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Military&Criminal Melodrama

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http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=16855867
ISBN 9785447441739

Аннотация

The novel «I am your woman!» was written in Krasnodar and Moscow. It is about the fate of modern military men. On the background of disorder there develop such social diseases as bribery, corruption. Honesty of main heroes – Dasha Sviridenko and Alexander Garov – draws them closer to each other in this chaos. They try to understand if they really love each other. But their feelings are so timid and unprotected that Dasha and Sasha are at a loss for they can't overcome other people's «interests».

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I am your woman! Military&Criminal Melodrama

Julia Rudenko

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Woman between the lines

One more book about love. One more pretender to become a new «Robsky» or «Dontsova». But we‘ve got plenty of them, haven’t we? Writing ambitiously about everything and nothing at the same time. Young, trying to imitate the «sharks» of the genre… But they don’t differ from each other… This idea occurred to me when I took a manuscript by an author unknown to me with a bold title «I am your woman!». It was obvious the debut woman writer threw down a challenge to men readers. It‘s seen with the naked eye. But what was that challenge? I wondered if she would be able to attract readers’ attention during the whole book.

I read the first part and realized: Yulia is a complicated nature with delicate feelings, who uses grotesque forms of describing man’s character and allegories of justice skillfully. You can find everything in this novel: the Chechen war, Love, «werewolves in epaulets», but the main peculiarity of Yulia Rudenko’s prose is that she made me, sate and «spoilt» with new books, see, feel, read the dramatism of human relations between the lines. This conflict – the collision of different life positions, how to act in extreme situations – is that very challenge.

The main heroine of the novel is endowed by the author with the idea of struggle for her love. She is not a business-lady, about whom they’re writing now, she is not a superstar. Dasha

Sviridenko is a young mother, who fell in love by chance, being married. The girl is tormented with doubts if she must preserve their family for the sake of her son. But Life puts everything and everyone on its places. Simple as it may seem…

But… I don't want to retell the plot. There are a lot of things in it you should think over yourself. I can see a serious background in comic army episodes and in wild outburst of those who got enormous power. And behind this naturalism there is a strong woman writer who can get to the most hard-hearted man reader with her talent. The novel «I am your woman!» is a courageous attempt to change the world that is falling into the precipice rapidly.

Tatiana Solovyova, writer

For those whom the gods love, unhappiness turn into a blessing.

Leonardo da Vinci

Part I

Chapter 1

Moscow recovered from its long sleep. The first sunbeams fell on the Baikal Hotel. It was a September Sunday in 1995, and the weather seemed to be mild that day. Andrey Malcovich lay on his bed in one of the deluxe suites, clasping the pillow with his hands and pressing it down himself, and smacked with his lips in a childish manner. When the sunbeams touched his face he opened his eyes, turned around reluctantly and looked at the digital clock. Six minutes were left till the ringing of his alarm-clock.

It was quiet in the room and outside. Andrey closed his eyes again and made an attempt to return to the magic world of his night visions. «Well, What was your name, you, night enchantress, the girl from my dream?» – he thought. Then Andrey Malcovich remembered he had fallen asleep during the TV-show dedicated to Mata Hari, the beautiful dancer from the early XX century. And his brain gave in to the television wave. This amazing image from the past penetrated into Andrey's subconsciousness and was still there. The contours of a naked girl were wrapped around with mist. She was standing on top of a rock and stretched her arms to Andrey. He came closer

without any word. Coiling around him like a snake, with all her entity, she awakened his desire. The dawn coolness was spilt in the air.

Suddenly there was no air to breathe any more… The thick mist beset him like a ring. Her lips were like fire. Andrey felt as if her heart itself had penetrated under his skin and was beating there. Just a gulp of fresh air he needed now! He tried to release himself. The girl stepped backward and vanished. Andrey was alone. That horrible silence again. And it was before. But now Malcovich felt that silence, he even heard it! The sense that he had lost something forever made his heart shrink and freeze for a while.

He could hardly make a single step forward. And then he felt himself falling down the precipice.

His strong and sunburnt body lay still and stretched on the bed. His Blanket slipped down on the floor. So Andrey woke up. It was high time for him to be off.

Half an hour later, after handing in the keys to a charming receptionist girl, Andrey inserted a plastic card into the door-slot so that to leave the floor. But behind the door he saw two ugly guys. They asked him rudely to insert the card once more and let them in.

Still imagining the young receptionist's eyes full of innocence, Andrey went straight to the elevator. But all of a sudden the ugly guys blocked his way, and Andrey noticed one of them taking something out of his bosom harshly. «It must be a gun» – he

thought. It scared Andrey. But he reacted instantly hitting the first at his jaw and right after that kicking the second's belly with his right knee.

It was enough to overcome them. They were lying on the floor. Andrey looked under the edge of the first bully's jacket. Well, he wasn't mistaken: the bully had a gun on him. So Andrey took the gun, put it into the pocket of his leather jacket and without waiting for the lift coming jumped over the fallen and ran downstairs clutching the rail.

On the ground floor Andrey stopped for a while, breathed away and went up to the exit. Then as if by chance he stopped at the security guard's desk and made a thoughtful remark:

– The last sunny days we are having! – and, squinting a bit, andrey leaned to the sentinel's face and whispered:

– On the eighth floor I was attacked by two bastards. Tried to get in. Perhaps, they're armed.

Before the guard could ask anything Malcovich started to the door. The automatic doors slid apart noiselessly and closed up behind his back.

The sturdy guard hurried to the telephone to call the militia.

Fifteen minutes later four militia officers convoyed those two bandits in handcuffs, and Malcovich, the former navy captain, sitting in his silvery Buick, drove away from the parking lot. He was on the way to a city where he could make a packet of money, the city that was a real gold-mine. Grozny was its name.

Chapter 2

– Well, it's beyond my comprehension! I simply can't understand it! There shouldn't be any foolhardy daring of yours in our life. We've just married and now you are eager to leave me and commit exploits at the world's end. Normal people marry, bear children, bring them up…

– That's it! Bring them up as they were brought up a long time ago. And it is not a good way. If we are always hiding and being afraid of modern life whatever cruel it is just imagine who our children will become! For God's sake, I'm going to work, not to make exploits as you say! I finished a military school. That's my profession! You knew quite well who you'd marry.

