

## Book 9. Three Nines, Two Jacks, and Not a Marriage in Sight

(1)

...In less than one chapter, Olga will finally become Vadim's wife.

(2)

The two of them — Olga and Vadim — live together full-time now. The two-bedroom apartment that they share with Landlady is small, and is made even smaller by the fact that Olga and Landlady have different recipes for *borsht*. Vadim loves them both and so he eats out, usually in the cafeteria at the history institute where he works during the day. Olga is also busy with her studies, but has more free time during her afternoons. In the evenings they both come upstairs to my apartment where we sit in my kitchen eating pickles and talking about things that seem important.

Living on different floors of the same building, the three of us have become as inseparable as marriage from a wedding. Vadim has found in me a reliable drinking partner — now he drinks more than he did before falling into love, but less than he did before believing in God — whereas Olga uses my apartment as a refuge from Landlady.

It's not that Landlady doesn't like Olga. In fact, Olga tells me, relations between the two of them — soon-to-be-mother- and daughter-in-law — would be perfect if they didn't have to live in the same apartment. Or if the apartment weren't so small. Or even if it *were* small, but didn't belong entirely to Landlady...

She even criticizes how I peel potatoes! Olga complains.

Look, I say for the thousandth time, Why don't you two move into my apartment and I'll find somewhere else to live.

And for the thousandth time Vadim objects. He has given me his word that I can stay in the apartment as long as I live in Russia, and now he is stubbornly keeping it:

What about you? I protest, What about Olga?

A promise is a promise! says Vadim.

But..., I say.

But...! Olga seconds.

No way! says Vadim with a wide sweep of his arm, And that's *that!*

For the last three months, since the wedding was announced, everybody has been especially high-strung. Landlady has been running around the markets looking for the brightest and most exquisite cabbage. Olga has been trying to find a wedding dress that will still fit her on her wedding day. And Vadim, who has not been able to reach a decision about his debts, has instead been consuming pickle after pickle. Sometimes he eats so many pickles that he has to drink vodka to wash them down.

One evening while the three of us are sitting in my kitchen, Vadim suggests playing cards:

Do you know any Russian games? he asks me.

Just one, I answer, My friends and I used to play a game called *Policeman*. But it's been a long time...

*Policeman?* That's the most famous card game in Russia. Do you like it?

Not really. No one wins the damn game. I mean you play and play and all you end up with is a loser.

It's not my favorite either. But I know another game that's perfect for three people. I think you'll like it.

Vadim takes out his deck of cards, counts out twenty-four, and begins shuffling them:

The object of the game, he says, is...

### (3)

As with most games, the object of the game is to win. Which in theory is easy enough. But because your opponents have the same goal — they are also trying to win — your task becomes somewhat more complicated.

You score points by declaring a marriage which means a king and queen of the same suit. In *this* game tens are better than jacks; clubs are better than spades, and hearts are worth as much as both of them combined. In

this game, a marriage is good, but absolutely helpless unless you have an ace to protect it, in other words, with which to take a trick and declare your marriage...

...First one to reach one thousand wins.

It *is* a good game, simple enough to allow tangential discussion, but complex enough that the better players usually win. The game is called *tysacha* and as usual I usually lose:

	<u>Vadim</u>	<u>Olga</u>	<u>Me</u>
Hand # 1	145	55	15

(4)

Not surprisingly, Olga also eats pickles. But what *is* surprising is that she doesn't drink vodka. Understandably, we are all worried about her. Vadim seems the most disturbed: he stutters, he paces, he points at Olga's ankles as if it could be her fault entirely. She never says anything, but sometimes she cries. Landlady says a lot but cries too. I myself have never cried since nobody suspects me of anything. Like me, Vadim doesn't cry, even though they suspect him entirely. Instead, he paces, he stutters, he eats pickle after pickle, and asks me to proofread the translation of his favorite song. "Vchera... Vse moi problemy..."

(5)

I don't understand what's so difficult...! says Vadim. He has gathered the cards after the first game and handed them to Olga to shuffle:

...I don't see what's so hard! You just take two fingers and slide them down the back of your throat... as far back as you can... like this...

And Vadim curls his fingers slightly and puts them halfway into his throat.

...And all your problems are solved... try it.

I can't.

What do you mean, you can't?

I don't know. I've tried, but it doesn't work.

What do you mean it doesn't work? It has to work... look you just...

I know! I know! You think I haven't thought of that myself?! You think it's never occurred to me? I mean... jeez... give me a *little* credit!

