

Book 2. Razvesistaya Klyukva

(1)

In August 1991 (1USD=50RUR) while President Mikhail Gorbachev was resting peacefully at his summer cottage, Soviet tanks rolled through the clean streets of Moscow to the city center. Confusion reigned. Gunfire could be heard to have been heard. At stake was the future of Russia which might never have become Russia.

Residents of Moscow, leaving the safety of their crowded homes, gathered together to form crowds on the safe streets. Some realized this irony and returned home. Others, not realizing the irony, also returned home. A third contingent of brave Muscovites (those who understood that democracy is much more important than irony) were even more heroic: *these* people returned to their homes as well, though somewhat later.

What a magical and carefree time for visitors with return tickets back home! What a perfect moment not to have Russian friends!

- a. I stood on my balcony baring my chest to the events outside.
- b. In the glare of the midday sun I closed my eyes and savored the strange smell of danger.
- c. Grinning smugly I tried to imagine tanks in downtown U.S.A.

(2)

On the one hand, tanks and weddings are two very different things and should not be confused. Tanks, for example, have large guns that can shoot through white buildings, whereas weddings are already white and far less dangerous. Of course there are other differences but this is without a doubt the most important...

(3)

In the beginning Aunt Helen sent bulky care packages that could not have made it through Customs or the dilapidated postal system; and, as a result, they did not. I don't understand what the deal is, she would say, and: What's the matter with those people over there anyway? At least twice a week she would call to ask naive questions about the political situation in the country.

Once, right after the putsch when the telephone lines were hopelessly busy, Aunt Helen dialed nonstop for five hours before being connected. When she heard my voice she burst into tears; and even when she had stopped crying her voice continued to waver until with some effort she was able to compose herself enough to express her real concern:

Are you... are you eating your green vegetables? she asked.

Her timing could not have been worse. I was twenty-six years old. Summer was ending. I had no Russian friends. To each of her questions I answered tersely: "No"... "When I can"... "If she wants it then give it to her"... and then: "Oh, just standing on the balcony."

(4)

So here I was with a cabinetful of gifts for people who love democracy but do not use condoms. In America it's much simpler: first, there already exists a two-hundred year tradition of democracy; second, condoms have always been more accessible than abortions; third, there are people you dislike and there are people who dislike the people you dislike, the latter being referred to as "friends" or "good friends" or "best friends" or even "very best friends" depending on the degree of coincidence. It is all very American, that is to say, safe and artificial and, of course, convenient.

But this was not America. Nor was it Russia. In actuality, this was pre-Russia Russia and so the Marlboro cigarettes went first.

(5)

Luckily, it was raining when I bought potatoes for the first time.

I had arrived to the store at 12:55, exactly five minutes *after* the store's employees — all of them at once — had broken for their one-o'clock lunch break. Now I could either return home without potatoes or wait under the rain. My choice was as difficult as a dilemma and dubious to boot: potatoes versus peanut butter, love versus warmth.

Months later I would realize that this had been the most important decision of my life: But for now I simply opened my backpack and took out a fat book that I was not reading.

(6)

I hunched over to shield my book from the rain, my hand traced lightly over the pages as if they were the contours of a married lover.

Was Love always this wet? And could It have anything to do with potatoes? And was there any difference between “high” and “tall”? Here and There? Heart and the Soul...? And why didn't anybody in Russia smile? Was it that they were waiting for Russia to finally become Russia?

By now my jeans were completely soaked.

But what did wet jeans have to do with anything? Did they necessarily mean that I would ever find love in this strange place? — what if the rain were to bleach my passport? What would I do then? Yet despite my doubts here I was standing faithfully under a downpour. Here I was buying potatoes...!

The fallen water had collected at the top of a nearby hill and was sweeping down the street in swirling currents. On the other side of traffic a trolleybus splashed through a large pool of rain; bystanders on the sidewalk scurried to get out of its way.

...Although, to be honest, I had always preferred peanut butter to potatoes. And besides, warmth was a physical necessity whereas love was not — Just ask my mother and all her boyfriends. Just ask anyone with the same last name as me, my father for example. People say he seemed to love his second wife, but who knows if that was just because she was helping him die. And then there's Aunt Helen. She once said that she had never fallen in love — never even married. And she is the happiest person on the face of the earth...

The water was now dripping from the end of my nose onto the book. The printed words ran together like a stream of consciousness.

...That's right. But why didn't Aunt Helen ever marry? She hadn't been unattractive. Her last name was different from mine. Was she afraid? Or uninterested? Or then maybe it was because she didn't want anything to come between us...

But what could possibly come between us?

When I looked up a man was standing in front of me, slightly to the west. His hair was redder than his umbrella. *How long had he been standing there?* The man looked at me curiously and then said in broken English:

I'm sorry please...

