

OLYA AMAN



TRAVELLING
WITH FATE

EMOTIONAL DEATH CAN BRING RENEWED
LIFE IN A PROFOUND DISGUISE

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Olya Aman

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Chapter 1. My dream

It was raining hard ...

I was shaking, not from the cold, but from fear. Everything that was happening seemed to be an endless nightmare: sullen, weary faces all around, chilling cold piercing to the bones, and the disturbing drumbeat of rain on the tarpaulin-covered car. I clung tightly to my grandmother's chest. I wanted to fall asleep and wake up again at home in the warmth, but for some reason it was not happening. Probably, it was due to the swarm of questions buzzing in my head, which sometimes drowned out even the noise of the raging weather. What happened? Where were we being taken? Why were we going somewhere we didn't know, leaving our homes?

The row of cars slowly crawled toward the mountains, barely moving along a slippery road, washed by the endless rain and sprinkling around the scraps of mud and clay. We were shaking in one of the cars weaving somewhere in the middle of the row. It darkened rapidly outside the window, and the rain did not let up, pouring with full force, casting a depression over everyone who was sitting in the car. Abandoning futile attempts to drown in heavy slumber, I looked around, gazing at the emaciated faces of unfamiliar people. Fear, confusion, fatigue, and anxiety were seen on them so clearly that I shivered and pressed myself even closer to my grandmother. She lightly touched my neck with her lips, comforting and calming me. It became a little easier. I'm not alone, my grandmother is with me and someday it will end. I wanted to believe that it was going to be soon.

I could not remember how I got into this car and what exactly happened ... Some vague scraps emerged in the gray haze of the rain outside the window, where only the outlines of rare trees and some structures could be perceived. I dozed off, probably trying to remember, but as soon as I fell asleep, the truck jerked and stopped. Sleepiness disappeared instantly. I jumped up from my seat and found myself near a small gap, hoping to see something in the thickening darkness of the rainy night. There was a tense silence in the car, broken only by the noise of the rain - everyone froze in anxious anticipation.

The man in military uniform came to the driver, handed him some papers and

asked without emotion:

- “How many people? Are there any men?”

- “Sixteen. Old men, women and children”, - the driver listed.

The soldier chuckled somewhat unintelligibly, and walking around the truck pulled back the edge of the tarpaulin and looked into the car, shining a flashlight on the people inside. When a piercingly bright beam touched my face, I involuntarily squinted and tried to shield myself from the light with my hands. The man in military uniform made sure that the driver was not deceiving him and chuckled again. He and was about to release the edge of the tarpaulin canopy, but one of the old men spoke out from the depth of the car.

- “Son, when will this all end?”

- “Father, if only I knew”, - answered the military man and smiled sadly. There was fatigue in his voice.

Someone heaved a sigh. The confused whisper of a woman trying to calm a whimpering child sounded. The tarpaulin canopy sank again, scarcely protecting from the rain and not completely providing shelter from the cold.

- “Let the car go!” - the voice of the same soldier sounded now confident and harsh.

The truck jerked and we moved on, leaving the checkpoint behind. I was still glancing at the opening, looking at public buildings and people in military uniform, checking the car behind us or briefly talking to each other. All this seemed to be a part of a nightmare. It was so difficult to believe in the reality of what was happening.

And then I froze when I saw the man on a black horse. He flew past us in a whirlwind, heading in the direction we were moving in. I saw him just a moment, but his image was embedded in my memory for the rest of my life. For an instant, I could see him in all the smallest details: a wet cloak with an oily shine, a gun in the warrior’s right hand, muscles rolling under the shiny skin of his horse and a red bandage on the rider's head. At that moment, everything became clear. I understood the meaning of the word, which I have often heard from my grandmother recently. I understood and felt it with all my heart: “War”...

I woke up in a cold sweat. Again this dream. Fragments of my childhood

memories had been leaking into my dreams more often. I had never thought my dreams had any special significance. I had never known how to interpret them, and I thought this was complete nonsense. It's not a man's business, plus, I'm an educated adult. I tried to convince myself that these were just games of the subconscious mind, which had decided to remind me about the most terrible period of my life. This dream was repeated down to the smallest details night after night. I involuntarily began to think if it was a sign. But what was it portending? Was it a bad sign or just a warning? Or were these just memories?

War ... I became acquainted with the terrible meaning of this word when I was only five years old. The confrontation between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks resulted in a bloody war that swept the entire south of the country in the early nineties. Of course, everything could be solved peacefully, but no one wanted to give up their positions and reach a compromise. As a result, the conflict escalated into an armed clash that turned into a real interethnic war. Our family was very fortunate that we had time to evacuate. Old men, women, and children were placed into several trucks and taken to a safe place, away from military operations.

Yes, we were running away from the war, and that warrior on a black horse was rushing to meet it. He was rushing to the war's inferno. I still remember him, although I saw him only for a moment. I remember the expression of calm determination on his face, how confidently he was holding his gun, how his red bandana brightened the rainy night with the tongue of a flame. Red means "ours", "the warrior of our people". In the heat of the battle, it was only through these bandanas that one could understand where ours were, and where the enemies were. But I learned about this much later, and at that moment I had only a vague feeling, which was difficult to describe. I wanted to be in that warrior's place – to dashingly rush to the place from where everyone was fleeing, to protect my homeland, my beloved ones and those people who were, like me, shivering in the cold inside the truck. And I did not care that I was only five years old, could not sit in a saddle confidently and that I had never held a gun in my hands. I was just not thinking about it at that moment. After a while, this episode was gradually wiped out of my memory under the influence of other impressions. But now it returned in this recurring dream. As if re-experiencing all the events of that night, I could still feel the warm touch of my cheek against my grandmother's chest. Could this all be because of that?

When my mother and I moved to the city, at first I missed my grandmother who stayed in the village. We used to visit her, but then my mother got a new job, and

I was completely consumed by school. Could this all be because of this? Having immersed myself in my studies, sports, competitions and other delights of the last school years, I completely forgot about the one who used to care for me when I was a child, about the one who comforted and consoled me in the cold truck, warming me up with her warmth, and then almost every night visited my room to make sure that I was not tormented by nightmares. "I have to visit her when I return! Or at least call and talk about everything, ask about her health", - I thought, getting out of bed and heading to the bathroom.

I graduated from one of the most prestigious schools in our city, and a plump folder with certificates and diplomas could provide me with admission to any university. But when I was in high school I literally became obsessed with Europe. I was dreaming of enrolling in one of the prestigious universities in the UK. I used to actively immerse myself in English and read the guidebooks on European cities. I was so absorbed by my dream to go abroad, that I did not even try to apply to any higher educational institution in our city. Instead, I bombarded the travel agencies and studied the programs of foreign universities. I was sure that I was going to succeed. I had absolutely all my documents ready, including my passport. I did not doubt for a second that I could make my dream come true. And everything would have been excellent if studying abroad had not been so expensive. Every time I talked about payment, the astronomical sums that consultants were asking threw me into an abyss of despondency. Perhaps, only children of government officials, bankers or businessmen could afford such a pleasure as studying in Europe. But my mother was certainly not able to pay for it. And even if I got a job myself, I would have to spend at least twenty years saving for a trip.

- "Medet, what are you thinking?" - my mother grumbled, looking at my gaunt face after another meeting with a travel agent, which ended in a digit with many zeros, - "Where are you going? Do you think they are waiting for you there with open arms? You could apply somewhere, at least as a fall back plan, and now all opportunities to enter the university have passed. You will have to wait a whole year. What are you going to do now?"

It was getting even worse from her observations. I understood that my mother was right in her own way, and that she was worrying about me, her unlucky dreamer. But it was beyond my strength to give up my grandiose plans for the sake of a stable and measured life, which my former classmates settled for. Europe was appealing to me with its forbidding castles and dreary pavements,

magnificent museums, and majestic monuments. It attracted me and at the same time eluded me, becoming more and more ghostly.

- "I will not give up!" – I used to insist stubbornly before going to bed, looking through the colorful pages of guidebooks. The next morning everything started again: another meeting with a representative of this or that company, a short interview, another number with a frightening number of zeros, and in the evening a dinner as my mother grumbled. This was continuing until I got totally desperate and there was not a single organization left on my list. With annoyance and anger, I hurled my guidebooks to the far corner of the room, barely stopping myself from tearing them to shreds.

Chapter 2. Friend

The next morning Daniyar called me.

- "Hi! Are you already up?" - he asked in an annoyingly cheerful and happy voice.

- "Now yes." - I grunted into the phone. I had absolutely no desire to talk to anyone. Especially to him.

- "Then hurry up and get dressed. Come over." - he said, ignoring my discontented tone.

- "There's something interesting for you. I'm sure you'll like it."

- "I do not like this anymore!" – I had even less desire to get out of bed and drag myself to him.

- "You probably do not want to go abroad anymore?" - Daniyar asked in the tone of a conspirator. – "Have you changed your mind?"

I literally jumped out of bed.

- "I'll be right up," - I said and hung up, but not before hearing my friend's laughter.

I dressed at a speed that any soldier-rookie would envy. "Go abroad" - this phrase affected me like a magical incantation, having instantly given me strength. It was like sweet music in my head while I was washing up and getting organized. A timid hope emerged in my heart.

Daniyar had been my best friend from the very first grade. Perhaps he was the only one I could call a friend, not just an acquaintance or a classmate. He rescued me so many times in difficult moments, supported me, when something was not right, and he was the only one who believed in me no matter what. His advice has always been incredibly wise and I could totally trust his opinion. I think that many in the class secretly envied his sharp intellect and tremendous ingenuity. The only thing that irritated me from time to time was that he could become a bore trying to be useful. And sometimes he imposed his help and care even where I could easily cope without him.

Unlike me, Daniyar never thought about leaving the country, although he had as many chances as I did. To be completely frank, even more. My friend aced exams and attended one of the best universities in our city. He was sure that skilled specialists were needed here, and people, who went abroad, as a rule, did not come back. Even though I tried hard to convince him that I would definitely come back, I did not succeed. However, this did not stop him from supporting me. It was the same this time. Daniyar was the one who gave me a faint hope that not everything was lost for me.

A few minutes later I was standing on his porch. The door opened after the first knock: Daniyar was already waiting for me. Having exchanged the usual greetings, we went into his room.

Daniyar's family lived, moderately speaking, modestly, or even too modestly. His mother worked from morning till late night. My best friend had never seen his father and his stepfather... Every time Daniyar came to school in the morning with his eyes swollen from tears and noticeable bruises on his hands, which he carefully tried to hide, I clenched my fists. "We don't choose our parents." - I often heard this phrase, full of humility, from my friend. My heart wept, and I was angry with myself because I could not change anything. Daniyar only smiled guiltily and absentmindedly adjusted the sleeves of his shirt, covering the bruises on his wrists. His stepfather had never worked. He loved to drink alcohol and often got physical. I could not understand why my friend and his mother tolerated all this, but Daniyar did not like to raise this topic and he avoided the conversation all the time. "We don't choose our parents." - he used to repeat.