Vadim is puzzled:

It's strange, he says, You're the first person I've ever known who can't make himself throw up.

What's so strange about it?

It's strange because *everybody* can throw up... except you. What's the problem?

I'm not sure. Maybe I'm just deceiving myself... can't bring myself to commit to it and that means that I really don't want to vomit in the first place, that I prefer the alternative....

And what alternative are you so stubbornly preferring?

I don't know. But let's just say I've been in Russia long enough to know the fine line between *here* and *there*.

Olga has dealt the cards and is waiting for me to start bidding:

Your bid, she tells me.

One hundred, I say.

## (6)

As the game progresses, I realize how thorough my luck isn't:

At first I receive aces but no marriages. Then I receive marriages—two and three at a time—but no aces. Then, I receive a marriage and an ace, but in different suits. Then I receive an ace and a marriage of the same suit, but it is spades—in other words, the cheapest suit—and I am outbid by Vadim....

*Why are good marriages so rare? Why is it that the black cards are worth less than the others? And why... WHY doesn't anybody in this country want my German dictionary?*

And then it happens: I receive the ideal hand. Ace, ten, king, queen. All of hearts. Whereas before I have had to duck out early during bidding, now it is Vadim who has passed and I who am bidding against Olga at one-sixty... one-seventy... one-eighty...

Vadim is staring at us in amazement:

Are you sure you know what you're doing? he asks.

Absolutely! I say.

...One-ninety... two hundred...

*But wait a minute! Why is Olga bidding so high? What can she possibly have to match my hand?*

...two-ten... two-twenty...

It's impossible! says Vadim, Two people bidding that high!

Finally, at two hundred twenty, Olga gives in. I collect my crib confidently — with this hand I can't lose — and slide my two friends a card each. But

before I can even lead my ace, Olga, without even looking at the card, lays down her hand:

Four nines, she says.

Vadim looks at her cards:

Redeal, he says.

You're kidding me!

Nope. Looks like she's got four nines.

Sorry, Olga says.

I feel tricked:

Who dealt that hand, anyway? I ask.

Vadim checks his sheet:

You did! he says.

And so I pick up the cards, shuffle them, and once again deal myself an ace with no marriages.

	<u>Vadim</u>	<u>Olga</u>	<u>Me</u>
Hand # 9	585	420	55

## (7)

Without any aces, without a marriage, I can only sit and watch from the side of the table as my two friends compete against each other. Without declaring a marriage I can't score points. And without scoring points I can't expect to outscore my opponents. Sadly, my chances of victory are as slim as Gorbachev's in the upcoming elections.

*Amazingly enough, Gorbachev really is going to run for president...!*

For now my role is spoiler, in other words I should do everything in my power to ruin other people's games. It is not a role that is entirely interesting, but one that I have already learned to become used to.

You know, says Vadim, We have a saying in Russian... have you heard it?

I don't know.

About cards... we say that people who are unlucky in cards are lucky in love. And vice versa.

Why?

I don't know. That's just what we say. I guess if you use up all your luck in cards you won't have any left over for love.

Actually, says Olga, it's the opposite: if you use up all your luck in love then you won't have enough left over for cards.

Well, I say, judging by our game the reverse seems to be true!

I look at my score and at the dusty solar calculator on my shelf, and as if to prove my point, Olga laughs and kisses Vadim lightly on the hairy part of his ear.

(8)

Can I ask you a question? says Olga as she shuffles the cards lazily. As usual, Olga is not interested in the game as much as she is in the conversation; she takes forever to shuffle the cards, she plays attentively only when she is winning, and then only if she is close to victory. The rest of the time she plays disinterestedly, making mistakes that especially irritate Vadim, who is more passionate about cards than he should have been:

A question? I say.

Yeah, Olga says, I was just wondering... I was just wondering why it is that you never smile.

What?

Since I've known you I don't remember a single time that you've smiled.

I don't know. I mean I've never thought about it. I just smile when I want to, I mean when I have something to smile about.

Everyone has *something* to smile about. But you never do. Never.

I don't?

No, you don't. Does he Vadim?

Well now that you mention it...

See! You never smile.

I... I didn't notice. I mean I didn't realize I wasn't smiling.

Well just think... can you remember the last time you smiled? Is there a time that you can actually remember smiling?

Well, I don't know. I remember *thinking* about smiling when I was in the flooded underpass... I remember *almost* smiling when I didn't have a cigarette... I guess the last time I smiled sincerely was... I suppose the last time I smiled was...