– But it never occurred to me you would choose Chechnya!

The quarrel in the Garov family seemed to become serious. If Larisa Ivanovna, the young officer's mother, hadn't interfered God knows what would have happened.

– Please, Lera, do come down! Sasha* is not a little boy! He'll just go there and see if it's so dangerous as they say. Maybe, the devil is not so terrible as he is painted as the proverb says. Besides, he can earn a lot of money as others do. Then you'll save money to buy a flat. Then a new car. And live happily.

– Larisa Ivanovna, my parents told me they'd begun to build a house for us! We are not so poor that Sasha should go to the world's end to get money, are we? And risk his life! He can be

killed there!

Alex* was offended by his wife's remark. He felt uneasy that Lera's* parents were richer than him and occupied high posts. And his mother, a simple accountant, brought him up by herself. He wished Valeria had never mentioned their poverty.

– Let's stop it! I've made up my mind to go. That's final! – said Alex abruptly and rushed out of the room shutting the door.

Larisa Ivanovna stood up from the chair with a sigh:

– It's time to warm up the cutlets. And the ducks need some grass. – she said and left the room too.

Valeria was alone. She didn't want to do anything, to argue with them any more. All her words are of no use. Maybe she is a square peg in the round hole here? But why on earth did he marry her? Not Katya? Not Glasha? Not someone else? He is so handsome and attractive! He could have chosen any girl he wanted. All the chicks in the street «re dreeming of him.

But Sasha preferred her, Lera Lavrova, a tutor in the kindergarten. Yes, she is not very pretty. But rather well-off, thanks to her parents. She could live as she wanted. Not worry about the future.

How wonderful their love-affair began! Lera leaned the back of her armchair and recalled how they'd met first.

It was a Sunday evening in summer. She was returning from the sea-side in her Opel. He, being a last-year cadet, was on the way home for summer holidays. So he was hitchhiking on the road, at the outskirts of Krasnodar.

Lera stopped her car beside him. Alex opened the door, flopped down onto the seat and began kidding:

– Nice to meet you! My name is Alex. Alex the Hijacker. Hijacker and car-stealer. And what's your name, you, wonderful owner of a not less wonderful car?

– …Va-le-ria, – Lera answered in syllables, drawling the vowels, and pushed the gas and clutch pedals gently, without any fuss.

Shifting the gear she hit Alex with her elbow by chance. The latter didn't lose his head and put his hand on hers:

– Can I help you?

Lera moved aside slightly but the guy took off his hand at once:

– Well, I only wanted to help you. Don't think wrong of me. – Sasha said and stared at her.

Lera turned her eyes to the highway in front of her. Hardly overcoming nervous strain that seized her, she continued driving. Lera felt she was blushing and tried to break that strange, uncouth silence:

– By the way, where are you going? – she asked Sasha.

– To the stanitsa** of Dinskaya. And may I ask you a question? Where from and where to are you going now? You, such a beautiful, young and brave Amazon?

Lera was taken aback again. She tried to speak of the sea-surf, but everything mixed in her head. Alex saw it. And he was pleased. He was so pleasedwith his newly-invented image

of a hijacker and seducer that suddenly he whispered right into her ear:

– Lera, dear, please relax! Or you'll skid but I want to live…

And then Valeria suddenly pulled the brakes. At that moment she wanted only one thing – to get rid of this impudent passenger. But at the same time she was pleased with his courting.

– Please… – but Alex didn't let her finish.

He nearly bumped against the windscreen but turned harshly and caught Lera by her shoulder, pulled her to himself and kissed. She couldn't resist.

She remembered trying to protect her virginity: «We can't do it! We've just met… know each other for a couple of minutes». But this attempt was too weak. Alex put his hand lower and lower. Her breasts betrayed her and made her moan…

*Alex, Sasha, Sanyok – diminutive for Alexander, Lera – that for Valeria.

**Stanitsa – a Cossack village.

Chapter 3

Somebody was knocking at the door and shouting:

– Comrade Major! Comrade Major! Please, open the door!

– Private Glushko, fuck off! – major Smirnov bawled from inside.

– To you… A kind of… your wife or so has come!

The door opened half. Major Smirnov, scared, wrapping his naked body with a towel mumbled:

– Did you really see her?

Glushko who was not the least frightened lost the gift of speech completely when he saw the major's hairy chest. So he just nodded.

– And where is she?

Glushko waved his hand towards the commandant's office:

– Th-th-ere…

– Where?! In the office? Speak out!

Then Glushko began to mutter:

– There… A car stopped… A blue one… Or not. Not know… Forgot… A woman get off. Very pretty! Good heavens! Ryzhov said: «Such pretty things're driving to and fro in their cars in Grozny like at home». That's what he said! And she came up to us. Ryzhov also said to me: «Big tits!».

– Shut up! Or I'll show you! Big tits!

– Comrade major. Please don't punish Ryzhov! He didn't

mean anything bad.

He didn't know she's your wife. But if you beat him He'll guess… And he'll kill me!

– OK, come down! But where is Svetka* now? I hope she isn't here, is she? – Smirnov leaned over Glushko's shoulder examining an empty corridor in one of the hostels of the Northern Airport.

– She is… Ryzhov saw her to the office. He said: «So you'll have to wait a little. Major Smirnov is on a secret commission.

– Ugh… Well, Ryzhov's a brick! Now Glushko, stand at the hostel door and don't let Svetka here while I'm dressing. Clear? Repeat!

Pleased with such trust private Glushko stood straight and said distinctly: «Stand at the hostel door and not let Svetka in!».

– That's a good boy! But Svetlana Vladimirovna for you. Go away. You're free!

Glushko went to the exit.

– But don't tell her it was my order!

– Yes, sir. Not tell.

– Because I know you well! – grumbled the major, closed the sauna door and entered the sweating-room. – Now dress! That's all! Had a good time together! Wife's come!

Ensign Lyubov Antonova said lazily:

– I heard. You go alone. I'd rather sweat out a bit.

– As you like, – Smirnov pulled up his trousers quickly.

Five minutes later Smirnov knocked at the door of one of the

rooms opposite to the exit. Before anyone inside could answer, he pushed the handle and opened the door.