The house was quiet and therefore a bit uncomfortable. Daniyar's mother was at work as always, and his stepfather, apparently, went to the nearest pub. I wanted to leave this inhospitable home as quickly as possible, so I hurried to get down to

business.

- “So what do you have? Don’t torture me, tell me!” - my voice trembled treacherously, betraying my impatience, but I was too intrigued by my friend to control myself.

- “Here you go!” - he handed me a colorful advertising booklet. – “I learned that there is a qualifying contest to the University of Colorado. The specialty is computer science. Only twenty spaces are allocated for our whole republic, but I am almost sure that you will be able to pass the competition. Try it! What if you succeed? You are good with computers and you know English. Take a chance!”

- “Colorado?” – Perplexed, I looked at the neatly folded sheet of expensive glossy paper with three beautifully printed green block letters “Colorado State University”. An opportunity for two dozen happy people who dream of living overseas. I've never been one of them. My dream was completely different. But the words from an old movie sounded in my head: “Green is a color of hope.” My obliging subconscious mind seemed to have already grasped Daniyar’s idea, but for some reason I uttered completely different words.

- “No, Daniyar,” - I tried to speak as gently and calmly as possible. I did not want to offend a friend who showed such concern for my future. It was not his fault that I... - “I'm far from computer science. I can create the simplest program, if necessary. But you know it's not my thing. I have never been interested in this in detail. And Colorado... It is America. That is not my dream. The English there is different from the one I was learning. Plus, who's waiting for me there? No one!”

- “So who is waiting for you in Europe?” - Daniyar frowned slightly. His words made sense.

- “People are really different there,” - I retorted, probably more hotly than I had to. – “There I would find myself, develop and improve. People are kinder in Europe, and rush to help you,” - I was carried away once again for a moment, having become immersed in the excitement of my dreams. – “I would love to see everything that I have read about in history books! Ancient pavement, which was trampled by legendary warriors and knights of old times, magnificent castles and the ruins of the ancient temples. I would love to see the Eiffel Tower, which I have only seen in movies and photographs, to touch the Berlin Wall, if any of it still exists...”

- “Don’t talk like that. So, the nostalgic part was preserved,” - my friend rapped out, interrupting my endless list of European sights, which I dreamed about seeing with my own eyes. – “I wrote the address on the back of the booklet,” - Daniyar mercilessly brought me back to reality. – “If you want - go, if you don’t – it’s your business. But in your situation I would not put off making the choice. The study has already begun, and you with your Europe have not even tried to enter the university. You will remain in a suspended state.”

He was right. Right a thousand times over, damn it! I could not provide any reasonable argument to challenge his arguments. Only my internal stubbornness prevented me from recognizing this at once. But I did not want to part with my dream for the sake of something more tangible. My whole being resisted it. For some reason, my feeling for Europe was getting weaker every minute. The Old World is closer, but the New World is greater! And who said that they will immediately accept me as a student?

At home later I sat on the couch for a long time, looking thoughtfully at the advertising booklet I got from Daniyar with the address neatly written in his handwriting.

- “Colorado. Computer science,” - I even snorted. I had never had a special interest in this profession and I had a very vague idea about it. But having thought that even failing this qualifying competition, I would not lose anything, I decided to go.

Chapter 3. Selection

The contestants crowded the corridor. I had not expected that there would be so many people willing to go to study in Colorado. Hope, excitement and frank enthusiasm could be seen on many faces. I heard fragments of talk saying that “this chance only comes once in a lifetime and not to everyone.” Perhaps, I was the only one who did not feel any joyful anticipation. I had no idea why I was here, I had already planned my defeat, and it was useless to pass the competitive selection with this attitude. I was already going to leave the building, but before I moved through the crowd in the direction of the exit, someone put a hand on my shoulder. I flinched and turned around.

- “I knew that you would be worried and I came to support you.” - Daniyar's face shone with a satisfied smile. – “The main thing is to breathe and relax your muscles. Massage your temples, it will help you to calm your nerves and

concentrate.”

He kept talking, pouring out overly smart words, from which a slight excitement, which gripped me in addition to my own will, as usual before the exam, began to grow into irritation. However, I was glad that he came. It was very pleasant to feel his support and care, although I was not ready to admit it.

My turn came, and I entered the room, where a competitive commission was waiting for me. Despite all of Daniyar's advice and my own efforts, I was still worried. The look of stern faces and frankly appraising views directed at me did not make me anymore certain. In total, there were eight people on the commission. My attention was drawn to two girls about my age who were looking at me with obvious displeasure, which was close to contempt. This confused me even more.

- “Hello,” - I squeezed out, trying to at least somehow defuse the mounting tension. The answer was a cold silence. For a second all eyes turned to me, but after a moment each of the members of this strange commission returned to their business: someone rummaged through a folder, trying to find something in it, someone made notes in a notebook, and one of the girls was examining her impeccable manicure with a bored look. I suddenly felt a sharp desire to leave, but as soon as I thought like this, the oldest one - a man of about forty - broke the ringing silence that prevailed in the room.

- “Tell us about yourself.” - he said in a voice that was colorless and devoid of emotion.

- “I am Askarov Medet. Year of birth is 1985. I was born in Chui oblast in Bishkek,” - I began, learning to manage my excitement, once again feeling the gaze of those around me. I tried not to think about the others and only looked at the person who was the head of the commission. - “I studied in a high school, after that I entered the Lyceum and graduated this year successfully.”

- “You probably know English, if you studied at a Lyceum?” - said a younger man, who was making notes in a notebook.

- “Yes”. - I answered succinctly, looking in his direction. The man nodded slightly and wrote something in his book.

- “Perfect knowledge of English is not obligatory in our competition.” - the chairman of the commission got right to the point, - “So, if you pass the

competition, you will have a year to prepare. All foreign students undergo a preparatory course, which includes language training. But the fact that you already know some is, of course, an advantage. Please, continue.”

I did not need to be convinced and continued.

- “I am fond of sports. I actively participated in all school activities. I never missed science fairs among schools. I participated in the city Olympiads and won prizes.” - I was suddenly overcome with a strong desire to win this contest. Without any reason, just like that. Maybe somewhere inside I wanted to prove something to someone. I began to say everything that came to my mind with excitement. – “In my spare time I'm fond of music. I like jazz very much. If there is an opportunity, I will definitely learn to play the saxophone.”

As I was speaking, the views directed at me from all sides were becoming more and more approving and interested. They were asking me questions, and I began to answer confidently and firmly. On the faces of the members of the commission I saw that my answers were fully satisfying them. And only the man who started the conversation remained impassive. His face continued not to express anything, and his voice seemed to be dry and cold. However, I cared neither about his indifference nor about the approval of the others. Even if I passed this stupid contest, what would it give me? Nothing. It would not bring me closer to my dream. And I would not go to America, even if I passed. I would not go... But then why was I trying so hard to make a favorable impression? I had no answer to this question.

Chapter 4. Unplanned trip

A phone call woke me up. I looked at the illuminated name - Daniyar...

My best friend had such a bad habit of waking me in the morning to ask how I am doing. And every time I miraculously overcame the desire to throw the phone against the wall. I found the phone and answered the call, trying not to show my irritation.

- “Congratulations!” - Daniyar's enthusiastic voice rang into my ear. – “You won the contest! You're going to America!”

Sleepiness evaporated instantly.

- “Did I pass? Did I do it?” - I could not believe my ears.

Daniyar kept chattering into the phone excitedly, but I could no longer catch the meaning of his words. The phrase “I did it!” was knocking in my head, and I found myself caught up in joy. Not because I was going to America, not because I was going to study at one of the most prestigious universities in the world. I did it! I recalled the crowd of applicants with hope in their eyes. Some of them had a very strong confidence in themselves. How many of them did I bypass? I turned out to be better! I had coped and proved that I was worth something. First of all, I proved it to myself.

Daniyar congratulated me again, and we said goodbye to each other. It was still ringing in my ears, but the euphoria of the unexpected success began to gradually subside, giving way to the cool intellect. Yes, I did it, I passed the competition. So what now? The dream of a fabulous trip to Europe lay on one side of the scales, and the real prospect of studying in the U.S. lay on the other one.

Colorado. Computer science. "This chance only comes once in a lifetime and not to everyone." - I recalled the phrase of one of the contestants with whom I was not familiar, but whose words somehow crashed into my memory.

The airport was noisy and crowded. A couple of times other “lucky ones” who passed the selection came to me while we were waiting for our plane. Perhaps I did not behave very politely towards them, because attempts to start an acquaintance stopped rather quickly. In fact, I had nothing to talk about with them. I simply didn’t share their enthusiasm for the upcoming trip. Frankly speaking, I did not feel anything about it at all. It was strange: I was going abroad for the first time. Plus, I was going to America. Unlike myself, feelings were literally overflowing from my mother, who came to see me off. She felt both pride and joy that her son managed to achieve something, doubts mixed with anxiety, and the bitterness of the upcoming separation. She was trying to hide her tears, but she could not. I could understand what she was feeling, but I was feeling only emptiness and apathy.

- “You will graduate, you will come back and be one of the best programmers in our country.” - she said. – “Everyone will be proud of you. We are already proud!”

I was mechanically saying something, trying to calm her down. I did not want her to be sad. I probably only agreed to go for this reason. Mom was so happy when she found out that I passed the competition. I did not want to disappoint

her. Her joy and her pride in me were more important than my ghostly dreams.

Daniyar came to see me off too. He was shining like a polished copper basin. My friend was also overflowing with pride for me and, probably, for himself. It was thanks to him that all this became possible. The dream of many had become my reality. I was very sad to part with him. If I knew that it was my last meeting with him, I would probably have told him a lot. He was a childhood friend, my inspiration, my advisor, my excellent conversationalist. We were like kin brothers. We both grew up without our fathers, but he was less fortunate with his stepfather. Why is life so unfair sometimes? Some rascal comes to your family, sits on your mother's neck, beats up someone's child and behaves like a host in your house. If I could help my friend...

On the plane, I was seized by fear. The stupor that seized me at the airport disappeared, and a flood of doubts and questions poured into its place. I suddenly realized that I was going to a foreign country where all people were strangers and spoke a foreign language. And I could not understand if I wanted this, or if I had to jump out of the plane and return to normal life.

- "Dear passengers, we ask you to fasten your seatbelts..."

My hands involuntarily reached towards my pocket, where there was "tumar" with an amulet inside presented by Daniyar as a goodbye. "It will help you in difficult situations." - my friend said, handing it to me. My fingers felt the amulet, and suddenly it became more comfortable.

- "I will definitely come back! I will finish my studies and come back. I will help you with everything, it's not easy for you now. Hold on. Thank you for everything! Thank you for being a true friend. You are small, but your heart is huge!" - I silently promised Daniyar.

