when it was dark yet and she heard how he moved about the room trying not to make any noise and cautiously closed the door.

He was very cautious in everything: it seemed to her that he even cared she would not see how much money was in his purse; he tried to open it a way she could not see it and later she herself looked aside when he took his purse out of the pocket. They usually went shopping together in the evenings after his returning from work and he always repeated that prices in Finland were high and one should be economical.

He talked not much. Sometimes she wondered what for he invited her. On weekends they walked to the lake or visited the city. She tried to talk, asked him about personal things, but he was rather evasive and she desperately chatted about herself and could not understand what really he was thinking about.

Once it seemed to her she noticed a real feeling on his face: having entered the market one evening they encountered a black haired woman with a resolute expression on her face talking to a cashier. The girl noticed that the man became tense having seen the lady and tried to pass her faster, hiding his eyes. The woman also looked at them attentively, her eyes narrowed and a sneer flashed through her face.

The girl asked the man about the lady when they got out, but he muttered something and she understood that he preferred she would not continue her questions.

Staying alone at home while he was at work she used to talk with his cat. The man had an old red cat which he did not let out to the street and which slept most of the time on the window sill or looked outside from behind the window. The girl loved cats, she had her own one in Russia. Very often she sat beside the cat, stroked him behind his ear, looked together with him outside the window and told him that his master did not like her, that soon she would leave for Russia and never come back, that she was always unlucky with men and this time she was unlucky too. The cat purred, sympathizing.

The man also loved his cat. Returning from work he firstly used to come up to him, stroked him and asked the girl if the cat ate well. He often consulted with the girl what food would be better to buy for the cat – the girl's profession was veterinary surgeon and she should know. It seemed to the girl that the cat was the only subject they could easily discuss and when in the evening they both watched TV and petted the cat lying between them on the couch, the girl sometimes thought that one would feel that way having a real family.

Once before her departure the girl was at home as usual. The weather was fine and the girl slightly opened the window, holding the sleeping cat, breathing the fresh spring air.

A lady-neighbour from the next apartment stopped beside the window and started a conversation about the good weather. The girl spoke Finnish not very well and understood not much. Still she understood when lowering her voice the lady started to speak about the man she visited. The lady whispered something about the man's ex-wife and the girl understanding not very well asked the lady to come in and to repeat.

And having quickly moved to the door and let the lady come in, the girl learned that the man once had an evil wife to whom he left the house of his parents and all his property while leaving, and he himself rented that miserable apartment and had taken with himself only his red old cat.

When the lady mentioned the cat the girl immediately remembered that the window in the room remained opened. She ran back into the room but, alas, the window had flown open by the draught and the cat was absent. The girl looked under the sofa and the bed, ran out into the street and called the cat there but it did not help – the cat disappeared.

She did not know how to tell the man about it. When, blaming herself, she told him as soon as he came in, he did not say anything bad but told the girl that though the cat was never let outside, he hoped that his pet should return. All the evening both the man and the girl walked under the slight rain about the streets around the house and also far away, they called the cat, everything was vain.

Late in the evening when it started already raining heavily the girl stood at the window looking into the darkness and the man sat on the couch in front of an unswitched TV. The girl thought that she brought there only the misfortune, she thought about the red old cat hiding she had no idea where under that heavy rain; she remembered her own cat in Russia, imagined that the same happened with her cat too, thought that very soon she would leave for her cat which quite safely was with her mother but the man would stay alone without even a cat he could take care of and having thought about it she started crying. The man did not move and said nothing, she wished to stop but she could not, and he stood up, came up to her, stood beside for a while and hugged her indecisively.

They both spent that night in her bedroom. He firstly comforted her saying that the cat would return. Later, hugging her tightly, he whispered into her ear that the woman they saw in the market was his ex-wife, that he understood she never loved him but could not understand why she hated him so severely. All their family life she repeated that he was good for nothing and he himself already started to believe in it. After the divorce he preferred to leave her the house and everything only not to communicate any more. But when she somehow found out that he decided to invite a Russian girl, she laughed and she told everybody that Russian girls could be interested in nothing else but his money until they know how little that money is.