*When did I smile the last time? Was it two years ago? Was it three? No... it had to be when... That's it!*

...I guess it was right before the ruble stopped falling.

(9)

	<u>Vadim</u>	<u>Olga</u>	<u>Me</u>
Hand # 11:	645	480	-105

(9)

In 1996 (1USD=5000RUR), while campaigning for the Russian presidency, Mikhail Gorbachev was assailed right in the face by a man who had pushed through the ranks of cordoned spectators and lunged at him as he entered a building to make a speech.

The western press revulsed in horror.

The former president was equally surprised, especially since he did not even know this man and had not done anything in the last four years to provoke such an attack.

Despite the whole messy affair, Gorbachev — who was visibly shaken — received barely two percent of the vote; this total was a bit more than one percent, but far less than the amount received by the eventual winner, a man who much to the regret of Gorbachev was not Gorbachev.

(9)

“It’s really too bad. I was kind of hoping he would win. He seems like such a nice man...”

(10)

In the beginning Olga would only visit me together with Vadim. But after the incident with Gorbachev she began to come alone, at first to get away temporarily from Landlady with whom she had fallen out irreconcilably, and then, later, for other reasons.

The first time we met for these *other* reasons, I tried clumsily to give her a calculator:

It’s for you! I said.

What is it?

It’s a solar calculator the size of a credit card. It’s my last one.

What am I supposed to do with it?

Take it.

What for?

I... I don’t know... calculate with it.

It’s nice of you but...

Olga looked at me politely:

...but keep it.

The strange thing about our relationship is that when we are alone together we do not say a single word until we have taken our first sip of

tea. And then, as soon as the tea is gone, we become silent once again — she is not here to talk. It is actually the middle part that I prefer, but Olga has more experience in such things, and I have come to accept that it is probably more honest her way. Vadim cannot visit me during the daytime — his job does not allow it — so Olga and I spend her afternoons in slow silent minutes that gradually turn to hours; my friend does not feel any sort of jealousy about our meetings because I don't do anything with her that he himself isn't doing... and because Olga and I meet in strict secrecy.

**(11)**

Take it off, she says, I want to feel you.  
And so I do. I take it off.

**(12)**

Olga drinks coffee with Vadim. With me she drinks tea. She is picky about it, and each time she comes over I take pains to make her tea exactly as she likes it, exactly how she taught me:

First, I boil water in my metal kettle until it whistles like a trolleybus driver. Then pour the water off the top — careful not to stir the dregs to the surface — into a small ceramic teapot, which I then rinse until it is as hot as the water. There are several teapots in my cupboard, but ever since Olga commented on the one with the chipped spout and pink handle, I have taken to using it exclusively. Slowly I pour the water out: now the teapot is ready for the two large spoonfuls of black-leaf tea and steaming water, which I cover with a lid. It should sit like this for no less than three minutes and while I wait, I cut a half-slice of lemon and spread it over the bottom of Olga's cup. For three anxious minutes I wait for the tea to brew, then pour it from the teapot right into the cup — just enough to submerge the lemon — and fill the cup with the boiled water from the kettle.

Olga likes her tea slightly cooled. Weaker than the color white. As sweet as silence. Three heaping teaspoons of sugar. I can't believe that anyone could stand something so sweet, but that's how Olga drinks it. Each time she comes over. In the afternoons. At least once per weekday. That's how she passes away the few minutes we spend between silences.

\*



(13)

But of all the things I do, Olga likes one thing most. After tea when she is lying silent and flat on the pink softness of her stomach I will take her leg and bend it at the knee so that her foot points naked to the sky. Using the very tip of my fingernail I will trace patterns on the tender skin of her feet, along the heel, over the arch, and in and out of the cul-de-sacs between her toes. It is here — between the toes — where she is most tender, and as she lays there, her entire body will tense up from the sensation, her face will grimace with tortured pleasure, her lips will press together in agony in a sure sign for me to move my finger even more lightly along her skin, which I do, prolonging it all a few seconds more until her body begins to quiver. Only then do I stop, mercifully, to take the other foot. Sometimes I trace words into her: at times they are words that she has spoken, but more often they are those words that I wish she would say. When I am finished I let Olga's leg fall wearily to the bed. She will lie there for a few moments, her eyes closed, her back as straight and as smooth as a sidewalk.

When she turns over I know that she is ready.

(14)

Wrong:     We are making love with you.  
Right:     You and I are having sex.