There was nobody inside. Smirnov came up to the window and opened it. Then he got out of the window. High and dense grass hid him up to the waist. Smirnov walked for five meters, then he bent and put his hands on the dusty road. Smirnov thrust his hands into his wet hair, tousled and sleeked it slightly.

– Now it's alright! – he thought. Smirnov scrutinized his camouflage uniform slowly and rubbed the trousers with his dusty hands.

Major Smirnov bent around the two-storey hostel and went impetuously towards the commandant's office. Ten meters near it, a lonely figure of private Glushko, scrawny and small.

The major cried:

– Private Glushko! Doing nothing as usual?! Go and put yourself in order at once! Wash! Wash and press your outfit! Clean your gun! Be ready by tomorrow! You'll go with me, to follow the column to Khankala!

– Me… to Khankala?! – Glushko gasped.

While the soldier was trying to understand what to do first, Major Smirnov entered the commandant's office, round and low.

– Wow! Svetlana? It's you! Or am I dreaming? Where from? With whom are our children?

*Svetka – diminutive and familiar for Svetlana.

Chapter 4

Hardly had Malcovich passed Mozdok in his Buick when he was stopped. With their AKMs atilt two patrol soldiers came to the car at the distance of a stretched arm:

– Get off!

Malcovich was about to show them his inefficacious certificate of the navy captain, but those guys didn't let him do so. Drawing a bead on him at once, one of them repeated:

– Get off!

«Oh, God, for what sins? Do help me, please!» – Malcovich thought.

– Hands on the hood! Feet astride! – one of the soldiers started probing Andrei's jacket.

He took out his passport, certificate and wallet:

– Andrei Andreievich Malcovich. Born in 1966 in Volgograd. Single. No children. – the soldier read aloud the passport data.

Then opened the military certificate, but read it to himself. After thinking a bit the soldier said:

– Comrade Captain, excuse us for the delay. You may be free!

«Good heavens! They could have let me go before! Thanks, God!» – Malcovich thought.

And then when Malcovich sat behind the wheel and turned the ignition key the second soldier offered him as if reluctantly:

– Do you mind opening the trunk? Just a formality. Just to be

sure. And you may go further.

Malcovich left his fingers on the key for a while. Slowly, with dignity he turned his head towards the car-window and asked:

– What?

– Open the trunk I said! – repeated the patrol soldier.

«Good Lord! What bad have I done?!» – a desperate thought flashed by in Andrei's head.

Humming the tune of «There is an isle of Bad Luck in the ocean», Andrei switched off the ignition, put out the key, opened the door and said rapidly:

– Well, kids! Let's arrange it! I'll pay! 500 to each! I'm in a hurry you know! They stop and check me at every post! I'm exhausted to open and close it all the time! One and the same everywhere! I've lost half an hour here. I was to be in Vedeno yesterday. So what shall we do? – Malcovich tried to take out his wallet. The second patrol soldier got on the alert.

– Take off your money! Open!

Malcovich heaved a sigh and started opening the trunk… Yawning the patrol soldier wanted to close his mouth with his hand to be decent, but suddenly whistled out and cried to his friend:

– Oh, Vasya! Here's an arsenal! Guns of all kinds! Just look!

While the patrol soldier was going to Andrei's car, thoughts were whirling around in his head. Andrei was unable to concentrate on anything.

– OK, I'll tell you though I mustn't. These arms are for the

commandant's office of the Northern airport. You know our guys are killed and the Chechens «re grabbing our arms as a trophy. The detachment commanders are in trouble. The office lacks a whale of arms! But it's useless to explain to those fat-assed generals in Moscow and Rostov that we are losing arms in battle. In battle I say! So I'm going to save my old friends – to refill the arsenal to cut it short!

– This tale will be good for your lawyer, Captain! In court! And then we are surprised why the militants have Russian arms! – said that Vasya and spit scornfully on the move. He convoyed Malcovich to the post cabin, to call the militia from Mozdok, «for detaining an offender».

Chapter 5

Nevertheless Lieutenant Garov, 23 years of age, left his native stanitsa. «Maybe, my wife will understand me, – he thought sitting on a pile of rolled canvas tents near a porthole of the plane „Rostov – Grozny“, – Anyway, other officers' wives share life with their husbands. They have to travel with them and put up with their duties, don't they?».

– Oh, young lieutenant! Flying for the first time? – a tender-hearted old man near him cried out.

– Yes, first, – Alex nodded.

– Want some water? I have some mineral water left. Have a drink?!

– No, thanks. I have myself. – Alex shouted in response and half closed his eyes as if he were dosing…

When in that Lera's Opel he took her passionately, even violently he couldn't imagine he would be her first man. Just think: a young lady drives along the deserted highway, then picks up a stranger and – what's more! – is ready to give in to him… Alex wouldn't have remembered her the next morning if he hadn't discovered some blood on his trunks taking a shower and hadn't compared this with Lera's cry «Oh, it hurts!» when she lost her virginity.

– Mum! Do you know the Lavrovs?

– Of course I know! Everybody knows them! He is a market

director, and she is the Chief public prosecutor.

– Oh, God! What I've done!

– What's wrong, my boy? – Mother didn't hear her son's exclamation for the water was running in the shower cabin.

– Nothing special!.. Mum, I'm hungry! Awfully hungry!

The next evening he was waiting for Lera near the kindergarten. When she appeared the last beam of sunset fell right on his face. So he screwed his eyes a bit:

– Hello!

Suddenly Lera spoke in a manly voice:

– Kid, wake up! Wake up! We've just arrived. The flight is over.

Alex moved abruptly and opened his eyes. The warm-hearted old man was over him:

– We've come I say. Had a nap? Well, don't hurry. We have a lot of time to disembark. They won't take you back on board. They'll fly back only tomorrow. With the dead. Here – with alive, back – with dead. Alive and dead. As the title of that novel. By the way, who's the author of it? Some Russian chap… Ugh… I forgot. Slipped my mind. Oh, my cabbage head! Don't you remember, lieutenant? – The old man was smiling.

Garov was ready to hit him at the jaw. He clinched his fists, but the old man noticed that and changed his face and tone.

– Please, don't be angry for my words, – he said. – Neither you nor I want death and war. Neither you nor I started killing people. Others began that war – those who drive in luxurious cars

and sit in cozy armchairs. They don't see any blood, any grief, they're just getting money. But it's always not enough for them. They don't care a straw who is me and who is you! Their fat life is the only thing they care! They're not at war like Napoleon. Alas, guys like you are merely cannon fodder. Ad you'll go to make exploits! What for? For their benefit?!