He did not wish to believe in all that but still believed, he wished to find good in life but already did not hope, he wished to become happy and could not even try as that evil woman poisoned everything. And the girl also hugged him tightly as if trying to defend, sobbed yet but already smiled and whispered that since that time everything would be okay and there would be no more reason to worry.

The Romantic Interview

I wished to include a romantic interview of one of the ladies into our Finnish marriage catalog, to wake up more romantic feelings in men and to increase the quantity of customers. I asked for this interview one of the girls, a secretary, she refused, said that she was not capable of expressing herself well verbally. Then I asked another girl, a hair-dresser at a famous salon, she also refused, said that too many people knew her here and there, that she preferred to keep silence. Then I asked the third girl, a surgeon. She immediately agreed and came to me just that evening.

She looked a little bit strict but brought a very beautiful picture of herself for the catalog. We sat together on the couch, having coffee, she asked if it was really possible to marry that way, I replied that the percent of marriages was not high, but nobody knew who would be lucky and a romantic interview could help. So we started.

I asked her if there was romance in her previous marriage (she was divorced). She laughed, responded that her ex-husband never understood her and helped not much, he was from people sure in one-two things all their life, she had to study in the university, to look after her little daughter, to work and to cook and to wash his clothes simultaneously, she finally asked her husband to leave.

I asked if there was any romance in her current life. She laughed again, said that that time she was the manager of a department of the hospital, that work took a great place in her life, that she was already capable of doing all the operations being done in the hospital, that she had to work so much with these miserable wages that she had no time for anything else, even for her daughter, and that's why she started to think about marriage to the west – if she had new children she would devote herself to them having the possibility to live a normal family life at last.

I asked if she really had nobody in her life at least to dream about after the divorce and what was her attitude towards men on the whole that time. She replied that she had a lot of male friends, that she was not able to make friends with women and to chat with them about different rubbish but it was possible to discuss interesting medical cases with her male colleagues or, for example, to discuss works of German psychologist Eric Bern whom she admired. She added that if she regarded men from the point of view of possible future marriage she did not think any more she could be happy in Russia. She said Russian men lost themselves in that disorder, drank much, could not provide the family that's why she decided to move to the West.

I asked if she thought it could be romantic to have a husband from another country with another language or if she supposed any problems could happen connected with it. She said she did not ever think there could be any problems as the Russians themselves always were the mixture of nationalities, she met her Finnish colleagues and they seemed very sensible and polite.

I asked if she thought she could fall deeply in love with one of her Finnish colleagues for example and maybe it could change all her world-outlook. She said she did not think it was anyhow possible at her age (she was thirty two), the main thing she wished to find was mutual respect and understanding, understanding of the necessity of raising children, mutual help and support.

I wondered if she really did not believe in love in the sense that it was something one could not imagine and predict in advance and she replied that she really did not understand what that concept meant, that what really existed in the world from her point of view was common sense and expediency and it was of course much more reasonable to live not all alone, but with a family, to be supported by someone and to support them to make life easier for both.

I asked what she thought about the deepest grief which a person having lost his beloved spouse could feel till the end. She replied that if people lose each other in a younger age they could comfort themselves very fast having found somebody else. As for old people they really could not be on their own yet, that's why they grieved so deeply, that was a reasonable medical explanation.

I asked then if she really hoped that such an interview could help her to find some romantic partner. She smiled, stood up, said that I might write what I wished, thanked, parted and left and I stayed in my office alone.

Just that moment my Finnish partner called and I told him about the romantic interview still being absent and being in a hurry to complete the catalog my partner offered to place there more pretty faces instead of the interview then.

And we did so. And a very beautiful picture of this young lady-surgeon that she brought for the interview was placed just on the cover. She did not at all look strict in the picture, on the contrary, there was something very romantic in the expression of her eyes and maybe it awoke lot of romantic aspirations in the men and the quantity of our customers was really increased.