It was too late to change anything. The plane soared into the sky, and I was looking out the window at my hometown, which was far below. I wanted to remember this picture, and I kept watching as the town quickly disappeared from view. And then we plunged into the clouds. I was captivated by the incredibly beautiful view. Doubts ceased to torture my soul, and I could quietly admire the landscapes sweeping far below, trying not to think about what awaited me.

Later, the confidence, which came to me once again, betrayed me. We were flying with a layover in Istanbul, and had to spend some time in the airport. I was staring into the distance through the glass barrier and saw the islands of

Foggy Albion, the Eiffel Tower, and the Reichstag building as if they were real. Of course, I saw them with my inner gaze, and my heart was sweetly compressed in my chest from realization that I was closer to my cherished dream than I ever had been. If I could just leave the airport right now. But now my goal had changed. I felt responsibility to my family, to Daniyar, to my less fortunate rivals. Soon the invitation to board the flight was made in two languages. We boarded the airplane and soared up again to set our feet on the earth across the ocean on another continent.

Again the airport, the noise and the fuss around me. I got confused for a second, having plunged into the surrounding chaos. Our group separated from the general flow of passengers and moved through the huge hall. I was trying to keep up, though I was pretty exhausted after the long flight. There was real pandemonium around me: there were so many people running in different directions, not noticing each other, almost colliding, as if they themselves were not understanding where and why they were rushing. I was so captured in contemplation that I almost lost my group. Meantime, everyone whom I managed to remember during this short trip, gathered at customs and I hastened to join them. Here we were met by representatives of the program that arranged our travel. They were holding some papers in their hands and were assigning us our host families. Having heard my name, I raised my hand almost automatically.

- "The city of Denver, Hudsons family." - one of the distributors announced, and I joined his group.

None of us understood what was happening. Being exhausted from a long flight, we all had a hard time figuring everything out and were stupidly following the directions of the people who met us. We were divided into five groups, each of which had its own attendant. Along with two more guys and one girl we were in the group of a middle-aged man of Slavic appearance. He called himself Oleg Yefimovich, and seeing that all of us were in complete disarray, finally explained to us what was happening.

- "University of Colorado gives you the opportunity to study in its branches, which are located in different states. We are going to the southwestern states, they are going to the north, and someone is going even further. Each of you will study at one of the University's branches, and live with an American family that will provide you with everything you need for the duration of your studies. So

you can quickly learn and practice American English. You have absolutely nothing to worry about, Americans are a clever and hospitable people. No one will offend you, provided that, of course, you behave decently. You will have to get used to a new family, but these people are trustworthy. If you still have any conflicts, you can contact the branch of our program in your city and get the necessary help. A brochure with contact details will be provided to each of you upon arrival at the site. Any questions?"

I had a lot of questions, as, probably, others, but none of us decided to ask this strict person.

- "If there are no questions, follow me," - Oleg Yefimovich said, and we followed him to the check-in counters.

We had another flight, this time within the U.S. A crazy thought flashed through my head that after so many ups and downs, I would hate airplanes for the rest of my life. Judging by the faces of my companions, I was not the only one who thought like this. We were all exhausted, tired, and after we were separated, the fear of the unknown surged through us with renewed vigor. I do not know what was happening in the souls of the rest of the guys, but to me everything that was happening seemed to be a strange, prolonged dream.

I thought that we would all live in some dormitory and would be able to stay together. I even had the chance to regret that I got acquainted with those guys who now were going with another group somewhere to the north of this huge foreign country. I involuntarily glanced at the frowning guys and the tired girl, trying to remember their faces. Nobody tried to start a conversation as we understood that our joint trip would be short, and there was no sense in getting acquainted. Soon our small group would be split up and scattered among different houses in neighboring cities. I again involuntarily groped Daniyar's amulet in my pocket and squeezed it like a friend's hand. A small piece of my homeland had warmed in my hand, when another landing was announced.

From the plane to the car, from the car to the bus ...

We continued our journey not having time to admire the local landscapes. Fear gave way to curiosity for a while, and we literally clung to the window panes, looking at exotic trees, strange bushes, cars passing by, people who seemed completely different from the people in our country, although they did not differ much in appearance. There was something elusive in the air, which was

constantly reminding us that this was a foreign country and we were just guests here.

The bus has stopped three times, until I was completely alone. The last one was a girl. Already leaving the cabin, she suddenly turned around and looked in my direction. Her face, which appeared exhausted after long travel, was illuminated with an encouraging smile for a moment, and looking into my eyes, she whispered with her lips only: “Good luck!”

My shelter was a big city, the capital of the state of Colorado called Denver. This name was vaguely familiar to me from movies and therefore was familiar to me. On the way Oleg Yefimovich told me a little about this city. Its population was about six hundred thousand people. There were many hills in the west and in the south, which gave the landscape a special charm. The downtown was noisy and funny, and there were quiet and cozy houses in the suburbs. The people were hospitable and filled with excitement. I was listening to it very carefully, because it was here that I had to live during my entire studies.

Denver met us with a fresh breeze and the smell of fragrant herbs, unusually booming for a semi-desert climate. A little further away the slope of the mountain was covered with green grass. Going through the city to the house, which was to become mine for the next few years, I noticed the boys, who were playing basketball on the playground. Then I still did not know that in America, children played the sport since the age of five. I saw old people actively discussing the latest gossip with their neighbors, who were completely different from our old ladies sitting in the evenings on benches and sharing the latest news, even though they reminded me of them. At that moment, everything seemed completely alien to me, and finding one single resemblance to the world I was familiar with, I could immediately find a thousand differences.

Finally, the bus stopped.

- “Here we are!” - Oleg Yefimovich announced, opening the door. – “Take your luggage, and I’ll find Mrs. Hudson. I’m sure you’ll get along.”

Chapter 5. Acquaintance with Mary Hudson

I picked up my duffle bag and headed to the house. The flimsy design of wood and plastic seemed so fragile, as if it was ready to crumble at the first gust of strong wind. Being accustomed to heavy building blocks of brick and concrete, I

could not even imagine that people could live in such “toy” houses for years.

Mrs. Mary Hudson turned out to be a nice, elderly woman with lively, mischievous green eyes and a friendly smile. She was almost as tall as me, and her face, despite her advanced age, was hardly touched by wrinkles.

Gray hair did not spoil her. On the contrary, it gave the hostess of the “toy” house some special attraction. My tongue would not dare to call her an “old lady”, since she looked so young. Later, when we got to know each other, I found out that she was much older than I thought at first sight.

When during assignments at the airport Oleg Yefimovich announced the “Hudson family”, I assumed that I would get into an ordinary American family: a husband, a wife, children, maybe a dog. For some reason, of course - a golden retriever. Honestly, I was a little worried and was not sure that I could get along with the whole family. But my guess was again far from the truth: Mrs. Hudson was living alone and, apparently, was very glad that someone would brighten up her loneliness. I believed in my own invented fantasies so much, that I was both surprised and, for some reason, a bit confused.

However, the hostess of my new home for three long years was unusually tactful and benevolent. We quickly found a common language, despite the fact that my American English could not be called impeccable. Still, the difference from the British made some words incomprehensible enough that at first we often had to explain ourselves with gestures. At first I was embarrassed, but Grandma Mary used to laugh so infectiously that our linguistic difficulties didn’t upset either of us, but forced us to have real fun. She was generally a surprisingly cheerful and funny woman. Thanks to her support, here, across a huge ocean, I felt her to be the person closest to me. Grandma Mary used to take care of me as if I was her own son, whom she has never had, or her grandson, who unexpectedly came to visit her after a long separation. If she was not with me, I do not know how I would survive in the United States.

I got a separate, very spacious and bright room in a house, which was much more stable than it seemed at first glance. I hung the flag of my country above the bed. Next to it I attached my friend’s amulet. Grandma Mary did not mind, even on the contrary. In the evenings, she sometimes dropped into my room and we talked. She loved to listen to my stories about my native city, the capital where we moved, about school, my mother, my grandmother, and Daniyar. Sometimes I was so carried away that I involuntarily switched to my native

language, forcing her to ask me to repeat myself. She asked me about national dishes and listened very carefully to my explanations. I felt her sincere interest, and I tried to recall everything I knew about my culture, traditions, and customs.

Apparently, her loneliness was very hard for her, and I felt better after our conversations with Grandma Mary too, as adapting to life at the university was a bit more complicated. The first year was more preparatory: an in-depth study of the language, several general courses and just one programming course.

Our entire group consisted completely of foreigners. The majority was made up of people from Latin American countries who tried to stay together and spoke Spanish among themselves. It was difficult to make new acquaintances in such conditions. In fact, I did not aspire to do this myself, having plunged into my studies. I used to spend a lot of time in the library, where I had access to the computer and an opportunity to work on it.

One day, Grandma Mary, smiling, brought home a box with a laptop.

- "Medet, come here, my boy," - the woman called me, - "This is what I bought at a sale, will you help me to learn computer science? Our neighbor, Mrs. Jane, said that it helps you to find useful information. So I decided that I really needed it."

I needed only to take a quick glance to understand that this laptop was actually the latest model of a well-known brand.

- "Of course, Grandma Mary! It's nothing complicated. It will only take you a minute to understand it. Let me install everything and I'll show you how it works."

- "Thank you, Medet! Then while you're busy, I'll cook dinner."

Soon she called me to the kitchen, and after eating I began to introduce my hostess to the basics of working on the computer.

- "Oh, Medet, this all is so difficult! Let's do this - when I need something, I'll ask you, and you'll find it. In the meantime, let it stay in your room. Work on it, why should it get dusty in vain?"

I understood Grandma Mary's maneuver, realizing that it was her way of giving me a gift. To tell the truth, I have always been burdened by her desire to feed me delicious foods and take me to cultural events. I knew that the university makes a contract with such people who host foreign students, and pays a certain

compensation for food and utilities. Once, by chance I heard the loud conversation of my noisy temperamental classmates. They were discussing this amount, for some reason having switched to English. It was such a ridiculous payment to “host families” that, having gained courage, I decided to talk with Grandma Mary frankly.

- “Thank you, you are so kind, but it's I have a library card. There I can study as much as I want.”

The woman threw up her hands:

- “Medet, what are you talking about? You have become like my own son. Do not offend me by a refusal, especially since I need your help with this. And in general, you don't have to be stuck in the library in the evenings. You can get some kind of stomach problems without a hot meal. Your mother will blame me for not taking care of you properly.” - she got up from her chair, making it clear that the conversation was over.

Chapter 6. Bad news

The first frosts came and, along with them, a week-long vacation from the university, but it certainly did not make sense to fly home.