Alex couldn't deny it. He was listening to the old man gloomily. He undid and clenched his fists.

The old man stopped speaking for some time, then continued in a quiet voice:

– I met Nino, my future wife on the 9th of May. Then it became a Victory day you know. She was just a girl. She left school and was going to enter the institute. But the war began. I was in a trench near Stalingrad in 1942 when I got a small parcel. Many soldiers got such parcels. So I opened it and saw a pair of knitted woolen socks. There was a photo and a small triangle letter in one of them… Our women in the rear gathered what they could for the parcels and sent them to the front line. It was Nino who' d knitted the socks. Besides, she looked ahead: she would marry the man who would get those socks. She told me that later when our son was one… Then I looked at her photo – a smiling pretty girl she was. That photo touched my heartstrings. I recalled my dear home, cosy and warm. So I read her letter, learned what her name was. As it turned out, we'd lived in the same street in Grozny before the war. Strange as it may seem, the war helped me to find my love. So I answered her. We wrote

to each other till the victory. In April, 45 I got wounded and was taken to hospital. Was discharged on the 1st of May, could walk on crutches only. Was sent back home. Nino came to meet me at the railway station, brought me a bouquet of tulips. In a year our son was born.

The old man paused. Then he continued his story:

– Nino died. But I live. Son died. But I live. Truly, I died too… We didn't want to leave Grozny. But everyone left. Nino and I stayed alone. On the 2nd floor. We, old people, can't look for a new home, wander from one flat to another. So as we thought it was high time for us to go to the better world. We had lived together for ages – so we would die together as well. As I thought. But it wasn't so… I went away for half an hour …And it began: helicopters, fire, enemies… I saw our house crash down. It was exploded. When I was leaving Nino said: «I'll have a rest, wait for you and then feed Vas'ka. Vas'ka is our cat. As you see she didn't feed him.

Alex couldn't help asking:

– And your son?

– My sonny died in the air-crash. He was a pilot. Now I'm coming back from my daughter-in-law. She lives in Rostov, with my granddaughter. She asked me to stay, but I can't stay, Can't live without Nino. It's all the same for me – to die. Better to be buried near her.

– You two, get off! You can talk outside! – someone said.

Chapter 6

The officers of the commandant's office met Sasha Garov friendly. Major Smirnov called him just Garik and offered him to follow a provision pack to Khankala.

– I'd love to! – Sasha answered with great alacrity. – When do we start?

– Oh, not so fast! Steady on! Not today but tomorrow! Major Smirnov squinting a little looked straight into Garov's eyes.

But meeting the same sight, sharp and steady Smirnov turned aside and bawled:

– Glushko!

Private Glushko came in a great hurry. Hearing his commander's voice he'd run out of a wooden john, fastening his fly on the run. So he got to the office quicker than fastened all the buttons on his trousers.

Major Smirnov couldn't help mocking at Glushko:

– So you see, lieutenant, – he said to Garov, – what blockheads I have to rule?

– Comrade Major!.. – Glushko tried to clear himself.

Then he got abashed and turned red.

– Well, come down, Private Glushko! Clasp the last button! Stand up properly! Now tell me and Lieutenant Garov how the detained militants feel.

Glushko set straight his shirt, pants and belt, then straightened

up at full length. After short silence he cried out as if dashing on the embrasure:

– Comrade Major! Let me speak! The two militants detained by you yesterday are in the cellar quietly. But not because they are always quite. I gather they are weak after you taught them a lesson so to say last night. So they're still lying, bleeding. Sometimes they say: «Bitches, Bastards all the same tear them all!»

– Hey, and you? Sitting above them and listening to their trash with pleasure?! – Smirnov frowned. – You'd better read books! There's some truth in them sometimes! What's the book you like by the way?

The soldier thought for a moment and said:

– «Three bears».

Garov burst out laughing and turned aside pretending he was coughing. But Major Smirnov continued seriously:

– What?! Is it a fairy-tale or so?! You like tales, don't you? Tales are a good thing anyway. But what's the latest book you read, Glushko?

Glushko was a bit confused, thought again and uttered:

– «Three bears».

Garov was half laughing, half coughing louder and louder. He was choking with laughter. Smirnov threw a glance at him, smiled slightly and said pretending to be serious:

– Glushko! Your silly answers made lieutenant Garov choke. Think of what your speak! You're nineteen, aren't you?

– Yes, sir!

– You couldn't have read books last in the 3rd form?

– Oh no, – Glushko smiled. – It's under my pillow. I read it before sleep.

– What… read? This tale? – Smirnov was stunned.

Garov was unable to hold back and now was laughing boisterously. Glushko looking at Garov and laughing Smirnov really didn't grasp what was going on. Turning redder than he he'd been with his fly he tried to understand what he'd said wrong.

– Comrade Major! I've told you the truth but you…

– Glush-ko!.. Did you read «Ryaba the Hen» for example? – Smirnov said stammering with laughter – I'll give it to you to read! Very in-te-res-sting!

Then ensign Merdyev entered the office carrying a large bag:

– Laughing? Glushko said something stupid again?

Smirnov still choking with laughter asked Merdyev:

– Lyokha! Did you read a Russian folk tale «Three bears»?! Ha-ha-ha! Glushko recommends us reading it! A good book – a bestseller – he says. It's a handbook for him! Like the Bible!

Merdyev putting the food from his bag into the fridge cast a glance at Glushko:

– «Three bears» is an excellent tale! My mum read it to me! It's not so absurd! But it's bad Glushko doesn't read other books. Romka, would you like «War and peace», the first volume? Once I found it in an empty flat in Grozny. «Perhaps, it'll come in handy!», – I thought. OK?

– OK, – muttered Glushko frowning.

Hearing them laughing Svetlana, Smirnov's wife, came out of the next room:

– Stop mocking at this laddie!

– Who is a laddie here?! – the Major asked sharply. – Glushko is a soldier on duty. He defends his Motherland and hence his mother and his village Glushkino. As a real soldier and citizen he must know about his country, its national heroes and its best writers as well. He is a man-of-war like those militants in the cellar who cry «tear you, bastards!». Or he is different because he reads «Three bears»? And if the Chechens attack us right now, will he jump off the window and run to mummy like Masha from this tale?! I hope he won't! – Smirnov grinned scornfully.