How did he know to address me in English?

...Where do you from?

Amer. . . , I started to answer and then remembered myself: . . . Canada.
I'm from Canada.

The man did not smile. He looked at me and motioned to join him under the umbrella.

No thanks, I said.

He motioned again.

I'm okay, I said.

Again he motioned.

Really, I'm fine.

But your book. . . , and the man moved closer to me so that the dripping water would not fall on its pages.

I tried to smile awkwardly, but failed. Without thanking him I looked away.

The street was flooding. In the intersection across from us a car had stalled and a man was trying to push it out of traffic. The car, though small, was stuck in a low part of the street and each time the man pushed it forward the car would move a little, stop for an instant, and then roll back to where it had been before. The man tried again and again; and again and again it rolled back.

The redhead held the umbrella above me, his shoulders wet from the rain. But when I gestured for him to move the umbrella closer to himself he just shrugged off my suggestion, his politeness sliding from his shoulders and trickling onto the wet ground. We stood silently. He did not start a conversation and I was helplessly grateful to him for this.

Meanwhile, across from us in the intersection the man had completely given up on his car, leaving it to waterlog in the middle of the road.

I followed his retreating figure until it had disappeared over the hill. As I watched him the rain rapped on the fabric above me. Black clouds banged loudly against each other. And I wondered, *Is Love always this cold?*

(7)

Man (calmly): Did you know Pushkin was one-quarter African?

Me (wet): Who?

Man: Our great poet Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin.

Me: I'm sorry. I don't read poetry.

Man: You don't! Why not?
Me: In America nobody reads poetry.
Man: America?! But you said you were from Canada.
Me: Oh, yeah... but that was before I knew you.
Man: I don't understand?
Me: Now I know you and trust you...
Man: So?
Me: ...So that means that I am not from Canada.
Man: In other words you're not Canadian at all.
Me: That's right.
Man: But...?
Me: Sorry.

(There is a pause as the man spreads a piece of bread with peanut butter):

Man (chewing): Did you know that Daniil Kharms died in a mental hospital?
Me: I'm sorry... Daniil Who?
Man: Daniil Kharms, the popular children's author.
Me: Hmm... That's a strange name. Is he Russian?
Man: Yes.
Me: Well, that would explain it.
Man: What?
Me: Americans aren't real big on foreign literature.
Man: You're not?
Me: No, unfortunately they're not.
Man: Even *Russian* literature?
Me: *Even* Russian literature.

(There is another pause as the man takes a sip of lukewarm coffee):

Man: You have heard of Lev Tolstoy, haven't you?
Me: Of course. But I've never actually read anything by him.
In America...

Man: Excuse me for asking but what *do* you read... I mean in America, that is?

Me: I'm sorry?

Man: Do you read Theodore Dreiser?

Me: No.

Man: What about Jack London?

Me: No.

Man: O. Henry?!

Me: Never heard of him.

Man: !!!

Me: You see, the thing is that in America nobody reads...

Man: ...American literature?

Me: Right.

(The man takes out a filtered cigarette but does not light it. He seems lost in an important thought):

Man: Still, it's a damn shame....

Me: What is? About American literature?

Man: About the blacks. You really shouldn't have made them slaves.

(8)

At about twenty minutes to two, other people began showing up outside the store, jostling for position in line. A large woman with a newspaper on her head tried to step in front of me, but at the last moment the redhead said something to her and she fell in behind us.

While I had been standing there, the rain had turned even colder and my hands began to shake. My lips trembled as they silently repeated the most important Russian words I knew: *give me please four kilograms potatoes; give me please four kilograms potatoes; give me please four kilograms potatoes.*

At exactly two-fifteen the store's employees returned from their one-hour lunch break and the throng moved inside. Despite the redhead's umbrella, I was the wettest person in line and so I stepped toward the cashier, who had not invited me to do so.

Give me please four kilograms potatoes, I thought, *Give me please four kilograms potatoes*. When this was done I thought it once more and then repeated it a final time: *Give me please four kilograms potatoes. Give me please four kilograms potatoes*. Then I stepped forward:

Give me please...!

A heavy hand on my shoulder stopped me. I shuddered, but it was too late: the first list had appeared.

(9)

As it turned out, some people had been waiting in line when the store closed for lunch and before leaving they had drawn up a list with their names on it. These names would have to be first; in this country it was something between etiquette and law. Unable to understand this, I quickly stepped back...

...and bumped right into the woman holding the second list. These people had received some sort of special permission from some sort of special person to receive some sort of special privileges; this too eluded me. Yet I knew enough to again step back...

...only to feel my neck snap as I was shoved from behind by the large woman with a newspaper on her head. She was holding a third list which was long and wet; the name at the very top was *Inostranets-Kanadets*.