The office of the company that was conducting the student exchange program was located near the university. According to this program, we were allowed to call home free of charge, but not longer than five minutes once a month. International telephone communication was an expensive pleasure. I called my mother, but we did not talk long. I wanted to accumulate more precious minutes, which were charged each month to a kind of account, to be able to talk with my mother and Daniyar.

I came up with a great idea. I wanted to give an e-mail address to my best friend, so that we could communicate several times a day. It would be so great, as I already missed him and his boring, but always useful advice. In some incomprehensible way, he was always right. In addition, in one of the telephone conversations, my mother once mentioned that she saw him, and he was all bruised again. I do not know why I didn't call him that same day. Probably, I did not want to aggravate the situation. He was feeling bad without it. I was also angry with myself that I did not make him participate in the competition with me. He would have definitely passed, and we would have come here together.

Perhaps, we could even live in Grandma Mary's house. There was enough room, and the hostess would be more cheerful with us both there. Well, that was ok. Now we would talk with him often enough!

As usual, I came to the office and dialed Daniyar's home number. I heard a long beep and I froze in joyful anticipation. I had accumulated a lot of news, and his life was most likely not any less saturated.

The phone snapped. I heard the hoarse voice of Aunt Gulya, Daniyar's mother, and when I asked her to call him to the phone, I suddenly heard sobbing.

- "Medet," - said my best friend's mother, struggling with her own trembling voice. - "Daniyar is not at home. He has not been here for a month..."

The sobs turned into crying, and I frowned involuntarily.

- "Aunt Gulya, do not cry, what happened?"

- "He ran away from home." - she took a deep breath, trying to calm herself, - "And to this day we do not know anything about his fate. Oh, Lord, help us! It's all my fault! If I knew that he was beating him, I could have saved him. I don't know now what to do."

I clenched my teeth and hung up the phone, though I wanted to hurl it with all the anger that had gripped me at that moment. "If I knew..." - a hysterical woman's voice sounded in my head. - "You knew everything! You could not be unaware! You could not have overlooked the bruises on the body of your own son for years. You just did not want to pay attention to it. The man who raised his hand to both you and your only child turned out to be more valuable to you." But what's the use of moaning into the phone? I had to do something, but I was at an unthinkable distance from my friend. We were separated by the ocean, and there was nothing I could do. I left the building, slamming the door, hardly able to restrain my tears. I did not want to call my mom in such condition. She would start to worry about me. Why should she care? Anyway, I could not change anything. I could before I left, but now... I was overwhelmed with a wave of guilt that I was not with my best friend when he was having a hard time. I felt very bad and I completely do not remember how I got to Grandma Mary's house. I did not eat dinner because I had no appetite. For the first time during my stay in this house, I locked myself in my room. The hostess tried to knock and anxiously asked what had happened and whether someone had offended me. I answered that I wanted to be alone, trying to speak as politely as possible. She

did not insist and went to her room.

Chapter 7. Memories

At night, again I had the dream, which had tortured me in my homeland. But, instead of my real grandmother, Mrs. Hudson was holding me in her arms, which were soothing and tender. And then, as always, a rider galloped towards the car in which we were riding. But this time, Daniyar was riding on a black horse, which had flakes of foam falling from its croup. He was thin, his clothes looked more like rags. His eyes met my eyes for a second, and he raced off. I cried desperately:

- “Daniyar, wait, my friend! Everybody is looking for you! Wait!” - the scream froze in my throat when my gaze followed him.

I could see bleeding wounds and bruises through Daniyar’s ragged shirt, on his back. I must have screamed out loud in my sleep, because soon I heard Grandma Mary knocking at the door. When I opened it, she gently put her hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes.

- “Medet, everything's fine. It's just a bad dream, my boy.”

I could not get rid of the feeling of something terrible and irreparable.

- “Oh, Grandma Mary, forgive me for waking you up. It seems to me that something bad happened to Daniyar.”

The elderly woman smiled encouragingly at me:

- “I was not sleeping, my boy. Come on, let's have some tea and talk.”

Adding from time to time aromatic Earl Gray into our cups, Grandma Mary heard from me about the gloomy side of Daniyar's life, which I had never told her before.

- “It happened that we became friends on the first day at school, and he never rushed home after school. For a couple of months I was taken home by grandmother Nurila, because it was necessary to cross two quite busy streets. No one ever came to pick Daniyar up. He used to accompany me and my grandmother. Then he used to say goodbye to us and went on at a leisurely pace.

One early evening, my mother went to visit her friend and took me with her.

Passing by one yard, I noticed Daniyar with a knapsack on a bench. We were surprised. Mom asked if he had forgotten his keys, but my friend only looked away. We wrote a note to his mother on a leaflet, saying that we would bring Daniyar later, and went to our house. Since then, we often stayed at my place after school. My mother was not against it, because she learned the sad story from her friend, who lived, by coincidence, in a nearby house. Daniyar's father died before his birth, and several years later his mother married a real sadist and tyrant. It turned out that every evening my friend waited for his mother to come from work, sitting on a bench or walking around the neighborhood. The reason was simple - he was afraid to be alone in the apartment with his stepfather. His stepfather used to beat him. Sometimes he extinguished cigarettes by pushing them against Daniyar. My friend had to wear a turtleneck with long sleeves and a collar many times on a hot day. His stepfather used to punish him without guilt. He never needed any reason or offenses."

I paused, trying to hold back tears from the pain I felt for my friend, and continued.

- "No one can do anything about this scum. He has a brother who is a big man in the city. Time passed, Daniyar and I grew up. His stepfather began to mock not only him, but also Aunt Gulya. My friend used to frantically stand up for her, bringing his stepfather's anger onto himself, but removing his mother from the attack. "We don't choose our parents" - that's what he always used to repeat to me. With all this, Daniyar managed to get a brilliant education at school. It was he who insisted that I consider the option of going to America. I am convinced that he would easily pass the competition, but he was afraid to leave his mother alone. And now he's gone, and I feel myself like a traitor. I left and did not even call him, although he needed me."

- "Do not blame yourself, Medet. You will contact your mother tomorrow and find out the details. Then we will think about what we can do. In the meantime, you need to rest."

- "Grandma Mary's eyes were glittering. Either the light of electric bulb was reflected in them, or she was hiding her tears."

I surprisingly managed to fall asleep as soon as I went to bed. It was like falling into blackness. When I woke up, I called my mother from Grandma Mary's phone. Having briefly asked how she was doing, I asked her to tell me if there was any news from Daniyar. Every week I dialed the familiar number and heard

the same thing. A whole month passed. I talked to my mother longer from the office of the company that supervised the students.

She used to only sigh, and I realized that no one knew anything about my friend. The police, as I understood from my mother's evasive answers, were not conducting any special search. It was useless to question her further, and I tried to shift the conversation to some neutral topic, but I could not do it - my thoughts were only about Daniyar. My mother tried to cheer me up and asked me not to do anything stupid. I promised, though I was not sure that I would keep my word. Our conversation was not going well, so we said goodbye to each other quickly, and I trudged back to Grandma Mary's house.

Chapter 8. Wings of hope

She was sitting in the small cozy living room by the fireplace, in which the wood was crackling softly. I politely said hello and was about to go to my room, but her gaze made me stop.

- "Sit down." – Grandma Mary nodded towards the empty chair.

I obediently sank into it.

- "They called me from the university." - my hostess said choosing her words carefully. – "Are you skipping classes? What's going on?"

There was no condemnation in her voice, only concern and care.

It was true, I had missed a few classes. I just could not concentrate on my studies because I kept thinking about Daniyar. I used to sit on a bench near the playground and thought what would have happened if I had not gone to America. The uncertainty was oppressive: there were more questions every day, and there were no answers to them. I did not know what happened to my friend. Was he alive or not? Was he healthy or not? Anything could happen to him, but there was nothing I could do to help him. How could I study?

- "Medet." - Grandma Mary said softly, having listened to my excuses. – "Will your friend get better if you quit school? Can it help him? Do you think he would want this?"

I was silent.

- "It's very difficult to lose loved ones," - she continued softly, - "but it is not a

reason to put an end to your own life and your own future. No one will become better because of it, believe me. I know what I'm talking about.”

Reflections of the fireplace were dancing in the depths of her eyes. It was the first time I saw such grief and pain in them. Not daring to utter a word, I continued to listen to her soft voice.

- “I came to America many years ago, alone. I was only 17 years old...”

At that time Mary Hudson was Mary Aldridge, born in the small town of Colchester from the county of the same name in eastern Britain. It was an ordinary town where everyone knew each other and weddings and funerals were the most striking events. The youngest child in the family was a red-haired green-eyed girl, who was not at all inspired by the prospect of marrying Bobby Smith or Tommy O'Brien, having children and spending the rest of her life growing roses and chatting with other moms in the evenings.

Mary had dreamed of becoming an actress since childhood. And not just an actress, but a Hollywood star, like Audrey Hepburn or Bette Davis. Her brothers and sister used to frankly laugh at her stupid fantasies, her father shook his head silently, and her mother advised her to throw all sorts of nonsense out of her head and think about something more tangible. But young Mary was not going to give up. She began to work as a waitress at a local cafe and soon succeeded in saving a little money - just enough to buy herself a ticket for a cargo ship going overseas.

- “A cargo ship?” - I asked to make sure that I understood my interlocutress correctly.

She smiled, a little embarrassed.

- “It was cheaper than flying, although it took me more than a week to get there.”

- “And weren't you scared?”

- “A little.” - Grandma Mary blushed slightly.

Of course, she was scared. It was not a cruise ship designed for pleasure trips. However, Mary forgot about everything on the ship with the romantic name “Wings of Hope”. A vast ocean and enchanting America - a country where there was a possibility of dreams coming true. These were the thoughts of a young girl, who escaped from her house at the age of seventeen against her parents' will and to spite the sneers of her elders.

On the ship Mary met Ronald. He served on this ship, and having noticed a redheaded girl dancing with joy in the middle of the deck, wanted to make a remark, but was too fascinated by the young Englishwoman. After learning how she got on the ship, Ron was a little shocked, but at the same time admired her courage.

I was listening to Grandma Mary's story with bated breath, and was afraid even to move. When she was telling me about Ronald, her voice sounded so warm and tender, but at the same time she was sad. She still loved him – I felt it by the way her voice trembled, and by the way her eyes gleamed dully in the twilight. She still loved and missed him.

Mary never became an actress. No one saw talent in this voracious, energetic red-haired girl. She could not be called a beauty, and she was far away from Hollywood celebrities. But for him, for her Ronald, she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

She sent telegrams home regularly. She used to write every week that everything was good, that filming was about to begin. Of course, it was stupid to write a lie with the hope that it would become true. One day Mary gathered the courage and called her parents. After this conversation the day ceased to be perfect. Her father said that he had only one daughter left, and her mother just hung up. Her relatives could not accept her decision. And if there was no Ronald, who became her only loved one in this foreign country, Mary would hardly survive. He was near when the whole world turned away from her and even her parents refused to recognize her as their daughter. He sincerely loved her.