Meanwhile they heard a tumult of explosion not far from them. After the explosion there came a cross-fire. Smirnov turned around, seized his tommy-gun from the bed and dashed to the door pushing away Glushko. Then he looked back on the move:

– Garov? Are you with me?!

– Yes, yes! – Alex seized a tommy-gun too and followed Smirnov.

– And I? – What I should do? – Glushko's voice came out of the office.

– Read «War and peace»! – Smirnov's voice echoed.

– Just a moment! I'll give you the book! – Merdyev said. He was pottering with the food he'd brought.

– Where are these pretty cakes and pelmens from? – asked Svetlana. – Is there a shop nearby?

– Of course not. – Merdyev said smiling. – The point is the Chechens try to earn their living in some or other way. That's why they set a market in the airport. When I see them I ask: «Where's your license? No license? Get off!». So they give me packets with food to stay there. That's all!

Then to Glushko:

– Here's the book for you!

Ensign Merdyev took the book by Tolstoy out of the mattress and gave it to Glushko.

Chapter 7

The rhythm of time came out of the hospital staff lounge distinctly and monotonously. The ward-door was ajar. Dasha Sviridenko hated the rest-time since childhood, since her mother had to take her out of the day-nursery because she was constantly ill. She wasn't asleep alone in the ward. She tried to plan beforehand the forthcoming mysterious event – the sacrament of the childbirth. Sometimes she took her knitting-needles – the panties were nearly ready.

The clock struck four, when the bottom of her stomach became unusually wet. There was no pain but Dasha got frightened. Perhaps her child was eager to be born. Dasha didn't dare to wake up any of her ward-mates. She stood up in silence and hurried to the exit. According to her calculations there were 2 days left before the supposed date of confinement. An obstetrician nurse examined her lying in the armchair and shook her head:

– The amniotic fluid has gone. So you'll bear drily.

To bear normally, without a Cesarean section was impossible for Dasha. 13 hours later Dasha exhausted by birth pangs and nearly unconscious was shown to the surgery. A medical brigade was sent for. Tatyana, a reanimation nurse who used to be Dasha's classmate came up to her, tortured by numerous injections, and whispered tenderly:

– A good doctor will operate you! I told him: «Don't cut our beauty too much!

Tatyana smiled and stepped aside.

– Well, where is your little vein? Do make a fist! – the anaesthesiologist said to Dasha flirting with one of the nurses. Almost all in the surgery knew they were lovers. Dasha also knew that. So it was nice for her to fall asleep surrounded with the fluids of secret love floating over her. She closed her eyes. The anaesthesiologist's last words: «Dasha, count up to 10!» – sounded as if in the microphone, then dissolved like an echo in the mountains. She was smiling full of trust towards the doctor.The she fell asleep…

Though Cadet Sviridenko was preparing himself to the forthcoming change in his life, the telegram about it was all of a sudden for him. It came like a bolt from the blue. He was shocked. What to do? Where to go? What to speak and to whom? «Son born.» His son was born. HE… HAS …A SON!!! No! – can it be? Maybe it's just a mistake. Is it real? Maybe, it's merely a dream. Perhaps, some other man became a father. SON! He is a father now, isn't he? What does it mean – father? What does it mean – son? It happens time and again. But could it happen with him. At that moment he was eager to be a free poet, to die young like Pushkin? And now he has a son! It's time to write a cradle song – that's what he must do! He went to the company commander. An hour later Cadet Sviridenko got a leave warrant for a day.

Arriving in Rostov, he headed for the local maternity hospital. But he wasn't allowed to his wife. He wrote her a message and went to his mother-in-law. She cried nervously at him: «You'd better buy flowers! Daddy!».

Then he was silent – Dasha's mother was calling the shots around:

– Wash your hands! Change!

He was exhausted by her commands completely. Why doesn't she realize? His son was born! He became a father! Not she!

When she was ironing diapers hurriedly to carry them to the maternity hospital as soon as possible and asked him to do something again he threw on his jacket and was off. Cadet Sviridenko spent a night under the hospital windows. The words of a cradle song occurred to him. He wrote them down on a sheet of paper.

In the morning he returned to his military school. «I have a son!».

Chapter 8

Malcovich met Major Smirnov during the Afghan war. But he wasn't sure if he could rely on him. Nevertheless, Malcovich couldn't invent anything better. So Andrei phoned his old chum and told him what had happened. Asked him to appear in court in Mozdok as a witness.

After that Smirnov grew very gloomy, as black as thunder. Well, a pretty kettle of fish! Malcovich lived easier. Neither wife nor children! Free as a bird. But Smirnov couldn't afford risking. Malcovich was in the soup now, Smirnov could be as well. Smirnov has a whale of problems himself. Everybody is stealing arms now, concealing and transporting illegally! But it was absolutely idiotic of Malcovich to be caught in such a way. «Well, Malcovich, Malcovich, a smart man! But sometimes a silly ass!».

Garov noticed at once Smirnov get grim.

– What's wrong?

– Of course, all is wrong! That bloody Malcovich, damn it! «Carrying arms to the commandant's office!» – He dared say so in the militia! Couldn't invent anything better? «Smirnov, do come and help me, please! I beg you! Save me! I'll remember it forever! If we sell the arms we'll share the money fifty-fifty». Fico to him! And if I don't go what's then?!

– Don't worry, Major! Is it impossible to say in court

Malcovich was really transporting the arms to us?!

– So you'll tell it, won't you?! Right? Bloody genius you are! The cleverest man I've ever seen! Don't be silly! – Smirnov was walking to and fro, took things and put them back. He couldn't concentrate. At last he sat by Garov with his hands upon his knees. – OK. Perhaps you are right. You will go to Mozdoc. Tomorrow.

It was a turning point in Garov's life. MALCOVICH NEVER FORGOT THOSE WHO ONCE HELPED HIM…

Malcovich and Garov came back from Mozdok to the Northern airport together. Malcovich's joy was exuberant. Garov was happy too that their affair came off.