The Island

Natasha lived with her little daughter in a St. Petersburg communal flat together with many other neighbours. The block was situated in one of St. Petersburg's noisy avenues. Windows of three rooms faced the avenue where trucks and trams rolled day and night. The fourth room faced a green quiet yard but an old woman living there though being lucky to have a good room had a bad character, eavesdropped on conversations, gossiped and grumbled all the time about other neighbours' kids making noise in the hall or about the family on duty that did not make weekly cleaning satisfactory.

The flat was crowded with so many people. Natasha's daughter and neighbours' kids always ran and cried in the hall. Bicycles and wash-basins hung on the walls, sometimes there was a queue to the bathroom or to the cooker to cook. The young couple with two kids felt overcrowded most of all in their single room, Natasha knew these young people hoped only that when sooner or later the grumpy old woman or the old man from another room left for a mercy house or even further their rooms would become free and it would be possible to occupy them as there was the appropriate right according to the law.

The old man was a former sea captain. That neighbour was Natasha's good friend – he was always glad to see both Natasha and her daughter in his room. They liked to visit him for tea in the evenings. There were pictures of ships and boats on the walls of his room, big tropical shells and overseas souvenirs on the shelves of his old furniture. Natasha's daughter liked to play with the sea shells, and had already broken some of them accidentally but the old captain did not curse, he used to say that it was for good luck and let the girl continue examining the shells and put them to her ear, listening to the noise of the sea.

The old captain survived a stroke. His legs worked poorly, he moved slowly just about the flat, the noisy avenue below was all that remained from his so broad in former times world. When the sun started to appear in his room in the spring he used to open the window and put his face under the sun rays, closed his eyes and imagined that he was at sea again and the roar of trucks and trams below was the roar of the sea waves. His wife died long ago, he had no children, his niece came once a week, brought him some food. Natasha also helped, bought him bread and milk, washed, cleaned his room. The old man's niece always convinced him to enter the mercy house but Natasha, being aware what mercy houses in Russia really were, told his niece every time that the old man was quite alright on his own and she was there each moment if something was necessary for him.

Natasha was a biologist, she loved nature, plants, animals, insects – everything that lived its own life in the world. In former times she worked in the Botanical Academy, but after perestroyka the wages there became smaller and smaller till she was working only for bus fare. Natasha started to work as a trade agent of a cosmetic company: visiting offices and different institutions she sold cremes and lipsticks, it was not easy having a child, the old man helped her, watching her girl when she slept, feeding and playing with her after she woke up, giving Natasha the possibility to run about the city with a heavy bag full of products from which she tried to sell as much as she could.

Natasha's parents lived far away, nobody except the old captain could help her. Looking after her daughter, selling cosmetics for a living she had no time for any personal life outside the flat, all her personal contacts besides casual customers were made of the flat's inhabitants. The young couple, though close to her by their age, were not close by spirit. They were too economical, bought only wholesale, talked how to spend money for useful things, not in a silly way just for pleasure.

Natasha's conversations with the old captain were different. The old man often told her about his sea voyages, about exotic archipelagos that his ship used to visit, where it was warm all the time, and there were tropical sunsets, blue birds and beautiful silver fish. Natasha told the captain about her unhappy marriage when her husband left her just before the childbirth; later he neither saw his daughter, nor helped. Natasha guessed for the future and did not expect anything good as there was

nothing good in the past. The old captain smiled, clapped her shoulder and used to say that one could never know what would be around the corner, that her young age was happiness itself. As to him, he was already happy just with the walls of his room, with his pictures, with the sun rays from the window, with their quiet conversations, with her daughter's sleep that he guarded, even with the neighbours' quarrel in the kitchen. Any trifle belonging to life could be appreciated in his age.