Soon they got married. Ronald still served on the ship where they met. When he left for another cruise, Mary waited patiently for his return. Together they managed to save money and open a small café. Working in this café was brightening her sense of torturous expectation. One day Ron came back and with a grim look announced that he was fired. By that time, the café had already gained certain popularity. There were regular visitors who liked how Mary cooked. This helped them to survive the difficult times.

- “Didn’t you try to talk to your family anymore?” - I asked cautiously.

She smiled sadly:

- “When our business became successful, Ronald suggested that I visit my relatives. I agreed, but when I arrived to Colchester, we found an empty house.”

- "Did they leave?"

- "Yes..." – Grandma Mary's sighed. – "And no one really knew where they went. I finally lost contact with those who gave me life."

- "But they abandoned you," - I objected hotly.

- "Yes, but I could not stop blaming myself. After all, I disobeyed their wishes and ran away from home in pursuit of a phantom dream."

- "Are you sorry?"

She smiled.

- "I would be sorry if I had not met Ronald. In fact, I was very lucky to meet such a person. I was happy with him. When he died, I thought I would die too, but..." - she laughed softly. – "He came to me in a dream. We were young again and were standing on the deck of that ship. Ronald told me to put all sorts of nonsense out of my head and continue to live. And he said that he loved me as before and would look after me. Sometimes it seems to me that he is really still around."

That evening we sat in the hall till late night. Grandma Mary has never been so frank with me. I think that at that moment we became real friends. She recalled Ronald, shared the most cheerful and joyful moments of their life together. And I told her about Daniyar and adventures that happened to us.

I remembered how one day he heard a sound from a dumpster near the school. We were probably 12 years old. He put his hand into it without hesitation, and pulled out a stirring plastic bag. A kitten was inside it, and we tried to find someone who would adopt it before evening. In the end we entreated my mom. The rescued kitten grew into a splendid cat, Marquise, who loved Daniyar most of all. It used to climb on his shoulder and not move from that place.

Another thing I recalled was how once he tied the fruits from his own garden in exchange for peppers that I grew in the schoolyard, which were torn off by hooligans. I did not win the "Young gardener" contest, but once again I became convinced that Daniyar would always come to rescue me.

The anxiety did not disappear totally from the joyous laughter caused by good memories, but bad thoughts didn't enter my head so insistently anymore.

Chapter 9. Weekdays in America

I never missed class anymore and quickly caught up with my classmates. I finished my first year of study quite successfully, although I did not even believe I could do it.

On vacation, I did not fly home - it was too expensive, but I did not want to sit around either. I got a job at the 24-hour café, which was formerly run by Grandma Mary. At first, I was a simple handyman, but after I managed to restore, in emergency mode, the computer of my immediate supervisor Mr. Minelli, which suddenly ceased to work, I began to help his friends, friends of his friends and so on. Grandma Mary was proud of me and flatly refused to accept the money I earned.

By the beginning of the second year I was no longer perceived as a stranger. Or maybe I just ceased to perceive myself that way, and easily communicated with students from the university. I was even invited to a party. At first I refused, because I did not want to make Grandma Mary worry, but in the end, having received another invitation, I thought: “Why not?”, and, having warned her, I went to have fun.

Frankly speaking, going to a party, I had only a faint idea of how American students had fun. I saw movies, of course, but there was too much artistic fiction in them. The reality went beyond the fantasies of screenwriters and mine, too.

I would not be able to imagine what would be happening there even if I tried. The house of one of my classmates turned into a real nightclub for one night. Music rumbled from the speakers, alcohol literally poured in a river, and the girls behaved very freely, even cheekily. During the first minutes of this spectacle, I felt uneasy. I did not know more than half of the people. Actually, they were not eager to get acquainted. Despite general fun, everyone seemed to be on their own.

- “Maidit!” – Tim, the guy who invited me to the party, jumped up to me.

I frowned slightly. Tim was stubbornly refusing to pronounce my name correctly. At first I tried to resist, but then waved my hand.

- “Do you like the party?” - Tim asked, handing me an already open bottle of beer. The dark glass unpleasantly froze my fingers.

- “I don’t know.” - I said honestly. This caused the guy to explode into a fit of

laughter.

- "Relax, buddy!" - Tim slapped me on the shoulder and took a sip from his bottle. - "We are all friends here!"

I did not argue with my drunken classmate. It was stupid to explain to Tim that I had a slightly different understanding of the word "friends". It was not possible to relax, although the surrounding people clearly did not experience problems with this. Probably, because of alcohol. I gently lifted the bottle to my lips and gulped the cold pungent liquid straight from the bottle. The taste of beer was not very good, but my head became pleasantly noisy. Tim slapped me on my shoulder again, and waved a hand to someone in the crowd.

I saw the girl who had approached us in the gym a couple of times. Her name was Sarah, and she was a cheerleader for the university basketball team. Tim officially introduced us to each other and went for another bottle of beer.

- "So your name is Meidit?" - Sarah gave me a frankly appraising glance, from which I felt uncomfortable again.

- "Medet." - I corrected. My throat was dry, and I took a sip of beer, which no longer seemed so nasty to me.

- "Are you a foreigner?" - it was more a statement than a question.

- "Yes, I came for an exchange program." - I replied.

- "Cool!" - Sarah smiled, although her eyes revealed that she did not see anything cool in me.

The conversation was not going well, so when one of Sarah's girlfriends dragged her to dance, I sighed with relief. I had not learned how to communicate with American girls, and the matter was not in the language. Thanks to our conversations with Grandma Mary I had no problems with English. I just did not know what to talk with them about. We had no common interests. Sarah was an example. She was considered to be one of the most beautiful girls at the university, and I would agree with that, but our communication never went beyond our dubious exchange of courtesies. And, frankly speaking, I was not upset. No matter what Tim says, I will never become a "friend" to these guys. Leaving the unfinished bottle on the table, I headed to the exit.

My face felt the night chill. My head spun slightly, and my ears rang after the deafening noise of the speakers. I lifted the collar of my jacket and headed to

Grandma Mary's house. It was not so far to go. I hoped that a walk would refresh my head, and the influence of the beer would pass. I had never tried alcohol before and being unaccustomed, my body reacted too sharply.

When I was almost home, I heard steps behind me. I stopped and turned, trying not to make any sudden movements - my body did not listen to my brain very well. However, before I had completed my maneuver, I received a sharp blow to my face, which instantly darkened my eyes. The second blow went into my solar plexus and knocked the air out of my lungs. I fell on the asphalt, frantically trying to inhale and covering my face with my hands from heavy boots that started courting me from all sides, giving sharp, jerky attacks. It seemed like an eternity. I was being kicked, and I could neither move nor even breathe properly.

It all ended as suddenly as it had begun. Someone's hands clung to my jacket, lifting me to a vertical position. It was difficult to stand - my whole body ached, my chest was sulking, a cough was throttling my throat, and there was a metallic taste in my mouth.

- "Listen here, freak." - I heard, and opened my eyes.

I recognized this guy. It was John, the captain of the basketball team.

- "If I see you flirt with my girl Sarah once again, I will kill you!" - his voice was full of contempt and malice.

The threat was followed by a blow to my stomach, which made me bend beneath the pain, hanging in the arms of John's friends, who were holding me. Their grip weakened, and having lost consciousness, I fell onto the asphalt again.

When I woke up, there was no one around. My body seemed strange, did not obey, and responded with unbearable pain to every movement. Gritting my teeth, I rose up cautiously, trying not to make any sharp movements. I was led from side to side and my body ached. Anger overcame me, which probably gave me strength, not letting me stretch out on the asphalt again.

Practically on autopilot I arrived at Grandma Mary's house. She met me on the porch, helped me up the stairs and into my room. She did not ask anything, and at that moment I was very grateful to her for not asking what happened to me. I do not remember how I managed to undress and get to bed. Most likely, this was not without the help of my caring hostess. As soon as I was horizontal, the darkness instantly eclipsed my thoughts.

I felt unbearably embarrassed in the morning. Despite my heated protests, Grandma Mary called the doctor. I knew without any doctors that I did not have any serious injuries, except, perhaps, a broken nose and several bruises. These guys knew where and how to beat me.

Grandma Mary did not show her condemnation. She did not demand any explanation from me until I raised this topic myself, asking for forgiveness for the incident and thanking her for her care and understanding.

- “Medet, my boy,” - she said seriously. – “You don’t have to apologize. I know that you are not guilty of anything. I only ask you, do not do what you decided to do.”

- “What are you talking about?” - I did not understand her.

- “I know you're thinking about revenge now. Don’t do it. Don’t try to prove anything to these guys. You will not succeed anyway. You will only make yourself even more unhappy. Promise me you will not try to take revenge on them.”

- “I will not. I promise.”

I kept my word. The traces of the beatings faded surprisingly quickly, and I was able to return to my studies. At first, my classmates threw glances at me and whispered behind my back, but I did not give a damn about the rumors. Sarah came up to me, trying to apologize for her boyfriend’s behavior, but I politely asked her to leave me alone. She could not be responsible for John's actions, but I did not want to develop my acquaintance with her. Once or twice Tim tried to invite me to another “party”, but I refused to attend such gatherings and unequivocally made him understand this. In addition, exams were near, and I had no time for parties. Gradually, life followed its usual course.

Chapter 10. Christmas gift

After almost a year and a half I managed to get used to living in the United States. America no longer seemed like such a strange country to me. I caught myself beginning to say “I'm going home!” when returning to Grandma Mary’s “toy house.” It really became a home for me during this time, and Grandma Mary and I became close. Of course, I knew that this all would end soon, but I did not want to think about it. Another year was ahead, and there was no one

closer to me than Grandma Mary in this country and in this city.

I used to call my mother every month. There was still no news from Daniyar. I began to get used to this, though I kept asking my mother about him. I had probably just resigned myself to the fact that my friend went somewhere, and for some reason he did not say anything to anyone, and I could not change anything, at least while I was abroad.

I celebrated Christmas with Grandma Mary, although Tim was making desperate attempts to drag me to a party that some classmates had arranged. Not that I was afraid of repeating the incident, which I was trying to forget. It was simply uninteresting to me. In addition, for Americans, Christmas is a family holiday. And it was more pleasant to celebrate it with Grandma Mary, who became my family.

Her gift was a surprise to me. I became so entangled in my studies that I simply did not have time to buy even a symbolic souvenir. It seemed that she understood everything from my embarrassed glance, laughed and hastened to reassure me, saying that I myself was a gift for her, because I did not join my friends and did not leave her alone on Christmas.

I opened a mottled box, tied with a festive ribbon, and found a bracelet inside. It looked a bit like a man's watch and was very stylish. Grandma Mary told me that this was a talisman.