Their optimism was quite contagious. A bottle of Stolichnaya appeared by itself on the table in the commandant's office. Then came red caviar, balyk (salted fish) and lard. Svetlana laid the table with great energy. She cut the bread, then found wineglasses somewhere – perhaps, asked the hostel lodgers.

So the whole company sat at a festive table. Of course, one of the toasts was in honour of the deceased soldiers and officers. Then kept silent in respect. Then talked a bit.

Two officers' wives, or the dekabrists' wives as they were called here, came on the sly from the hostel and joined the company.

Malcovich was eloquent and fascinated everybody. Another bottle of vodka came, then a third one. And at 3 – «the dekabrists» themselves…

Then it turned out one of the officer's wives was absent. And Malcovich vanished too. So her husband – company lieutenant Puzanov – went to his room in the hostel so that to tell his beloved wife – a blonde with the looks of Monroe – that he'd arrived. But He didn't find her in bed sleeping sweetly. Puzanov decided to rejoin the company.

On his way he wanted to piss. At first he was about to do it outdoors but then changed his mind and turned right in the long corridor…

Then he wished he had left the hostel!

But the devil or so made him enter the john with the letter «M» on the door. Opening that damned door he saw a broad man's back that enclosed the window. Two naked legs embraced the back. The broad-backed man was breathing frequently. His trousers fell lower and lower for he was moving in rhythm.

Puzanov got interested in all this. He wasn't modest or tactful at all. He didn't leave the john., but entered the cabin and made a piss. Then he heard the woman's orgastic moan. Puzanov was amused with it. He went out of the cabin in high spirits. Puzanov was going to tell those at the festive table about the picant scene.

The door slammed behind his back… And Puzanov stood petrified.

A handbag! A handbag lay on the floor! No woman in the hostel had it but his wife! He had bought it for her in a boutique in St.Petersburg! Oh, shit! So it was she – there, in the john, on the dirty window-sill, with naked legs around the broad back!

Puzanov was struck by cruel truth. «Bloody bitch!» – he thought. «Bitch!» – he said aloud. «Bitch!» – he cried at the top of his voice. Puzanov opened the john door, came up to his wife who was dressing. And not seeing Malcovich Puzanov said to her face: «You bitch!» Then he turned on his heels and rushed to the commandant's office.

The next morning everybody knew about the night event. Puzanov complained his friend Nikishov. Then Nikishov was discussing with Ryzhov with great gusto what Puzanov had to do, then told carelessly to his wife about the whole affair, but ordered her strictly not to divulge the secret. She swore on her honour but to be friends with Verka is much more important.

So it began. The rumours spread around. Verka told Tan'ka, Tan'ka told her husband… The Puzanovs were quite encircled with gossips. But Puzanov didn't put up with the role of a cuckolded. Once he gave a lift to the commandant's secretary – a long-legged Oksana… He took her right in the car, summersaulting, for five times or a bit more. Again he told Nikishov – now about his success. Nikishov – to Ryzhov. Rumours again. But the Puzanovs didn't divorce.

Chapter 9

Dasha recovered of a heart-rending woman's shriek next door. Looked around. On the cot near her there lay a man.Some ugly yellow liquid was pouring down in the pipe coming out of his blankets right into the bucket. Dasha touched carefully her belly under the blanket. It was even again! A cold hot-water bottle below. But higher?! Nor bandage, nor plaster. How were they taking her baby out? Oh, god! What's with him? With her son? Or daughter? She was afraid to ask anyone. Truly, there was no one to ask.

It was dark outside – so it was night. It began dripping under the bed. Dasha managed only to lift her blanket a bit. As she saw there was also a pipe descending from her body into the bucket as that from the man nearby.

Then a nurse with a syringe in her hand entered the ward. She rolled back the brim of Dasha's blanket and rubbed her leg a little higher the knee with a piece of cotton wool. Then she made an injection. Dasha gave a short cry.

The nurse went out. Dasha had no time to ask about her baby. It was the anaesthesiologist who told Dasha about her child. He came to see his patient in the morning. Before Dasha saw her baby, red and wrinkled, the obstetrician started massaging her breasts. Her cold hands went lower and lower, and she crumpled so strong as if she wasn't a human being at all but just a big piece

of dough. And it was a bit humiliating. Indeed, Dasha felt herself a sort of dough, an orange being squeezed. It hurt very much, but she had no desire to cry. She restrained herself.

– Put on a gown and go to the maternity section, – the nurse said when leaving.

On her way out of the reanimation Dasha touched the lower part of her belly. The ex-class-mate didn't cheat her: the surgeon made a tiny horizontal cut.

The space that drew her together with her husband, mum, girl-friends widened immensely when she put her baby – that clod of blankets and diapers – closer to her bright-red nipples. The child sucked them greedily, sipped milk stronger and stronger. At last he was sate.

«My darling! I don't let anyone offend you».

A cockroach ran across the bed near Dasha. So she didn't switch off the light so that the insects didn't alarm her baby.

Chapter 10

It seemed Malcovich would be always lucky. Next morning he, Smirnov and Garov managed to sell the arms. Smirnov striked it off the register as unfit. Malcovich promised his friends to open an account in a bank for each of them and put a biggish sum to each.

– Garik, do you have children?

– No, just married.

– Where's your wife? Why didn't you take her here?

– To this rat-place?! Besides, she can't leave her job —she won't find any then, – said Sasha sorrowfully.

Rats as if hearing they were told of began rustling at the round walls of the commandant's office. One of them got out of the hole and smelled the air. Perhaps, it felt the scent of fried cutlets cooked by Svetlana on a small electric stove a little bit earlier. Smirnov took off his gin as quietly as he could and shot. Yes, he hit it. A minute later, a huge black smooth dog D… har came and carried away the killed rat. Smirnov blew into the gun's muzzle in a film-like manner and put it aside:

– Garik's wife is too soft. Not like my Svetka! Through fire and water she'll get to me! Absolutely fearless!

– I see you like when she comes all of a sudden whether you're unfaithful to her or not.

– Let it be! All the same she won't know! Even if she does she

won't leave me. Alone with children?

– That ensign-woman is pretty enough! Very sexy! – Malcovich said baring his white even teeth.

– Hold your tongue! Steady on! – as if jealous Smirnov grasped his gun.

– Well, you can fight as much as you want. But I wash my hands and take off! – Garov said.

– But who on earth will be my second at the duel? – Smirnov asked laughing.