(15)

Let's say — you don't mind, do you? — let's say you're preparing for a wedding. Really, it could be any excuse to eat, drink, and vomit... but let's say it's a wedding. Guests will be coming over and they will expect food. And drink. And maybe even a place to sleep for the night. Everything should be festive. Everything should be loud. Each of your guests should leave having discovered something about themselves that they didn't know before they came. They should be glad they bothered to attend. They should remember this day apart from all others; after all, it is no ordinary day... it is a day for being wed!

Home for you is a small apartment that will soon become even smaller because your son was not careful. Because his Soul leans more toward *αἰσθητικὴ* than to logic. Because your future daughter-in-law has too few recipes and too much free time during her afternoons.

Who knows?

Either way it's not important. During your short lifetime you have survived war, starvation, dictatorship, communism, stagnation, Gorbachev, a putsch, rebellion, inflation, and now the side effects of reforms. Your years have taught you that in life nothing is as serious as it seems. Tragedy is transitory. Transient. Answers, you have learned, can be as painful as a puncture or as simple as a suture... it all depends on how you choose to look at it. Your life has taught you to take things simply. Without complicated ideas. Without theories. Without hope, of course, but more importantly without regret.

And so you spend your time trying to find the right cake. The greenest vegetables. The richest cheese. For years you have been saving your kopecks. For decades you have been buying the cheaper of two cabbages. The poorer of two potatoes. Money is money, you have been telling yourself, ...even in Russia. But now the time has come to let loose. Now the time has come to spend what you have managed to save. Sure, money is money...

...but *a wedding is a wedding!*

And so you spend a year's salary on salad, a month's wages on mayonnaise. With the money you earned last week you purchase bottled water. And when your savings have been reduced to useless coins, you sacrifice them without hesitation to a gypsy boy strapped to an accordion.

You do it without thinking, of course. Instinctively. Your thoughts are elsewhere. After all, the big day is approaching. Your only son is getting married. Guests are coming over. Music will play. People will eat. People will drink. People will...

...It promises to be a day unlike any other!

## (16)

Once, when Olga and I have just sat down to tea, Landlady calls. We are especially nervous because Olga is awaiting the results of her tests. And so Landlady's voice penetrates like sunflower oil on black bread:

I know she's there, she says.

Vadim, I mutter, isn't here and Olga is probably...

She's there. Let me talk to her.

She's probably drinking tea, I offer.

Dammit, that girl never drinks tea!

Flustered, I call Olga to the phone. She takes the receiver and I leave the room, closing the door behind me.

I grab a cigarette and light up. Tomorrow is Saturday. Olga's weekends belong to Vadim. It is their time to be alone. I'm not sure what they do — I don't ask — but for me it means time to myself in my apartment with my vodka. And this weekend will be no different: in fact, if the rain lets up then by Sunday evening I should be passing through Charleston, South Carolina....

When Olga comes out she is in tears. She points to the phone which is lying awkwardly on the warmth of the bed where we have just been. With my hands I ask if I'm supposed to take it, and Olga, wiping away her tears, nods. When I hold the receiver to my face, I can hear Landlady's breathing and feel her words against my ear:

What do you two talk about? she says: What could you possibly have to talk about?

(17)

It is Tuesday when Olga tells me the results of her test.

Well, I say, What are you going to do?

What am *I* going to do?

Well I mean what are we going to do? I mean what are the three of us going to do?

Olga looks at me with annoyance:

I don't know, she says, I don't know what I'm going to do.

Do you know whose... I mean is it...?

Olga puts her finger to my lips:

Shhhh..., she says, Let's not talk.

But I just asked..., I say through her fingers.

It's not important. Either way it's not important, now is it?

And taking her finger from my lips, Olga leads me from the warmth of my kitchen back to silence.

(18)

Whose deal? I ask.

Yours, says Vadim.

Again? But I just dealt.

No you didn't... I did. And since you're sitting to my left it means that now it's your deal. At least that's how the game is played *in most cases*...

	<u>Vadim</u>	<u>Olga</u>	<u>Me</u>
Hand # 21:	880	715	-5

**(19)**

And then something strange happens. I receive a call from my ex-future-ex landlord whom I have left my new address. He is calling to tell me that there is a letter from America. It is strange given that I have not lived at that address for over a year. And when he hands me the letter I am even more amazed. It was mailed more than three years ago. The letter has been traveling — who knows why — for more than three years!

The handwriting is unfamiliar. When I open it the date at the top is smaller by several months than the postmark, which itself is years smaller than the day I received it, in other words, today.