- "It belonged to Ronald." - she helped me with the clasp. - "I found the box six months after he died. There was this bracelet and a note for me. Ron had not worn it for a long time, but on the day of our acquaintance on the ship he put it on. It was written on a piece of paper, which was in the box along with the bracelet. And it was also said that one day, when the time comes, I would present this bracelet to someone close to me. I decided that the time has come. And I have no one closer than you, my boy."

I was touched by her words to the depths of my soul and promised that I would cherish this bracelet. Grandma Mary laughed, hugged me and touched my forehead with her lips, just like my own grandmother used to do. She helped me to fasten the gift on my wrist and stepped back a couple of paces, admiring the bracelet. For a moment I saw a young red-haired girl who was dancing on the deck of a cargo ship carrying her to America.

When the last year of my studies began, I seemed to have crossed some invisible

boundary. Not that I was counting the days until graduation from the university, but it felt like everything around reminded me that soon I would have to go home. Suddenly I realized that I would miss this city, the university, Grandma Mary, and even Tim, who, perhaps, had become for me, if not a friend, at least a buddy. I was getting sad because of these thoughts. I managed to get used to this foreign life, and I did not want to part with it, although separation was inevitable. At the same time I caught myself saying that I miss my homeland even more than during the first days of my stay here. I really wanted to see my mother, tell her everything, and hug her. After all, we have only been talking on the phone for two whole years not more than five minutes once a month.

Grandma Mary, apparently, was sad because of the imminent parting too. She did not show it, but I noticed a change in her behavior anyway. She became even more caring than before and tried to please me in every way, and sometimes she used to just look at me, as if trying to remember, and smile at some of her thoughts. We agreed that when I got settled back in my homeland, she would come to visit me. I told her so much about my country and my city that Grandma Mary wanted to see everything with her own eyes. I was pleased to hear this, and I promised that I would certainly send her a message when I settled down.

It was getting harder for me to stay at home, especially when it was raining. Sometimes, returning from a “computer emergency”, the way Grandma Mary smiling used to call my work for another friend of Mr. Minelli, I was wandering through the streets of Denver for a long time, as if saying goodbye to this lovely town. Passers-by were glancing at me, hurrying to hide in the warmth from the dank dampness, but I did not care. I loved walking in the rain.

During one of these walks home, I accidentally came across a small shop with a flashing neon sign. Written in elegant italics was “Do you like jazz?” “Of course I do!” - I replied mentally, instantly recalling my dream of learning to play the saxophone, which I had not yet realized. About three years ago, for some reason, I even announced this at the competitive selection for study in America. I smiled and went inside without thinking a second.

A small cozy shop greeted me with the soft soulful sound of the saxophone coming from the speakers under the ceiling. All the surrounding space was occupied by display cases and racks of CDs - a real paradise for a music lover. I always loved jazz and now I felt as if I had found an antique treasure chest. My eyes could not focus until I snatched the names of my favorite performers from

the general mass. Time seemed to have stopped for me. I was wandering between the shelves, looking at the bright covers of the discs. I wanted to buy up the whole store, but of course I could not afford such a luxury.

It took, probably, at least an hour before I finally chose a CD that would perfectly complement my collection. Having picked up a thin plastic box, I headed towards the cash register, counting the required amount on the move. And then something happened that was beyond any logical comprehension. I looked up and saw her...

Chapter 11. Unexpected meeting

The girl at the cash register took the disk from me, smiling affably, and our eyes met for a moment. It seemed to me that the ground had fallen from under my feet. My heart sank somewhere down, and my tongue literally stuck to my larynx. I was standing there and could not say a word.

She was beautiful! Her face shone with a radiant smile framed by luxurious dark hair, which fell in waves onto her shoulders. Her eyes, black as a moonless night, seemed to be bottomless pools. I felt myself drowning in them and did not dare to look away, afraid to move because I might destroy this strange magic. Never before had I experienced anything like this.

Several coins fell from my hands and rolled on the floor. I bent down to pick them up, cursing my clumsiness and sluggishness. One of the coins rolled under the counter, and I barely managed to get it. The girl continued to smile and it calmed me down a bit. I even tried to smile back, though the look I had at this moment was most likely pathetic.

She took the money from me and disappeared in a small room behind the counter only for a few seconds, but they seemed to me an eternity. When she returned and handed me a plastic bag with my disk, our fingers touched a little and it seemed to me that I was struck with an electric charge. My heart froze, my breath was constricted and my throat was dry. I could not squeeze out even "Thank you" and just nodded. The girl continued to smile and, I swear, it was not the smile of the cashier on duty. She was smiling at me personally. I nodded once more, and having taken the plastic bag with the disk, hurried to the exit.

I was seized with unprecedented turmoil. I could not even explain my confusion. What did I see that was so special in those velvety almond-shaped eyes? Did the

promise of the unearthly pleasure lurk on her lips?

The rain began pouring with renewed force, but I did not notice my surroundings. There was only the image of the girl from the store in my eyes. I kept going over these few minutes and tried to understand what happened to me. The answer came by itself, but I was brushing it off like an annoying fly. Love at first sight? Such stupidity... A fairy tale for young girls or for this notorious Hollywood. I categorically did not believe in the naughty Cupid who shot sharp arrows at his victims. That is why I came to the most logical conclusion. Probably, just the charm of the music plus the warmth of the little shop after the darkness of the street disturbed the peace and adjusted to a romantic mood.

Nevertheless, her eyes were constantly standing out in my memory, and I wanted to sing. Then I again regretted that I had not learned to play the saxophone. It could probably express my feelings, which I myself could not understand clearly.

Finding myself standing near a music store the next day and trying to see something through the wet display glass, I became even more embarrassed than yesterday. My legs brought me here by themselves. Why didn't I notice it before? After all, I walked along this street several times?

There was no logical explanation for my behavior. I wanted to see this girl, her eyes and her smile again. This desire was so strong that I could not cope with it. I had already entered the store before I could think of any justification for my presence there. Having searched for a beautiful stranger with my eyes, I went to one of the shelves, took the first disk and pretended that I was studying the list of tracks on the back, glancing at the door of the utility room that was ajar.

She appeared in a few seconds, and I hurriedly began to read the text on the cover of the disc. It must have looked very stupid, but I could not help it. As soon as she left the utility room, I was consumed again with such a whirlwind of emotions that I could only stand and stare at this stupid CD. I could not even think of approaching and getting acquainted with this girl.

Having thrown a cautious glance in the direction of the cash register, I became convinced that the girl was busy with her own business. She was not looking at me. Instead she was making notes in a log. Her lips were touched by a mysterious smile, and having caught my gaze she looked up. I hastened to turn to the shelves and exchange the CD that I had been holding all this time in my

hands. It must have looked even more stupid, but it gave me the opportunity to sneakily admire her smile for a few more minutes. I would stand like this until the closing of the store, pretending that I was choosing disks, but then she would suspect something. Therefore, having changed my mind after the fifth or the sixth CD, I went to the register. When she handed me a CD packed in a plastic bag decorated with the same inscription as on the signboard, it seemed to me that at that moment her smile was even more charming than yesterday.

The next day I went to the store right after the classes.

And the next one too ... I felt like a fool, but could not resist such powerful feelings.

I used to come to the shop every day. I hesitated for a long time, not daring to enter, but the desire to see her again was insurmountable. Walking along the shelves and pretending that I was studying labels, I was watching the beautiful stranger. Without realizing it, I got to the point where I could not imagine my life without this store. I literally counted the minutes until the next meeting, and when I was returning home, I used to carefully recall every moment, every fleeting glance, every gesture and every movement. I used to play the very first CD I bought in the store, and let my imagination take over. Every note reminded me of her. The stranger herself was like jazz, and yes – it was true love.

I did not dare talk to her. The excitement that embraced me every time our eyes accidentally met prevented me from it. In addition, my mind stubbornly insisted that I should not make new acquaintances, because soon I would have to leave the country. Why bother her if I had to leave soon? What could I offer her? And most importantly – would my determination be enough?

Chapter 12. Separation

One evening Grandma Mary was waiting for me in the hall again. She always did so when she wanted to talk about something serious. I did not wait for her words and sat on the chair opposite.

- “Medet, my boy, what's going on with you?” - she asked with a slight uneasiness in her voice.

- “With me?” - I asked absentmindedly.

She laughed.

- "You are in the clouds now too."

Mischievous sparkles were dancing in Grandma Mary's eyes, and I got a little confused.

- "Sometimes you have a face like you found a treasure and you do not want to share," - she said with mild irony. - "I suppose a girl is involved in this case. Am I right?"

I got even more confused. Her astute green eyes seemed to see right through me.

- "Yes... No... I do not know..." - I sighed. - "Everything is complicated".

- "Do you like her?" - Grandma Mary asked bluntly.

- "Yes." - I felt that I was blushing.

- "And does she like you?"

- "I do not know, we've never even spoken." - my cheeks were burning with fire, and I hardly found the words.

Contrary to my expectations, Grandma no longer laughed. She listened attentively to my confusing explanations about the history of our meeting, about the fact that I buy CDs one by one, but I have only listened to the very first one, about me being afraid to even talk to her, to give hope to myself for possible relationships. Grandma Mary asked me one question after this unexpected confession:

- "And what does your heart tell you?"

- "It tells me to approach her and..."

- "So what's going on? Go to her right now! You cannot ignore what your heart chooses. This might be the biggest mistake that you will regret all your life. Fate rarely gives you a second chance."

- "But... I'm leaving in a few weeks. I'm going back to Kyrgyzstan." - I tried to explain. - "She's here, I'm there. What fate is there?"

- "Is that your decision or your heart's? Love can overcome the greatest distances, believe me. Remember, my boy: if you feel in your heart that this is your dream, grab it and hold it tight. If you miss it, you will be sorry. It's better to regret what you did than what you did not do."

Grandma Mary's words inspired me and I firmly decided that tomorrow I would definitely meet the girl who, without knowing herself, took possession of my mind and heart. At night I could not sleep for a long time, imagining myself entering the store, carefully choosing the words for the upcoming conversation, going over all the possible options again and again, trying to guess how she would react, what she would say, how her eyes would change, her smile. Something was telling me that everything would be fine. I was not afraid that she would laugh at me - she was not like those girls who do not care about other people's feelings. Closer to the morning my mind finally gave up and having immersed myself in the sound of jazz in headphones I plunged into sleep.

I woke up rather late, but I felt quite passable, despite the fact that I could not close my eyes almost all night, thinking about the upcoming meeting. Having quickly put myself in order, and hastily swallowed breakfast, I went to the store, afraid to lose the determination. However, as soon as I entered the store and became surrounded by shelves of CDs, the names and contents of which I had already learned by heart, and met her eyes, I realized that I could not do it. All my vigor vanished somewhere, all my thoughts and pre-prepared phrases got messed up, and I was seized by confusion again. I could not make myself talk to her, limiting myself to buying the next CD. I walked to Grandma Mary's house feeling darker than the clouds, cursing myself for my own indecision. I should have probably returned to the store and tried again, but I had no strength for a second attempt. How I missed my precious friend Daniyar! He would certainly manage to force me to overcome my fears and talk to the stranger.