Once, distributing her cosmetics, Natasha found herself in a marriage agency office and while the lady manager was examining Natasha's lipsticks and perfumes, she, in turn, gave Natasha application forms of Americans wishing to get acquainted with Russian girls. Looking through biographies and pictures Natasha suddenly came across the name of the archipelago the old captain told her about. She saw the picture of a smiling man, it was written there that he was an American engineer working on the island, living there with his little daughter and looking for a loving wife and a kind mother for his child.

Wondering why she was doing it, Natasha copied his address. In the evening she told the captain about it: it was not easy for her to explain to the old man what the marriage agency really meant as having no possibility of going out he missed many features of new post-Soviet life. Nevertheless, smiling and joking in his own inoffensive manner, the old man encouraged Natasha to write. He remembered that once his ship was really being unloaded in that archipelago, Soviet sailors were not allowed to enter the shore, still they all had time to notice how beautiful those islands were and how kind and careless the local people were there.

And Natasha wrote her letter and started to wait for the reply. She wrote that maybe the wish to make their children happy could draw the American and her together. And it really seemed to her that something should change in her life finally, and while she waited for the American's reply her conversations with the old captain were rolling around that island.

She did not seriously admit the possibility of moving there, but she just imagined palms and exotic birds she somehow touched by her letter and thought how many wonderful things were there in the world she had no possibility to know. And the old captain thought, looking at her dreamy face, that if she really moved to the island he should certainly leave his room for the mercy house where his own life area would be narrowed to a bed in a crowded ward. He knew that both old men in deep sclerosis and those like him were kept together there. And the old captain already started to consider what two or three books and what pictures he would take with him and wondered if it would be allowed to open windows there, if he would be able to feel yet the warmth of the sun rays.

But the American did not reply. Natasha could not know that the mother of his daughter, who betrayed and left him, came back and he forgave her and stopped his search which he really started in order to prove to his disloyal wife that he did not suffer at all and did not need her either.

After two months of expectations Natasha stopped waiting for his reply. The young couple who also knew everything from the gossiping old woman were disappointed as they very much looked forward both for Natasha's and the old man's departure to occupy their rooms.

Since that time Natasha was usually silent while she had their evening tea, she sat thinking about all the hardships and problems awaiting ahead. Looking at his pictures the old man thought that he would really give up everything to see a smile on her serious face. And he comforted her saying that something good would surely happen in her life very soon and the only thing one should do was to hope for better.

Story about Masha

When you read this story you will maybe ask me: What for did you told it? It will not be a sweet story about a happy marriage of a Russian girl and western guy. It will be something just on the contrary though it has a happy end. I would like to tell it maybe to add some realistic details about things that happen around our introduction service.

She came to my agency as many girls come for the first time, very interested, not very brave. Some girls are restrained and tell not much, some of them tell their life story at once. She was from such. In fifteen minutes I already knew that she was twenty eight, never married, that she had some men in her life and all these men were married. All they told her that they were very unhappy in their family-lives, all asked her to feel sorry for them and every time she swallowed this bait, their exhausted souls relaxed warmed by her faithful attitude, then they remembered about their sense of duty, asked her to forgive them and returned to their evil wives and, of course, to children. Maybe it was so with her because her parents divorced, her father left them when she was eight and both she and her brother thought they were «bad children», that's why their father left them as good children always keep their parents beside. This idea being in her subconscious maybe made her thinking she did not deserve the best but had to be grateful even for such a trifle as the temporary attention of a married person. So at twenty eight, which is considered too old for a girl in Russia (girls usually marry around twenty here) she had no husband, no children, and she was eager to have a child and decided to look for a husband in the West and came to my agency.

«I would have a child without a husband if I could afford it,» she assured me. Yes, of course I knew that she having a very good education and a very intelligent creative profession now had to work as a cleaner. I also knew that she spent a lot of time to get her university diploma while working simultaneously and when she graduated it turned out that her profession was not needed by anybody in Russia during the time of the crisis.

I remembered this girl, picked her out from many others. Her smile was shy, her eyes were so honest and I wished to help her if possible.