Silently I open the letter and begin reading.

**(20)**

But just when Vadim is on the verge of victory my luck changes. Suddenly, I get a run of good fortune. First I win a game to push me into positive figures. Then I play “blind” thereby doubling my score. Then I get a hand that includes marriages in both hearts and diamonds. Even the one hand that I do not lead, I am still able to ruin Vadim’s marriage by declaring a marriage of my own....

Game by game, he sees his score become less and less; once again his luck has abandoned him. Olga holds her ground for a while too, but then begins to slip as well. In time, our scores have evened up:

	<u>Vadim</u>	<u>Olga</u>	<u>Me</u>
Hand # 29	475	560	505

**(21)**

I think he knows, Olga says.

It is late afternoon and she is holding her tea before her lips with both hands.

Who? What?

I think Vadim knows about us.

What! Why do you say that?

I don't know. I just think he knows. He doesn't say anything, but I just have a feeling he knows.

How could that be? We're so careful.

I don't know, says Olga, All I said is that it seems like he knows.

Olga takes a sip of tea and looks at the large glass ashtray on my table. With me she is either painfully honest or equally silent. She respects Vadim enough to lie to him, but with me she can afford to be sincere. From the beginning she has not led me to believe that our relationship will in any way impose on her relations with Vadim. From the very beginning I have understood my role. And I have accepted it.

And so I take a drink of tea and light another cigarette. And Olga looks at me, moves the large glass ashtray closer to herself, and does the same.

(22)

One afternoon over tea I decide to provoke her:

What would you do, I say with a grin, if I told Vadim about us?

Olga laughs without answering.

No really... what would you do? For example what would you do if at the wedding I announced to everybody about you and me? What would you do if I objected during the ceremony, or if I stood up during the dinner and said, "Ladies and Gentlemen I'd like to make a toast to Olga... the woman I've been having orgasms with for the last year!"

Olga has stopped laughing, but still doesn't answer. So I push further:

No really... I'm just wondering what you would do if I stood up during the dinner and made a toast like that?

You wouldn't, she says finally.

What do you mean?

You wouldn't make a toast like that.

How do you know? Maybe I would.

No, she says, you wouldn't.

Okay okay I wouldn't... but what if I *did*... what would you do?

Olga takes a drag of her cigarette:

I'd deny it, she says.

That's it? That's all you'd do?

Of course.

But what if I had proof? What if I started proving it in front of everybody?

You couldn't.

What do you mean I couldn't?

You couldn't prove anything. And if you tried, I'd deny it.  
But what if I described things that only someone who knows you intimately can know...?

You don't know anything about me.

I don't?

You don't know anything about me that everybody else doesn't already know. There's nothing you could say that would surprise anyone.

I stop to think. *What do I know about her? In all this time she hasn't told me one important thing... she hasn't once bared her Soul!*

...And besides, everybody would just think that you were drunk. No one would believe you.

Hah! They'd believe me all the more! You know what they say... the four people who tell the truth are children, drunks, the insane, and ... *children, drunks, the insane, and...* I forgot the fourth one...

Policemen.

...Right, policemen. Everyone would just assume that I lost control of my inhibitions and started babbling the truth. What would you do then? Huh?

You wouldn't do it. Not even you could bring yourself to do a thing like that.

What's that supposed to mean? Why "even you"?

You understand that it would just cause problems that nobody needs. Even you understand that.

*Again "even you"!*

You know if I didn't know you better, I'd think you were trying to hurt me.

You can think what you want I guess.

There is a pause as Olga crushes out her cigarette in the glass ashtray:

Look I think we've talked enough, don't you?

At that moment I feel like hitting her. But instead I look at her coldly:

Why do you even come here? I say, Why do you even bother?

Olga hasn't even stopped to consider my question, but already has a flippant answer:

I don't know, she says, Why did you come to Russia?

(23)

	<u>Vadim</u>	<u>Olga</u>	<u>Me</u>
Hand # 36	835	880	880

(24)

It is almost the end of the game. Both Olga and I have the chance to win if we can score the final one hundred twenty points; Vadim is not far behind. Whereas in the beginning I played passively and without purpose, now for some reason I have a terrible desire to win. For some reason, this game has taken on a whole new meaning... for me it has become as significant as snow, as important as a first paragraph.

Olga shuffles the cards and deals them out. I wait until they have all been distributed and then pick them up, unfanning them in my hands. And sure enough I receive the worst hand possible: three nines, two jacks, no aces, and to prevent me from declaring a redeal, an unprotected ten.