– I'd rather check the soldiers. I gave them a task – to clean up the bathhouse and under the awning. It's terrible there you know. In brief, the soldiers are making the order.

– That's right of yours. Do go and control. – Smirnov paused, waited till Garov closed the door. Then turned to Malcovich.

– He is so gloomy, that fellow Garov. Bored. Melancholic as they say. Still makes love with wife only. Too faithful! Wants to be good and honest all the time! But it's too hard!

– Don't be so pitiful! We'll help him as much as we can. OK? – Malcovich winked to Smirnov slyly. – By the by, I have a plan. Look!

Andrei took a Parker ink-pen, seized a clear blank-form from the table and began drawing circles on it.

– Here is the Centaur Development Firm. – Malcovich began. – It was to fulfill some construction works in the port of Eysk. But the deadline came and very little was done. It had no time to finish «em on time. Now this firm's on the verge

of bankruptcy. But I'll come to the firm's customer and pay with promissory notes what the Centaur didn't do. As you can guess the Centaur owe me now! I give the Centaur some time to make profits. In a year this firm will return me this sum plus interest. Or it will build me a villa at the sea-side. So let's «build the port»? Let's try? Let's risk? It's a bonanza! – Malcovich pushed Smirnov slightly with his shoulder.

But Smirnov wasn't enthusiastic about it:

– I'm sure you will. And I? We're to shoot all these bloody bastards here in Grozny. Till the end I think.

– It doesn't matter. – Malkovich continued his speech with great gusto. – I have a friend of mine. She is a sort of deputy chief of УКС. She's already signed some papers. Now with her help I'll clear off the debt of УКС to the depositors of share-building. The УКС owe me! In a year or two I'll demand flats from them to clear off their debt. You need a flat or not, Vadim Gennadievich?! Or perhaps you're waiting when the State rewards you for your excellent service?! Who'll give your children a house to live in, a roof over their heads? Where are they, by the way?

– In Stavropol, in the hostel. With a room-mate.

– Well, think it over! It is real to live in this country. If you want of course. But you don't, Major. Don't wait – grab it at once! Easily, joyfully and with dignity! And that fellow Garik we'll take with us!

– Don't involve him in your schemes! I don't let you spoil this

guy! And I'm not going with you either.

– OK. We'll see later who's right. Next time I'll give you the keys from a Moscow flat! Again you refuse?!

– In Moscow – of no use! I'll get a flat in Rostov.

– How long?

– What d'you mean – how long?

– How long are you on the waiting-list?

– Five years.

– And you'll wait for twenty-five years as well!.. Am I right? Svetlana? – Malcovich asked Smirnov's wife who'd just come.

– Stop whispering you two! Again chatting of us women?! Let's go and eat the cutlets until they are cold. When will you get married, Andryusha? Can't stop tempting my husband!

– It's absolutely impossible! I tell him – look at this girl, look at that! But he – fuck off! I love my wife!

Smirnov hit Malcovich slightly below his chest.

Chapter 11

Larisa Ivanovna Garova pushed the doorbell button on the gate in a high thick fence. A short-haired boxer called Vandamme began to bark, then Valeria's mother shouted:

– Shum! Sit! Shum I said! Shut up! Blasted Vandamme!

Step by step the barking ceased. It was obvious, the hostess managed to drive her big dog into its huge kennel. Now Larisa Ivanovna could hear her approaching steps.

Having opened the gate Larisa Ivanovna's new relative couldn't help yawning, disappointed.

– Ah, it's you! Anything happened?

– No, just to visit Valeria, – her tone sounded sorry.

Without any further words, the hostess of a two-storey mansion nodded and let her in. Valeria's mother shut the gate, lloking all the time over Larisa Ivanovna or through her as if she was made of glass.

Valeria came onto the balcony:

– Mum, who's there?

– To you. Can't lift your ass and see yourself! I have to open the door all the time, with my high pressure! – The tall big woman with white dyed hair told off her daughter entering the house. – Don't forget to feed your Schwarznegger or Vandamme, what's his bloody name! He's ready to tear me to pieces! Hardly shut up!

A big Persian cat appeared in the parlour. Valeria's mother

took it on her hands:

– A good cat! – she said lackadaisically and went to the drawing-room.

Larisa Ivanovna followed her. Then she stopped at the spiral stairs and thought whether to ascend or Valeria would descend to her. As if reading her thoughts like a book Valeria leaned over the rail:

– Go up, Larisa Ivanovna!

Breathing heavily Larisa Ivanovna fell down on an armchair. Valeria's thin lips stretched in a smile. Then she sat beside her:

– Any problems?

– Good god, no! It's alright! Sasha's friend brought me a letter from him and some money.

– What money?

– He's got his first wages. Wrote to me to hand it to you. You can put it on the savings bank account if you please. Or buy something.

Larisa Ivanovna was about to tell Valeria about Sasha's letter, but was struck by her daughter-in-law's categoric tone:

– I don't need any money! I don't need anything!

Larisa Ivanovna was perplexed. She didn't realize what was wrong. Some supernatural forces made her raise from the armchair. Stunned, she could hardly murmur:

– Well, I'd better go. Bye.

Well, she won't tell her anything at all! Not in a mood!

It didn't occur to Valeria why Larisa Ivanovna had got upset:

– Where are you going? Larisa Ivanovna?

«Valeria doesn't call me Mother».

– Your cat's made a piss on the carpet! – heading for the stairs, Larisa Ivanovna uttered quietly. She didn't Valeria anymore. She ignored her questions.

– Ah, no matter! Let's have tea! But where are you?

– No thanks. Never mind.

Larisa Ivanovna nearly rushed from the gate. Never! Never she will cross the threshold of this wicked house again! Never.

Chapter 12

– Garov! Don't try! You'll never get through! It's useless! They don't connect even with Rostov. I can't send a pack to Mozdok for two days! And you're calling your wife! – the working-department chief rapped out his words.

– Mikhail Andreevich! Let me try! It's very urgent! My folks at home are shocked by the news from Chechnya on TV. I'm sure they are worried about me.

– Worried you say?! OK. Permission granted. But just for your sake! Don't jabber it to anyone if you get through. All want to phone you know.

The stout lieutenant colonel left the room. But not because he was polite. He was to be at a festive table. If the calendar wasn't mistaken it was the 7th of November*.