And such a possibility happened very soon. My Finnish acquaintance, whom I have known through business, asked me to introduce some good girl to him. He told me a very sad story how unhappy he was having no opportunity to see his daughter, whose mother did not allow them to meet, how eager he was to create a new family, to have new children and of course the first whom I remembered about was this girl, let's call her Masha.

They got acquainted, liked each other, very soon their acquaintance became more close and he, let's call him Hannu, left for Finland and invited Masha to visit him there.

While she was waiting for the visa he called her every day, asked how she was, told a lot of trifles about his life, dreamed how happy their future common life would be and how many children they would have. Masha was happy. She told me later that walking about the city on different affairs that time she looked at St. Petersburg beautiful palaces and did not believe that such a happiness was now hers. Previously she was sure it would not be possible, but now she was sure it still was.

She left, they called me from Finland, she sounded happy, then – a bit less excited.

Her first visa was valid for three weeks. She returned and came to me. She looked thoughtful. On one hand everything was good: they did not quarrel, she did all homework, cleaned the house, cooked, helped Hannu in his business. On the other hand he spoke very little to her, met friends in the evenings or read a newspaper, she could not understand if he really needed her.

However he invited her to come for the second time. They agreed to marry as soon as they have a child. But there was no child that time either and the marriage was delayed till the time of her third visit. And when she visited Finland for the third time, once, cleaning the house again she found a lot of pictures through which she understood that she was not the only female visitor of that house. When

she was absent some other girls came and no one knew about each other but it was very convenient for the host – the house was always clean and there was always a woman there.

«But I do wish to marry!» cried Hannu when I told him what I thought about all this. «I am just choosing. Masha unfortunately is not beautiful enough but I will marry a beautiful woman soon and will quit the game!»

And he has really chosen at last: a twenty year old model (extremely attractive indeed!) who left him after three months of marriage for a boy of her age (Hannu was forty five). Now Hannu calls me cursing his destiny.

You cannot choose your destiny, can you? Youth and beauty are attractive, but maybe one should also think?

As for Masha, we have become friends not just with her, but also with her Russian husband. Yes, we found a good Russian man for her! When she recalls her stay in Finland, she shuts her eyes wishing to forget things which she would like have not happened.

How Masha Found Her Husband

Having returned from Finland, Masha found herself without job, without money, without any idea what to do further. She came to me for advice.

I felt responsible. It was me who inveigled her into her misfortunate adventure; it was me who had to help her to get out of it.

In the first place she had to find a job. Her profession was an architect. It was very difficult to find an architectural job in St. Petersburg while no new buildings were constructed. However there were lots of phone numbers of architectural studios in my thick business telephone directory. Masha settled on my couch and started copying numbers and addresses. Lady clients came and left, my husband – whom I at last made to transport bricks lying about the yard to our garage for its restoration – appeared periodically. At last he made his last trip, Masha copied her last address, we closed the office, sat into the car and drove home, having dropped Masha at the Fontanka river where she lived in her room.

Next few days Masha called through the list. Her diligence was rewarded. The manager of one studio invited her to come, and a miracle happened – Masha was accepted!

True that later Masha learned that almost all the staff of that studio left the service themselves as they were not paid wages for already half a year. But Masha was too happy that time she could call herself an architect again to notice such details.

It was turn to arrange her personal life. Being deceived in a rotten classical way Masha did not wish to believe in anybody but I told her that if she really wished to have children and family she just had to take steps in that direction. I gave her many instructive examples when success was the result of will and faith. Being inspired, Masha went to our local personals newspaper and ordered to publish her personal ad.

She got lots of letters. She had to make a special card-index with names and phone numbers of candidates. She started to spend all her evenings calling men, dating them, crossing out the list or ticking off and including new ones.

All the candidates were very different. Those who seemed most suitable were brought to my office for my consideration. Masha wished to know someone's opinion.

The most interesting candidate was a young architect, Konstantin. Masha was excited he was an architect too. He was very handsome and intelligent and he came from a very good family. Masha liked him, she asked me to try my best to make a good impression so the young man would appreciate Masha's nice and intelligent friends.