Across from me, Vadim is smiling and I can only imagine why.  
The bidding starts with me, and I immediately say one-twenty.

(25)

One-twenty, I say.  
Pass, says Vadim.  
Pass, says Olga.

(26)

What do you mean, *pass*?  
You heard me, says Vadim.  
That's right, says Olga, Pass.  
But there's no way I can score one hundred twenty points with these cards...!  
Well, says Vadim, It looks like you're going to have to try.  
Yeah, says Olga, Good luck.  
And without thinking I answer her:  
Go to hell! I say.

(27)

To score one hundred twenty points you need to have an ace. But instead of an ace I have the worst hand imaginable: three nines and two jacks. An unprotected ten. And only half a marriage. I do have a lot of diamonds, but no queen to make it worth anything. Of course there's still the crib, the three cards lying face down on the table. In theory they could save me. There might be some aces there... or maybe even a marriage....

Slowly I turn over the cards, one by one:

(28)

Ace of Hearts.

(29)

Ace of Spades.

(30)

Ace of Diamonds.

(31)

I smile for the first time since the ruble stopped falling. Vadim slams his fist on the table so hard that Olga gives him a dirty look:

How do you like that! he says and then: Blind luck...!

Yeah, says Olga, If you wrote about a hand like that nobody would believe it!

I slide Vadim and Olga a nine each:

No redeals?

Olga smiles.

Vadim does not.

No redeals? I say smugly: Well then here we go...

(32)

Our hands are as follows:

<u>Vadim</u>	<u>Olga</u>	<u>Me</u>
A♦	10♠	A♣
10♦	Q♠	10♣
K♦	J♠	Q♣
J♦	9♠	J♣
9♦	K♣	10♥
A♥	9♣	Q♥
J♥	K♥	9♥
A♠	Q♦	K♠



(33)

In theory my task is simple: I have to take all eight tricks. It's clear that the game will come down to a fifty-fifty decision that either Vadim or Olga will have to make. And so the first six tricks go as expected. I take them without resistance, building my score to seventy-three. To win I will need to take both of the remaining tricks, in other words, this trick and the one following it:

	<u>Me</u>	<u>Vadim</u>	<u>Olga</u>	<u>Total Points</u>
1.	A♦	Q♦	9♥	14
2.	10♦	9♠	J♣	26
3.	K♦	J♠	Q♣	35
4.	J♦	K♥	K♠	45
5.	9♦	9♣	10♣	55
6.	A♥	K♣	Q♥	73
7.	A♠	Q♠	...	...

After playing his Queen of Spades, Vadim leans back from the table. Olga has stopped to consider the order in which she should discard her final two cards. And Vadim is looking at her carefully:

You realize, he says to her, that if you play the right card you can keep him from winning?

How do you know?

I've been following the game. If you make the right decision you can stop him.

Olga looks at her cards and bites her lip:

I don't know what to lead. I can't remember what's already been played.

Vadim is annoyed:

Just think carefully and make the right decision. It's fifty-fifty. Either you play the card that lets him win. Or you play the right card. Just think. You can do that much, can't you?

But it's obvious that Olga can't remember which cards have already been played, and, therefore, which card she should lead.

You know, says Vadim, If you would pay more attention to the game and less attention to whether your opponents are smiling or not...

Olga looks at Vadim spitefully:

There you go! she says and slaps her card on the table. It's clear that she couldn't care less who wins the game and has simply chosen the card at random:

There you go! she says: Are you happy?  
Both Vadim and I look at the card:

10♥

Thanks, I say.  
I take her ten and lead with my Jack of Hearts:

	<u>Me</u>	<u>Vadim</u>	<u>Olga</u>	<u>Total Points</u>
7.	A♠	Q♠	10♥	97
8.	J♥	10♠	A♣	120

I have my one hundred twenty points. I win.

**(34)**

	<u>Vadim</u>	<u>Olga</u>	<u>Me</u>
Hand # 37	835	880	1000

**(35)**

Vadim is amazed. I am gloating. For once in my life I have been purely and truly lucky. An incredible luck, a fantastic luck.

*He who is lucky in cards will be unlucky in Love!*

But at this moment I don't care.

**(36)**

After the game the three of us sit at my table. The conversation is typical, weaving in and out of itself. Then I remember something that I have been wanting to ask for a long time:

You know this is my first wedding, I say, And I wanted to ask you... how should I act... I mean is there anything that I should do or *not* do? Anything that I should keep in mind? I would hate to do something to embarrass myself...