Standing toe-to-toe-toe, the three listholders argued amongst themselves, spurred on by the people whose names they fingered. Some were shouting. Others were yelling. The woman with a newspaper on her head shook her list angrily and pointed at me. In response the second listholder pointed angrily at the woman and shook his fist at me. The third woman, with her list in hand, shook one fist at the woman, the other fist at the man, and finding herself with no more fists to shake glared angrily at me. The people in line — the names in the lists — followed the argument with self-interest. Some pointed loudly at me. Others shook their fists. Everyone was either yelling or shouting but each of them was doing something angrily — and most of them were doing it at me.

The one exception had bright red hair and a faded red umbrella and somehow managed to stay composed, even as the tension rose. I myself was far less composed than confused, my mind struggling to focus on a single thought and that single thought was: *give me please four kilograms potatoes, give me please four kilograms potatoes*.

Then slowly and ominously the sound began to die down. One by one we all looked up from the lists to see that the cashier had settled into her seat behind the counter; she was straightening her hair and brushing off the front of her smock. Thick viscous veins burrowed in the skin of her neck like purple worms. We waited quietly. The room seemed to be suspended on the tips of her plump fingers. Sensing this, the cashier slowed her movements even more. Lazily she motioned for the first person to step forward.

The first person?

The line exploded. I was pushed into the man ahead of me, my face smashed against his shoulder blades. Order was lost. All three lists were now on the ground, muddied and torn by our trampling feet. People were pushing from all sides and I could barely breathe.

Instead, I wrenched my neck around and looked behind: the redhead was working to free his arm which had been pinned to his ribs by the crowd. Twisting and prying the man could not wrest it loose. His muscles strained. His face was flushed. He groaned but nothing gave. He strained but nothing moved.

My God would this place ever become Russia?

First came the arm. In one instant it just seemed to free itself. And when it was freed the man raised it to his face and wiped away a bead of sweat that had been trickling down his temple for many years.

What am I doing here? I don't even like potatoes. And I hate cigarette smoke!

These are the thoughts that might have crossed my mind if it hadn't been for the crowd which at that very moment swelled larger and larger and then dropped violently; I was thrown forward to the front of the line and like a wedding bouquet I sailed right at the scowling cashier, who upon seeing me held out her arms expectantly.

Potatoes. Love. Marlboro cigarettes. New Year's.

At that moment how far away it all seemed!

(10)

Let's say — stay with me here — let's say you have three children. They could be any age, but let's say they're six eight and eleven. Your children are curious and devoted and have their father's eyes, the blue eyes that you built a home around. The eyes that promised a family.

Home for you is a small apartment that you will never own: four people in two rooms that in the beginning seemed empty; then small; now cramped. Three times a year the apartment shrinks still further.

You had a husband once but he left. Or died. Or maybe both. Now he's gone and all that's left of him are the children, who are seven nine and twelve. The children and the ugly scars on the inside of your belly.

Remember how your future husband held you after the first operation? Remember how he sighed forgivingly and pressed his lips to your hand? Of course you do. It was so long ago but you remember everything.

You cried when he left. Or when he died.

But not for both.

At work the other employees talk quietly about you. *Poor thing!* they say, *No husband and three children ages eight ten and thirteen. Three children and no husband. And just when it seemed that she'd finally stopped crying... just when it looked like she'd finally forgotten him... this happens. As if these things weren't random at all. As if, like blood, they could coagulate in some but not in others... Poor, poor thing...!*

They say all this behind your back, of course. But on Tuesdays they let you hear.

At some point you stop caring. About the gossip. About the scars. About the years which have drowned your hopes and thickened your neck. And besides, who has the time to care when there's a birthday to get ready for — your eldest child is turning fourteen and you are having guests at your small apartment, the small apartment which, regrettably, has just grown larger.

In the corner of your bedroom is an old picture. The photo is black and white and shows two unsmiling people, a young man and a younger woman, also in black and white. One of them has since left, or has died; the other one is you holding a bouquet of gray flowers. Everything was so much clearer *there* which for you means *anywhere but here*. Things were so much better *then*, which for you means *any day but this one*.

And still, sometimes when you least expect it you see his eyes, the blue that is neither black nor white. The blue that has been forgotten a thousand times only to appear again in the strange hue of summer water and smuggled denim. It's as virtuous as virginity; as inevitable as an escalator; and, in the end, as hopeless as the blue gaze of your children who are curious and devoted and who have already turned ten and fifteen.

(11)

The cashier extended her arms as if I were a wedding bouquet.