I tried to prepare for this visit. When they both came I offered coffee and started an easy conversation about arts and literature. It turned out that the young man also wrote poetry. I asked him to read something, he did, of course I admired it. The young man was excited and impressed. I asked him to tell us more about himself; he did it with great pleasure. I managed to transfer conversation to the theme of loneliness, suggesting how nice it would be if Konstantin shared it with someone. Masha looked down in modest silence, I talked with inspiration, Konstantin listened with his eyes shining. It was the nicest evening.

On the next day Masha called me and said that Konstantin asked my telephone number.

«What for?» I asked.

«He wished to talk again with you about literature. It seems you made too good impression on him,» said Masha coolly.

«But you yourself asked to show your nice surroundings!» I exclaimed.

«Yes, but it seems you tried too much...» Masha said sarcastically, and muttering *oh, bother!*, I asked her to tell him I left the city forever or got cold. I was punished for this lie having really caught cold in a few days.

Masha was a kind girl, so she forgave me. Very soon she asked me to regard another candidate who raised her doubts..

That one was a huge man, I already don't remember his name. He brought a box of sweets and immediately had eaten two thirds himself. I tried to be as modest as I could, listening only to Masha. But when finishing off sweets the man bragged how experienced he was in getting around taxes in his business, I forgot all previous intents. I immediately asked him to explain me ways of avoiding taxes I did not yet know. He was also very interested in learning what I could share. When our mutual interest was satisfied I remembered about Masha: she was silently sitting on the couch and looking at me ironically.

That person disappeared very soon too. Masha brought to me some candidates more. One of them played guitar and sang songs of his own composition so loudly that several days later I still could not listen to the radio. The other one sat in complete silence while Masha and I tried to amuse him, then he suddenly became red and invited Masha to go to his country house. When she refused he immediately left.

Masha complained she was too tired of all these men and already desperate to find her right one.

But after some time I suddenly noticed that Masha disappeared. She did not call any more and did not bring to me anybody. Some more time passed and I needed my telephone directory that Masha had taken again to look for another job as she had time to understand that it was hard to live without any wage even being called an architect.

I called her, asked to bring the directory; she apologized, promised to come.

And she came the same evening, brought the book but she was not alone. A black bearded man came with her. They did not look at each other, were very tense. When I looked at the man, his glance, given in answer, was almost unfriendly. Masha looked confused. I tried to talk to both of them but words stuck in my throat. Masha just gave me the book and they left.

And I understood that something was going on between them. They left surrounded by the atmosphere of uncertainty and disarray. And indeed their further relationship was complicated and not easy but there was no place for any other people and their advices in it. Sometimes Masha came to me frustrated. Sometimes she called and even through telephone line I felt how happy she was. Much of everything happened with them yet. They married only in a year.

Problems with Electricity

That day a complete darkness met me in the entrance of the house where my office was situated. I could move only by touch. I thought that something happened with electricity and maybe soon it would be improved. Having gone out for lunch in the same darkness I met a person with the steps and tools in his hands and understood it was an electricity-man.

«What happened?» I asked. «Why is it so dark at the stairs?»

«There are buttons everywhere now.» he replied.

«What buttons?» I did not understand.

«Lighting buttons in each room,» he said. «You press it going out and the stairs are illuminated. The stairs are illuminated only when somebody goes out. If you wish to come in, you press the button downstairs. Don't you know? Great economy.»

«I have no such a button.» I said.

«Then you did not order, you are guilty yourself.» he said without special expression.

«Then will I always go out in the complete darkness?» I asked.

He did not answer rising upstairs, demonstrating that the theme was over.

«Hey, it cannot stay so!» I followed him, raising the voice. «Who invented it? How silly!»