Vadim laughs:

Just follow the flow, he says: Do what everybody else is doing and you can't go wrong.

Will there be a lot of guests?

No, we're keeping it low-key... about twenty people.

Will I know anyone?

You'll know the two of us and, of course, Landlady. Olga's parents will also be there. My best man Boris. Olga's best friend is coming — she's intelligent and polite... I think you two will hit it off. Of course a host of relatives will be there, but we'll seat you next to us... they'll be further down the table and you won't even notice them.

I nod gratefully:

Yeah, I say, You're probably right about following the flow, about doing what everyone else is doing. I can't go wrong that way. You know, it's funny: sometimes I think that I'm more nervous about your wedding than the two of you are... as if it were going to be *my* wedding!

What's there to be nervous about?

Well, I've never been to a wedding before... this will be my first.

Just think of it as practice for your own wedding, says Olga, For when you find a wife of your own and decide to marry her.

Suddenly from the other room the phone rings loudly and I leave the kitchen to answer it. Through the static I am surprised to hear a rough voice ask for Vadim.

Who may I ask is calling? I say.

An old friend, the voice says.

Vadim comes from the other room to take the phone and I go back into the kitchen with Olga. From the other room Vadim's voice can be heard:

"Hello?... but... but... how did you get this number... I know... I haven't forgotten... But I just can't right now... you see tomorrow's my wedding... I promise as soon as I can..."

Olga closes the door on his words. She offers me coffee and we sit drinking it in silence. Finally, I speak up:

It's time, I say.

For what?

I think it's time for me to leave... I'm thinking about leaving Russia.

You've been saying that for two years now.

This time I'm serious... I mean it.

And you've been saying *that* for almost as long.

But this time... *this time* it's forever... I'm sure of it.

What's the reason this time?

Well, I've just started thinking: I don't have anything here... no money... no future... my job's the same... my Russian's getting worse and worse... and now I'm losing you...

You Americans are all the same: money, job... your Russian is fine. And as far as losing me... as far as that's concerned, well, you can't lose me because I was never yours to begin with.

Olga stops to let the words sink in:

Just face it, she says, The real reason you want to leave is that you couldn't handle living here. Life here was too hard for you. You couldn't cope with our harsh Russian realities.

Well, actually, Olga it's quite the opposite: for me, a foreigner in Moscow, life here isn't difficult at all. In fact, if anything it's too *easy*. I've found a comfortable niche for myself, one that I can't seem to crawl out of. But now things are changing. This time I think I'm ready to do it... I mean, to crawl out forever...

Olga nods indifferently.

Just then the kitchen door opens. Vadim walks in. He seems shaken.

Who was that on the phone? Olga says.

An old friend, says Vadim but his thoughts are obviously elsewhere.

Is everything all right? I ask him.

Fine... everything is just fine.

Are you sure? You don't look so good.

Everything's fine.

What does this old friend want? says Olga.

Oh nothing. He just wanted... he just wants to pay me a visit.

A visit? What kind of visit?

I'm not sure.

When's he planning to come?

I don't know, says Vadim, But I have a feeling very soon.

### (37)

A few days before the wedding Olga comes over for the last time. Neither of us have talked about it, but we both sense that it can't go any further, that this will be our final meeting.

While I prepare the tea we are silent; and when it has been poured we drink slowly but without speaking. Our smiles are weak and forced, like consular officers, and for the first time our silence seems awkward. Finally, I start:

Are you nervous about the wedding? I ask.

What's that supposed to mean? she says.

I don't know, I tell her, It's just a question.

Oh, she says and takes a long drink from her cup... so long that by the time she is finished I have understood that no further questions are necessary.

Both of us are silent.

I am relieved. I am sad that it was so easy, but I am relieved. And then it occurs to me: Should she leave? Or should it happen once more for the final time? Could it be that we could still... that we would... *now?*

*Why haven't I thought about this?!*

I am ashamed and look away from her. I look away so that she will not see that I am thinking about this, that I do not already know.

The clink of her teacup against its saucer interrupts my thoughts. It was false, louder than it should be, and I look up. Olga's eyes are moister than I have ever seen them:

I don't love him, she says and then: He'll be a good husband... a good father someday... but I don't love him.

I take her hand and it happens. It happens for the last time. And when it is over I feel sad that this time, our final time, was no different from any other.