During the last weeks in America, I was busy with pre-departure preparations. I did not go to that store, trying to persuade myself that I had no time for that as I had much to do before I left. In fact, I was just angry with myself for not being able to talk to that cute girl. "However, this was probably for the best." - I used to persuade myself. - "Nothing good would come of it anyway."

Grandma Mary saw what was happening to me. From time to time, I used to catch her glances, in which I saw an easy reproach mixed with regret. She did not say anything. She did not like to repeat herself. I have always admired her wisdom and tried to listen to her advice, but I could not use the last one. "Coward, coward, coward!" - I scolded myself. - "You could not even tell her your feelings."

We spent the last evening in her house in the hall near the fireplace. She brewed

tea, baked insanely delicious cookies, which we barely touched. We talked about everything and could not get enough of it, feeling that the separation would be long.

- “Tomorrow I'll leave,” - my voice was quivering slightly, showing my feelings,
- “And I'll probably never see these streets, the sidewalks which I have taken to the university for three years and which I knew like the back of my hand. I would not hear boys shouting in the yard playing basketball. It was so strange... When I was flying here, I felt no joy. And now I admit to myself that I do not want to leave. You probably would not believe me if I said that I fell in love with America.”

- “Why? I believe you.” – Grandma Mary's lips were touched by a wicked smile, and for a second I saw a red-haired girl who was my age again. – “Come on, don't be upset! You'll be all right. And do not forget, you promised to invite me to visit you, as soon as you settle into your new life.”

- “I remember.” - Something in her voice made me laugh. For some reason I thought that she would have become a very good actress.

Both of us could not hold back tears when I presented Grandma Mary a warm, but surprisingly light woolen cloak. She immediately tried it on, turning in different directions, examining herself in the mirror and no longer holding back her tears. Where did all these directors and producers look? Beauty was not only in appearance. Grandma Mary would undoubtedly have become a Hollywood star, but even without that I simply adored her.

Insomnia tortured me all night. The feeling that I had some important business that I did not finish did not give me any peace. Tired from tossing and turning, looking through all the possible options in my head, I got up from bed and turned on a table lamp. My hands automatically reached for paper and pen. I was writing, crossing out, crumpling the sheets of paper, throwing them into the wastebasket with the accuracy of a professional basketball player. I involuntarily grabbed the unfortunate plastic case of my pen, trying to find the words, put them on paper and crossed them out again. I calmed down only when dawn was already breaking out the window, and a sheet of paper was covered with my slim handwriting. Having accurately folded it four times, I found an envelope in the desk and placed the letter inside. “Now that's it for sure!” - a tired thought flashed through my mind.

Grandma Mary fed me a delicious breakfast, and judging by red capillary vessels in her eyes I could see that she hadn't slept any more than I did that night.

We said good-bye at the doorstep and she asked me to email her when I arrived safely home.

- "At least send me a smile, and I'll know that you're all right. There is a good reason why you taught me to use the computer," – Grandma Mary winked at me, although I saw that she, like me, was hurt by the separation that was about to tear us apart.

In response, I tightly embraced this amazing woman, biting my lip to keep from crying.

Before going to the office of the company, which was conducting the student exchange, from where I had to go back, I made a decent detour to look into the familiar street. The neon sign was not on in the afternoon, and this place no longer seemed to me so mysterious. Looking through the store window, I made sure that there was no one inside. "That's better!" - I thought, sighing with relief.

I wasn't in the store for more than a minute. I left an envelope on the counter and left. The letter I had been working on all night was for the mysterious stranger. I tried not to think about what would happen when she found and read it. It did not matter to me anymore.

"Hi! Unfortunately, I have not found out what your name is, but I'm sure that you have a very beautiful name. The most beautiful! Same as your smile.

I'm sorry if this letter seems incomprehensible and chaotic. I am writing it at night and cannot organize my thoughts. It is so difficult to choose words in a foreign language to express feelings, which cannot be described in your native language.

I came to this country from remote Kyrgyzstan. You probably do not even know where it is. But it is not important. Tomorrow I'm going home. Most likely, when you find this letter, I'll be on my way. I'm sorry that I did not dare to speak to you. I do not know why...

When I saw you for the first time, something happened to me. It was like a flash of lightning. A strange feeling, but very pleasant. I could not stop admiring your smile, and your eyes just drove me crazy. You are a very beautiful girl and, probably, you often hear such compliments, but I am speaking sincerely. I used

to come to your store, stood there for hours, looking at the shop-windows and CD racks, and you probably thought: "What a strange guy?" And I just wanted to see you. I was buying the CDs only to see your smile again and again. My heart was sweetly clenched from your smile.

I never believed in love at first sight. But I fell in love with you at that very moment when our eyes first met. Every day this feeling became stronger, but I still did not dare to approach and talk to you. Instead, I wrote a letter and left it at the counter, while you were gone. It is probably silly, but I could not just leave. I wanted you to know. For all three years that I have lived in this country, the happiest moments were the ones that I spent in your shop, stealthily watching you. I am grateful to the fate that it brought me to you and allowed me to experience this feeling.

Thank you for your presence!

A strange guy who loves you and jazz!

Medet from Kyrgyzstan."

As the experienced travelers say, the way home is always shorter. Insensibly I found myself at home.

Chapter 13. New life and old anxiety

The meeting with my mother after the separation was predictably exultant. She covered the "dastarkhan" for two of us, cooked all my favorite dishes, and watched me eating enthusiastically.

- "Medet, what have you become! Completely grown up and yet so small, my little son!" - my mother carefully placed the next spoonful in front of me and asked me about life in America.

I showed her pictures: Grandma Mary, her house, my room in it, my classmates, the university, the American streets and all sorts of attractions. My heart sank for a moment from the anguish of the unfulfilled love, when a music store appeared on one of the pictures. I forbid myself to even think about the beautiful stranger, but I didn't have enough strength. For some reason, I did not tell my mother this love story. Perhaps, I was ashamed of my indecisiveness. Or I just felt that if I started the story and announced my feelings again, I would throw away everything and run back to America.

A new life in my homeland began the very next day with the purchase of a

computer from the money saved in America. First of all, I typed a detailed letter to Grandma Mary. I conveyed sincere gratitude from my mother, who admired her kindness and hospitality, and the invitation for the mandatory visit to our house. I remembered the time difference, but it seemed that the hostess who gave me not only shelter, but also wise support, was waiting for a message from me. My dear named Grandma answered almost instantly, and from her wishes of success, I suddenly incredibly believed in myself and started to work.

I did not have anyone's help to count on, so I compiled and sent out CVs for all vacancies in more or less large organizations that I could only find on the Internet.

Study in the States was now paying off. On the same day, I was already invited for several interviews despite the lack of experience in the specialty in my homeland, lack of recommendations and profitable connections.

Only a week after my return, I found a job in a large trade organization with branches throughout Kyrgyzstan in the position of an assistant to the system administrator. The firm was just introducing new software, and this required considerable effort from a small department of “Automation of control systems”, where I was taken. At first I was just assisting, setting up some little things, dragging “iron” through the offices and helping users with stuck programs. I had practically no free time. I was running between two floors of an office building and a nearby central warehouse, setting up and tuning the equipment. Sometimes I had to explain the same thing ten times a day. Surprisingly, I got sincere pleasure from my work and was mentally grateful to my friend Daniyar, because it was him, who understood that computers were my avocation.

Soon my immediate boss, more precisely, the head, Iraida Rustamovna, noticed and appreciated my efforts. They began to assign me training presentations, development of instructions for users, business trips to the branches with, as she was joking, “Mission of educating the stone-age-people.” After some time, I earned the reputation of the most hardworking young specialist and received an increase in an already good salary. My mother didn't get tired of repeating how proud she was of me. I felt that my trip to study in America was one of the best decisions in my life, although I made it only thanks to my friend.

However, Daniyar's fate continued to alarm me. Why didn't he get in touch? I tried to reassure myself that he would find out that I came back, and would call or send a letter – an old-fashioned paper letter as we used to do in the past. For

this, we had our own “secret mailbox”, which Daniyar came up with. A metal box from candies presented to my friend by my mother served as a mailbox. We split the bright fruit candies. That was him, my friend Daniyar, who used to always generously share all good things, which were not abundant in his life. Then my friend carefully wrapped the box in plastic wrap and offered to hide it in a place where it would be inaccessible for strangers.

There was a basement with windows as ventilation in my foyer. When I came back from America, I noticed the same cats or their relatives sitting there. If you extend your hand palm up in the second hole from the door, you will feel the niche formed by a broken brick. We put our mail-box there. Do I need to say that I was hoping and was almost sure that Daniyar left me a message with information about where to look for him? To my deep regret, though the box was in place, it was completely empty. I put a piece of paper with the number of my mobile phone there, hoping that one day Daniyar would if not knock on my door, at least call me.

I did not see have scary dreams anymore, or simply did not remember them. But every morning I dreamed that he would be near again. I used to wake up and clutch the amulet he presented me, asking - “Where are you, my friend?” - without noticing that I was saying it aloud. I was hoping that I would get some hint.

But there still was no news from Daniyar, and I decided that it was time to take the investigation into my own hands. Negotiations with the local law enforcement officers did not yield anything. As it turned out, the search was called off, and the case has long been gathering dust in the archive.

No one wanted to help me with the search for a missing person who had been gone almost 3 years. I had no idea what to grab for and how to find the tip of the guiding thread leading to Daniyar. There was not a single hint that would indicate in which direction to start the search. I interviewed all of our mutual friends and even those we just saw in school. I met with aunt Gulya, hardly holding the accusations against the mother, who had grown old from worry. But, I did not get the slightest clue.

I had only to print ads with a picture of Daniyar and paste them in the most crowded places. I used to take them on business trips, and distribute them there. I placed information about the search in all social networks, on all electronic bulletin boards. My hope that it would help me was diminishing every day, and I

hated myself for it. I blamed myself for having left without providing the means of constant communication with my friend. I felt that I had to do something, but I could not think of anything else.

Chapter 14. Extraordinary girl

My schedule was full because of work, but I remembered Grandma Mary with tender feelings. I used to send her e-mails, share news about my new life. On her birthday I even called her to hear the pleasant timbre of the voice, filled with self-deprecating humor and sincere joy from my congratulations. I missed her, our “toy” house, and, of course, I missed the beauty with charming eyes from the music store. I often thought about her during my first months home. I wondered if she found my letter, if she read it, and most importantly, I wondered what she thought of me at the moment when she found out about my timid but strong feelings. I drove these thoughts away as much as I could, but they came back again and again, without giving me a chance to put my personal life in order. Actually, in the cycle of daily worries, I had no time to do it. As if, having consented, my mother and Iraida Rustamovna, whose son of my age was already married, were telling me about the need to find a good girl. I did not contradict them, but I did not try to fulfill their wishes, because there was a nameless American dream in my heart.