«So you prefer the stairs to be illuminated all the time?» he asked very caustic. I replied that though I could seem very impudent but I really would prefer. We argued a little bit more and though he finally called me a scandalous lady but at last agreed to switch on the button in my office too. He set it up without any delay though grumbling something concerning my character, then left promising to come to switch it on in the evening. I did not like this renovation at all as my girls-customers could not know anything about the lighting button downstairs either and would surely have problems to find me in such a darkness. What has happened in the evening has even exceeded my expectations.

The door-bell rang, I opened the door and saw a very young girl with lots of make-up at her face and in some dress with sparkles. Her expression was very tense when she appeared from the complete darkness of the stairs. She looked around suspiciously and came in with some hesitation. Continuing to look around she reminded that she has already sent me a letter with an amateur picture of herself and that I called her and asked to bring some better picture which she brought now. She showed me the studio picture in the same dress with sparkles, with the same quantity of make-up, the reddest lips, dark shadows around eyes. I looked for her amateur picture to return for a long time; I could not remember the girl anyhow. At last I found and understood why I could not recognize her; a very nice girl without any make-up, in simple jeans and shirt was standing at the beach smiling happily. The picture was rather small and not good enough for scanning, still better than what she brought that time. Well, I did not tell her as it was her wish to display herself so.

«What will you do with me further?» she asked strangely.

«Further?» I did not understand what she meant.

«Are you always alone here?» she asked even more strangely.

«Yes,» I replied being amazed.

«And where are other people?» she continued to ask.

«Other people? Which?» I was amazed even more, and that same moment the door-bell rang, I moved to the door to open it and had time to notice the girl's face has changed becoming quite scared.

It was the electricity-man at the stairs.

He said he would switch off light to switch on the button. And he did switch off light for a very short time. I loudly said something encouraging to the girl in the room in that complete darkness. Then the electricity-man switched on the light again, we checked the button, I thanked him, and we parted.

When I returned to the room I have not found the girl at her former place. I looked around and found her standing behind the wardrobe desperately holding a tear-gas spray in her shaking hand.

«Don't come up to me!» she exclaimed. «What do you want to do? Why did you switch off the light?»

I was astonished but murmured something about problems with lighting-button and electricity.

«I changed my mind, I don't want anything! Don't come up! Who else is hiding there?» yelled she shaking her sprayer, trying to look into the hall and seems being afraid even to move.

«There was an electricity-man but he left,» I whispered with my heart trembling, thinking how to manage to call and where to call first, to the militia or to the ambulance. But the girl suddenly threw the sprayer and burst into tears. She cried loudly and childishly, all make up leaked from her face, I ran and poured her a glass of water, my hands were also shaking when I offered it to her, I was frightened so as I was not ever for a long time.

Fifteen minutes later we both sat on my couch and had tea. The girl's face was now clean from any make-up as she washed it; she looked like a real kid with her swelled up eyes, handkerchief gripped in her hand, in her absurd sparkling dress. And she told her story.

She was the only daughter of rather old parents. Her parents, pensioners, read a lot of newspapers and watched TV news all the time and were very much concerned with criminals and mafia by which papers and television used to frighten people every day. They even saw off their only daughter to school being afraid that something could happen with her though she hated this accompanying. When she entered the college they would like to continue but she protested and has fought her independency. Still her parents tried to follow her or to view her wherever they could. Her girlfriends dated boys long ago but it was quite impossible for her with such parents. Once however a smart car stopped beside her on her way home and a young man offered to take her. Her parents warned her most of all from just this but she not only has got into the car and chatted with great pleasure but even gave her telephone to that very nice, according to her opinion, person when they stopped at her home. And of course her mother saw it all from the window; the person in the luxurious car could be only from mafia. The scandal was grand and when the man from the car called at last, her mother had time to say that the number was wrong. It was too late when the daughter ran up to the phone. The young man never called again.

The girl decided to revenge herself. She did not care already and wished to do something terrible so her parents would understand how bad their behaviour was and they would repent.

Her parents told her once that they heard there were a lot of underground brothels in the city hidden behind legal marriage agencies and that the destiny of girls captured by them was awful. And the girl has taken the decision, has prepared an appropriate picture with lots of make-up, borrowed an appropriate dress from one of her friends and at last resolved to come. When she saw the dark stairs she was confirmed that something awful was very close. When the light was switched off in the room she was scared, she understood what she has done, so she decided not to surrender.