– Hullo, Dad, is it you? It's Sasha. Is Lera in?

His father's morose remark «Just a moment» hurt Sasha's soul. Just this phrase, nor «Hello!», nor «How are you?»!

– Oh, Sashka! – the receiver asked merrily.

– Hi, Lera!.. No time… Can cut off any minute!.. I'm alright!.. Don't watch TV. Here no one speaks to journalists and they invent horrors just to say something.

– Well, I don't watch TV at all…

– Really?! And What d'you do? – Garov asked.

– Yesterday came back from Sochi with old folks. Maman

sunburnt badly – now is suffering from overpressure. Papa's standing for elections. Going to be a deputy. Can you imagine?

– Bunny! Sorry I can't speak long.

– Hmm. When are you back?

– In two months I hope! Visit my Mum, tell her I called. Or live with her for some time, will you?

– No, it's a bit improper. – Lera drawled.

Angry Garov nearly hung up. Improper! Improper for his wife to live with his mother! Just for moral support and help about the house.

– Valeria, time's up! – Garov said, tired.

– Well, bye! – Lera hung up.

Ensign Merdyev entered the room stealthily and slapped Garov on his shoulder:

– Don't hold the line! Maybe, someone's calling here! What's at home? You're lucky if you got through!

Garov hung up, clutched a bunch of keys nervously from the table:

– That's the end! Yes, that's the end! – and went out quickly.

Almost all gathered at the table. The women put on their best dresses, the men – their medals and orders. Garov who of course came late was offered a place near Ensign Lyuba Antonova. She began to patronize Garov at table. But he wanted neither spirits nor salads Lyuba offered him and answered «Yes» or «No» to all her questions.

And it doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand why Lyuba

was so tender with Garov. Vadim Smirnov with his wife Svetlana was right to her. Lyuba was full of jealosy. So she was going to tempt Garov and thus revenge Smirnov.

Lyuba invited Garov to a slow dance and became too sentimental listening to Talkov's song. She pressed herself to Garov passionately during the refrain phrase «You'll come to me But it'll be too late».

At first Garov didn't react at all. But step by step he began to feel extremely strong gravity to the knolls of her nipples (and without bra!) So he pushed her a bit aside.

After the last accord of «Summer Rain» Garov rushed to the street.

– Where are you going, Sasha? – Lyuba said with caress.

– I need some fresh air. It's a bit stuffy here.

– May I go too?

– Well, why not.

So Antonova nearly achieved her goal. The culmination of that sudden gravity between two bodies was forthcoming… Many girls had dreamed to draw Garov to bed. But they had failed. But not she! Antonova anticipating her triumph pretended to be drunk. She clutched his hand. But suddenly she felt that her other hand was grabbed by… whom do you think?.. by Smirnov!

Smirnov was burnt with curiosity. He followed them in the darkness leaving his talkative Svetlana with Nikishov's wife.

– Well, well, well! Where going to, you little doves?!

Antonova kept her head:

– I'm free and I can walk with whom I want? Go, Comrade Major, to your dear wife!

Smirnov told Garov in a whisper:

– Look here, leave us, OK. We'll have a chat!

Garov didn't rejoin the celebrating company and went to bed. But he couldn't sleep. Went out again. Antonova's and Smirnov's voices came from the bathhouse. The stars were shimmering. Then the voices died away. Very soon the Major appeared pulling in his belt and shouted in the dark doorway of the bathhouse: «If I see you with someone else – I'll punish you!». Not seeing Garov Smirnov passed by him and muttered to himself: «Hm… Garov she wanted! Fig to her!»

Silence covered all around. And only the rockets of fireworks flying up to the sky sometimes broke it.

Alex sat on the steps of the commandant's office and Djohar the dog came up to him. He touched Sasha's chest with his moist nose. The young man hugged him as if the dog could realize his misery.

Chapter 13

Dasha Sviridenko went onto the balcony. Somewhere at the distance the darkness was torn by the salute and in her thoughts there was a strange inexplicable connection between the darkness of the night and what was on behind her back – a feast in a new flat gifted to them, a young married couple, by her in-laws.

The house-warming dated for the 7th of November was at its height. One toast after another, plenty of vodka, broken glasses…

– But where is Dasha? Did you hear her singing? She's the greatest singer! – her father-in-law boasted to the guests.

– Yes?! – a drunken man's voice answered. – And what's she singing? Let her sing of a nightingale!

– What a hell of a nightingale? – a rude stout woman in her fifties with a red drunken face. Can she sing «Am I guilty or not?»?! – and at once sang that song loudly.

Then the boozy company caught up the words «That I love!..»

Dasha squatted down, closed her ears with her hands and… words themselves began to form a sort of ornament of verses:

Among noisy and shameless struggle
For the small sweet of toyish power
Son is growing. And for happiness
I'm begging the fate. —
Not for me, but for him only.

– Dasha, what on earth are you doing here? – her husband rushed to the balcony.

– Me? Just make poems.

– What?! Let's go inside! You'll freeze here! Why did you leave us?

– Wait a minute. Let's stay here for a while. Look – here's the Milky Way! I wonder if there's anyone alive among the stars? Like a human being?

– Dasha, don't be angry with me but I can't lisp. Well, the Milky way, I see it. But what of it? It's all the same to me. No matter if there's anyone or not. I'm more anxious about my future place of service. By the way, your aunt Galya promised to talk to her son, a colonel, about it. And what?!

– Darling, you have a year before you to find it!

– You think it's a lot of time? No, it isn't. Time flies you know! And what's then?! To go to Grozny, to war? To death? Or you want your son to lose his father?! Maybe, you don't love me at all?! Maybe, you're fed up with my parents?! Why deuce are you here now?! Sent our Max to your bloody Mummy beforehand! Or my mother can't do with children?!

– Oh, Sasha! He's only two months old. Too little! Why on earth fetch him to this booze!

– Don't speak any more! If you want to stay at the damned balcony – OK!

The pane in the balcony door clinked – Alex Sviridenko shut it violently behind him.

– Oh, my Lord! I'll stand it! Stand it! Stand t! I'm strong! Strong! All will be alright! Alright! Alright! Alright! – Dasha repeated to herself clinching her fists. – Please, God! Let everyone be happy! – But her tears dropped.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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