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(12)

I offered the woman my money and asked her to give me please four kilograms potatoes. She was not impressed. Four kilograms potatoes, I repeated. Again she was not impressed. The woman looked at me blankly, the purple worms rising to the surface. Four kilograms. Give me please four kilograms potatoes... The woman glared at my words, her worms pressing against themselves. Potatoes four give me kilograms! I said again. Still no response. *Do something! Quick! Do something before she starts...!* Okay! Okay! I said to the worms, Give me *three* kilograms! But it was too late. They had blossomed like overfed capillaries; the woman began to shake the money in my face like a threat. She was shaking the money and yelling and pointing at an old wooden toy with beads on it. *But she wasn't yelling, she was screaming! And the toy wasn't a toy at all — it was an abacus!*

An abacus...?!

The woman yelled and screamed and when she could yell and scream no more, she began to shout. I stood shaking my head in confusion, trying to understand: *Was she yelling or was she screaming? Could it be that she was shouting?* I don't understand! I pleaded but by now the line was growling and surging behind me, around me; throbbing like a wound it was overtaking me.

I would lose my place in line. I was losing my place in line.

I had lost my place in line.

Was love worth all this grammar? At this point in my life the answer seemed to be no.

But then she stopped.

The redhead had made his way to the front of the line and was saying something to her. His voice was clear and confident. He spoke deliberately and when the cashier tried to interrupt, the man held up his hand calmly continuing his explanation until every last worm had retreated into the fleshy folds of her neck.

Standing there I watched the man speaking and heard the cashier listening. The crowd continued to move restlessly behind me.

But by now the worms had been buried.

The man held out his hand expectantly and the cashier, upon seeing this, set a piece of paper on the counter; the paper was approximately the length and width of a book of wet matches; it was lighter than potatoes. Expertly, the man picked up the piece of paper.

Why had she yelled at me? Why had she shouted?

I looked at the redhead for an explanation but he just shrugged his wet shoulders and with a sigh pronounced the first Russian words that I would ever understand with both heart and soul. As he spoke, clouds could be heard colliding in the distance, a piece of thunder snapped against itself like a red flag:

This isn't Canada! he said.

(13)

Pulling me aside, the man handed me the piece of paper and extended three freckled fingers so close to my nose that I could see the circles of wrinkled skin at the joints. As he spoke I stared at his spotted skin. *What did the fingers mean... three what?* Perhaps it was the time? Or his luckiest number? It could have been the amount of rubles that he had paid for my potatoes; or the amount of times I would have to stand in line each time I bought something green. It might have been the number of children that can fit in a small apartment; or adults in a small bed; or women named Tanya in a conversation that I cannot understand.

Really, it could have been any of these things — or every single one of them. All I knew was that the man was saying something very important, that his fingers were very freckled, and that in my hands I held a little piece of paper that weighed less but meant much more than just potatoes.

(14)

I was so grateful to the redhead I invited him to my apartment for coffee.

The man was my age. Old enough, he said, to have learned and forgotten English, respectively; and so we spoke in a mixture of both languages. Our conversation was awkward — more pauses than words, less grammar than desirable — but somehow we managed.

When it was time for him to leave I gave him the cigarettes. *All* of them.

The man thanked me but seemed embarrassed that the cartons would not fit in his arms. So I lent him my backpack to carry them in. On second thought, I told him, *Keep* the backpack — after all, what good is it if it's empty? At this the man shook his head and waved his arms in front of him. He did this so convincingly that I gave him a jar of peanut butter and stuffed a can of coffee into the backpack. The man seemed flustered. He began looking in his bag and after some time pulled out a head of cabbage that he had bought at the store. For you! he said. I accepted it with both hands. It's green, I said. The man seemed puzzled but agreed. I

smiled and thanked him. He thanked me back. I thanked him a second time. He thanked me a third. Thank you, I said. Thank *you!* he said.

This continued for several minutes.

Then it occurred to me: the German-English dictionary! The inscription had already been scratched out. Its pages were as thick and hard as ever. But to this the redhead was adamant: no, no, no, he said and I reluctantly put the dictionary back on the shelf next to the four solar calculators the size of credit cards.

I thanked him for remembering his umbrella. He thanked me for not giving him the German dictionary. I thanked him for knowing Russian. He thanked me for thanking him....

It was getting late.

Taking out a deck of cards that I had been using for solitaire, I wrote my phone number on the King of Clubs; he chose the Three of Diamonds.

We exchanged phone numbers. Logically, I put his card in my wallet. Inexplicably, he did the same. Then he thanked me one final time, raised his umbrella over his head, and left.

I had gotten rid of the Marlboro cigarettes!!! I had made my first Russian friend!! Perhaps this meant that Russia might actually become Russia! Perhaps I really would find love after all. And maybe... Just maybe...?

That night my heart raced. My soul flew.

But later, when I opened my wallet, it became clear as a clover that love and logic are equally inexplicable: Instead of the man's phone number I saw my own handwriting and, underneath it, the King of Clubs.

The man had tucked the Three of Diamonds into his wallet, and with it, his own phone number.

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