Very soon, looking through our catalogs, she still giggled remembering what had happened not long ago. I returned her pictures, she took them, then hesitated, gave me back the first amateur one, and said she would still like to stay the customer.

«Where else to take a husband with such my people?» smiled she and stood up.

I saw her off to the door, pressed my new lighting button and the girl went out into pretty well illuminated stairs, glanced back, smiled again and disappeared in the street.

Provincial Girls

Many girls from province come to St. Petersburg, leaving their small towns in the hope to change their life in the large city. They often come from areas where life seems stopped, where there is no place either to work or to do anything else besides work, where people just try to survive carrying on their natural economy, where rows of sellers at small bazaars wait for customers in vain, where people just look at each other with a silent question «What really will be further?» and cannot find any answer.

St. Petersburg seems to be full of opportunities. Girls from province, having arrived, being lucky to settle here, admire a beautiful but indifferent city, its lights and amusements that they cannot yet afford, and dream to force their way through their limited reality. They find a job and work hard in the hope to be a success. They often come to my marriage agency office and bring their pictures. Provincial girls are diligent in everything: their introduction pictures are very good, girls believe in a Cinderella fairy-tale, they are sure that either their efforts at work will be rewarded or handsome princes will surely find them. But their career in the city where any labour costs so little often does not turn out, princes do not occur either and when I call them to check if their intent to marry abroad did not change yet some other people tell me that this or that girl left for home already long ago.

Other provincial girls having found themselves in the large city stop dreaming very soon and understand that they should hold their ground themselves. Such girls are often more persistent and efficient than the ironical and reflexing girls from St. Petersburg, they look older and harder than their St. Petersburg female mates. They learn firstly the seamy side of life, good knowledge of it often makes them consider that such virtues as warmth and gentleness are just luxuries that they can't yet afford.

I met a pretty young woman from a far southern city. She looked confident and victorious in her picture. However her life was hard, she had to provide also her son and old parents. She had no dreams, she regarded her possible future marriage as a geometry problem which should be successfully solved, she could not count wrong, her gambling was the prosperity of all her family. She looked through the letter of an American guy I gave her without any romantic feelings, on the contrary she was very business-minded when asked me a lot of questions about the man's financial security. Her letter written in reply however was extremely passionate and romantic though as well full of dignity and intelligence. Looking through her letter I darted a quick glance at her to try to understand to what extent she was serious but her glance given in answer was sarcastically impenetrable, one could understand nothing through that glance. I thought that the American man writing to her would be lucky if she really experienced all those feelings. And I did not envy him if she decided that he was just an appropriate chance.

I knew one provincial girl more. She was sincere and charming though not very pretty. But her smile was such that you could not keep from smiling in reply. When I asked where from she arrived I understood everything. Her native town was close to that same one where my own grandmother lived and where I used to spend my summers in childhood. The door of my granny's house never closed, I remember kind people always ready to help that visited her. I felt sympathy to the girl, all my provincial ancestors' genes woke up, I also decided to help the girl by all means.

I gave her an address of an American man who was looking for a fiancée in my agency that time. She started to write him letters. But it appeared that she did not speak English at all and asked me to do translations. She behaved as if we were closest friends and I was sure she herself would certainly do such a favour for me if we changed places. I could not even charge her as I knew that she worked at a bankrupt factory and got her wage by old-fashioned sweatshirts manufactured by that factory which she had to sell somehow at the bazaar to get at least part of money. So I started to translate her long naive letters, sighing and looking at my watch, having delayed my numerous urgent affairs.

She sat on my sofa and chatted describing her adventures with the sweatshirts and unlucky attempts to get another job. But in spite of all the effort the American man was not interested and did not reply, there was no more reason for her to visit as having become too busy with my bookkeeping report I could not continue my charity.

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