### (38)

"...Yeah, well the weather *here* is beautiful... You know maybe you should think about coming home once in a while..."

Here Aunt Helen stops. For the first time since I can remember, her voice becomes passionate:

How long are you going to be there? she says and then: When are you coming home?

I do not answer.

...You promised that... that... It was only supposed to be for *one year!*

I can't answer.

Do you hear me?

I do not answer.

I said do you hear me?

Again I do not answer.

DAMMIT, JAMES, I'M TALKING TO YOU!

I stop.

*What did she say?! What was that? It was... it was my name! How foreign it sounded. How strange...! Aunt Helen is saying my name! When was the last time I heard it? When was the last time I cared? Why haven't I noticed it until now?*

Silently, it hangs in the air. Her word. My word. And in this word, I can hear a voice as timeless as vanilla, though more silent than sleep; in this single word I hear the voice not of my Aunt, but of her sister:

James..., it is saying, ...tell mommy you love her.

### (39)

#863. In a daze I raise my head painfully to see a circle of faces looking down at me. I am lying at the base of the escalator and people are crowding around and offering me their words. Did you see that? they are saying in amazed voices, Did you see how he fell? Have you ever seen anything like that? The poor thing, falling all that way...! But then as I continue to lie without moving their concern subsides, giving way first to confusion, then to suspicion, then to utter derision when they realize that I am not drunk. *He's not drunk!* Then what's the matter with him? someone asks and from the crowd another person answers, I don't know but he's not even drunk! And so they disband and I am left to dust myself off, test my limbs and joints one by one. *Here I am*, I think, *I'm finally here!* Tomorrow is the wedding and everything is set: my gift is ready; my coin is in my wallet next to my last solar calculator; and for the first time ever — for the first time since I can remember — I have a name. *James, tell mommy you love her...* At last I have gone as far as I can with the eleven yellow words: only one remains. One word. One solar calculator. One German Dictionary. One old coin that is as common as a twelve-story building, as worthless as a word.

### (40)

“Dear James,

I hope you get this letter. I'm going to put it in the mail a bit early so that it will beat the holiday rush at the post office and hopefully it will get to you by New Year's. In fact, I'll mail it out tomorrow.

Not much is new with me. I'm not working now because I've been sick a lot lately. I'm not sure what it is, but the doctors say that I need to stay home and rest. I have an appointment next week to do some tests and

they're supposed to tell me what the problem is. The doctor says that it's not likely that it's anything serious but that we should still do some tests just in case. And so after the holidays I have my appointment.

You know, I'm writing this — you have no idea how difficult it is for me to write letters! — although I'm not even sure you'll get it. I talked to Helen last week and she says she's always sending you letters and packages that you never get. She seems really upset about it. And worried. I know it's hard for her with you being so far away. Of course it's hard for all of us, but it's especially hard for her because you're the only person she has. And I guess that's why I'm writing you.

You see I can understand why you're treating me the way you are... you don't write, don't call, and when I call... when I call you won't talk to me. I know that I've made some mistakes, and that you probably feel that you are right in this. And to be honest I can't blame you. Of course I wish you didn't feel this way, but I can't blame you.

But what makes me sick is what you're doing to Helen. You can't understand how worried she is about you. She says sometimes she can't sleep at night because she's thinking about where you are and what you're doing. It was especially bad in the beginning, but even now she still worries. I don't know what she tells you on the phone, but it's hurting her. I'm sure she doesn't admit it, but it is. I wish you could see it and do something about it. Call her more. Come home more. At the very least write her. It really is the least you could do.

You know I've never asked you for anything. I've always felt that I wasn't in the position to do it. But now I'm asking you to be better to her. She loves you more than anything, and you should have noticed that a long time ago. I don't know what's kept you over there for these last two years, but now I'm pleading... if I mean anything to you at all, if *she* means anything, try to be more considerate of her. Don't do it for me... do it for her.

I guess that's what I really wanted to say. I hope you won't take my words the wrong way. I just want what's best for you and for Helen. I'm just trying to help.

I'm enclosing a picture that I found the other day when I was going through my old papers. Your father took it of us when you were about three and a half. Can you believe I was ever that young?! It's amazing how time flies, how things come and go, how people can change and be changed without really seeing it in themselves...

Anyway, I suppose I should go. If you get a chance drop me a line. You can write to the address on the envelope. It should get to me... I don't

move around so much these days. In any case, I look forward to seeing you when you get back home. There's so many things that I want to tell you, but I can't say them in a letter....

Love,

Mom

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