Later on, a new acquaintance, a modest girl, entered my life. She was one of the young personal computer operators who worked in the organization. My sharp-tongued chief used to call their department a “forge of employees”. The most capable employees, having ably mastered the art of accurately typing the data from invoices and the formation of all sorts of invoices, summaries, and reports, invariably advanced to other departments or firms. I was quite a frequent visitor in this constantly changing team because of the beginners’ persistent desire to accidentally disable everything that was possible and impossible. Many girls of my age were trying to make eyes at me, calling me to all sorts of “mini-parties” or just to drink tea at lunch hour. I was trying not to seem wild and sometimes agreed, but initially did not consider the possibility of a romantic relationship. Among her colleagues, Asel appeared to be a mixture of old-fashioned modesty and iron will. For the first time she constantly used to address me as “Sir”, blushing with lightning speed, if I accidentally touched even the tip of her fingers. The girl could enter endless data without rest, only occasionally talking

to someone during the festive dinners. Honestly, her politeness and shyness meant nothing more to me than the frank flirting of the other employees. I did not care, and they did not win my desire. But naughty-fate was persistently confronting me with Asel.

One Friday, I got a call from one of the branches located in a nearby city. They needed my help to revive the tax statements “suddenly killed” by the chief accountant. I guessed what the cause of the incident was, but attempts to explain what to do by phone were unsuccessful. I had to go myself. It was just a 40 km drive. Therefore I refused my boss’s proposal to go there with the general director’s personal driver, having decided to go by bus. I expected to do the work in an hour and a half and quickly return to the office.

I shouldn’t have been so self-assured! After resurrecting the data for the chief accountant, I was asked to look at a few more computers, and I left the branch later than I had planned. Plus, on the way back the bus broke down. I could go straight home, but I recalled that the keys together with a bulk of my money were at work and my mother had gone to visit grandmother for the weekend. I had to hitchhike to get to the office before the end of the day. I was late anyway. It was good that the guard Sadyk was still there. Having borrowed from him the necessary amount for a few minutes, I paid the driver and went to my office to collect my stuff and keys. In the doorway I froze in surprise - Asel was washing the floors incredibly gracefully moving and carefully passing a rag to the furthest corners. She had headphones in her ears, and I did not dare to smear a freshly washed floor near my desk. So I stood watching her until she saw me. She smiled shyly and took out her headphones.

- “Oh, Medet, hello!”

- “Hi, Asel, although we have already seen each other today.”

- “Come in.” - she invited me into my office, - “I will not disturb you. I will only quietly mop the floor and go.”

- “I just came to collect my stuff. Hand me my bag, please. It must be on the chair.”

Asel took a handkerchief from her jean pocket, wiped her hands and hurried to fulfill my request.

- “Here, Medet, take it,” - she handed me my bag. – “Have a nice weekend, Sir!”

- “And you too!” - I replied, taking my stuff. – “Another request - stop calling me “Sir”, please.”

The girl nodded hastily, and for the first time I saw that she was very cute. Her face was absolutely without makeup. Dark hair, brown eyes, long eyelashes. I asked:

- “What kind of music are you listening to?”

Actually, I expected to hear almost any answer, except the one Asel gave me.

- “This is not music. This is an audio-lecture on accounting and auditing.”

Apparently, she thought my extremely surprised look was disbelief, because she handed me an earphone with an ingenious gesture, involuntarily approaching as close as the length of the wire.

“...just like that, the goods shipped to the buyer under the contract of sale with a deferred payment are taken into account on the balance sheet of the enterprise, on the account...”, -a female voice, devoid of all emotion, sounded in my ear. I returned the source of accounting knowledge to Asel and said goodbye:

- “Aah...” - I said, - “Well, bye!”

I returned the money to Sadyk and was about to leave when he winked at me conspiratorially and said in a whisper:

- “Take a look at this girl. So what if she has a difficult fate... She is a pure gold herself.”

Only the fact that he was old enough to be my father kept me from speaking out about the uselessness of advice about my personal life from strangers. I said goodbye politely and went home. I will not hide that, on my way, with a smile I remembered the girl a couple of times. She was able to dance with a mop listening to a monotonous scientific discipline.

Chapter 15. Step forward

A few weeks passed, and suddenly my dream about Daniyar returned. It was more nightmarish than before. My friend was standing at a distance of just over 3 meters from me, but there was a deep cleft between us. I was looking around in search of a way to overcome the barrier. My friend was silent, and it was

impossible to understand anything in his eyes. I could not force myself to jump over these ill-fated meters. I tried to call Daniyar, because his physical training had always been better than mine, but he only smiled slightly. And when his lips parted, I saw a gaping emptiness instead of his snow-white teeth.

I almost forgot what it was like to wake up from a cry in a cold sweat. My fairly terrified mother hugged me, stroked my head, lulling me, like a baby. In order not to upset her, I soon pretended to be asleep, but could not fall asleep. Maybe Daniyar was encouraging me not to quit searching? Maybe he was asking me to help him, and I did not know how to do it? Having decided to update the flyers on the streets, I suddenly was almost late for work because I simply overslept.

As luck would have it, I had no a single free minute to fulfill my intentions during the day, and I stayed in the office after work. I asked permission from Iraida Rustamovna to use the printer for personal purposes.

- "I will refund all the supplies. I just need it very urgently."

I was lucky to have such a clever and understanding boss. She handed me a bundle of thick paper, and, leaving, wished me good luck.

- "Medet, print more on an ordinary paper too. I will send them with the goods to every store we work with and to our suppliers."

- "Thank you very much!" - I sincerely thanked her and began to update the announcement and print out the leaflets.

I went through all the sites for search of missing people, and even filled out a questionnaire for a Russian program of similar content.

My sad reflections were interrupted by the knock on the open door. It was Asel, who was planning on cleaning the office and found it occupied.

The polite girl hesitated at the door, until I signaled for her to enter.

- "Come in, Asel. Do not mop near my table. I'll mop myself before I leave."

She came in and started cleaning, and when she finished she turned to me quietly:

- "Don't mop anything, Sir. I'll clean in other offices and come back here again."

- "Are you calling me "Sir" again? I'm not that much older than you, probably..."

- “Ok, don’t be offended, Medet.” - Asel blushed and went out.

Of course, I did not listen to her, and she looked at me with surprise when I closed the door, coming out of my office with a pile of flyers in my hands.

- “Everything is mopped, don’t worry. You don’t have to stay at work because of me.”

- “Thank you!” - she was grateful, - “Can I help you with the announcements then?”

I just nodded in agreement, because it was becoming more and more difficult every day to remain alone with my sad thoughts about Daniyar and the beautiful American girl.

It was convenient to carry out my voluntary mission, which I considered to be my holy duty, with Asel. She was putting up the flyers very quickly, and it was much easier to talk with her than I thought. She was responding to questions about herself in monosyllables. She was 18 years old, she was dreaming of getting an education. They didn’t have enough money in the family that is why she was working as a cleaner.

- “Can you imagine, Medet, how happy I was when the director allowed me to clean the office? I do not spend time traveling between jobs. So I can study more.”

As if becoming frightened that she opened up to me so unexpectedly, Asel sharply changed the topic of the conversation and began to ask about America. She was interested in absolutely everything, and she was an excellent listener. And in general, I felt well and was comfortable with her.

It was already late, and I, without any far-reaching plans, just out of politeness, offered to take her home. She agreed simply, without affectation. I did not feel any agonizing excitement or painful confusion. My heart was not knocking at a frenzied pace with her, but it was nice to talk to her. Asel’s house was quite far from the place where we came, putting up leaflets, but because of our conversation the way was almost imperceptible.

- “Thank you, Medet. I did not think that you were so good and simple.” - Asel blushed slightly, it was even noticeable in the dim light of the bulb near the entrance. - “Thank you for bringing me home.”

- “Thank you for the pleasant company!”

It would be untrue to consider that after this walk we became friends or even more, but I did not feel any negative emotions after our walk. However, before going to sleep, listening to the first CD, which I bought in America, I was still dreaming about the American girl with bottomless black eyes.

Chapter 16. Asel's story

Due to my work, I had to drop into the office of the operators. Asel had never showed her feelings toward me, which I had been stubbornly ignoring. However, as I began to understand, the women's team turned out to be a real serpent's lair.

- "Oh, girls, Medet is here! Now our Asel will blossom again!" - sharp-witted Zeinep used to chirp. - "Medet, look how you influence the girl! She is just blushing!"

- "Right! And she probably breaks the computer herself to make Medet visit us!" - her nearest girlfriend used to continue the humor.

Asel used to become confused and enter the data even more diligently. By the way, her computer always worked without failure. She followed the instructions flawlessly and at the same time tried to cope with all problems on her own.

The girls used to laugh without malice, but involuntarily, thanks to their jokes about Asel, I myself noticed that she was looking at me in some special way. I tried not to focus on this thought, because my heart was left in America.

I realized that the girl was in love with me after a few weeks. My mother and I were at the shopping mall and met Asel. She respectfully greeted me and wanted to move on, but at that moment a boy and a girl of 9 years old jumped out from behind the shelf.

- "Mom, Mom!" - they shouted in vain, - "Ilyas and his classmate are fighting!"

Asel quickly told us: "Sorry" - and rushed after the children.

Mom looked after her closely and noticed:

- "Medet, this girl works with you, let's go help her."

When we came to the conflict site, we saw how fragile Asel kept two boys in her outstretched hands and strictly told them:

- "Do you have nothing else to do? Plus, in the store! Do you want to go to the

police?”

The teenagers, who were taller than her by almost one head, looked subdued. Asel apologized on their behalf to the guard. She said to me and my mother, confused:

- “Boys are so quick-tempered sometimes...”

We said goodbye and went our separate ways.

On the way home, I listened to a lecture about the fact that such a pretty girl was looking at me with adoration, and I did not even offer her help to carry the bags home.

- “Mom, but who will help you? And anyway, why did you think that I should marry this year? I don’t have time for girls, even the pretty ones. First I have to get you up on your feet.” - I answered, and added mentally: “And forget the stranger from the music store.”

- “Oh, Medet! You will be sorry! You are listening to me and do not hear. Look, she is so cute and tender, but look how she put the rascals in their place? She would become an exemplary wife and a caring mother. They seem to be her little brother and sister.” - Mom continued thinking aloud, - “But did you notice what they called her? Look closely, Medet!”

“Apparently, Asel knew how to attract people even after a short acquaintance. Before her, I have seen this ability only in Daniyar. If my mother was fascinated by her, then, really, the girl deserved attention.” - I mused.

And when, about a week later, my colleagues began to tease Asel once again, I interrupted the way they made fun of her:

- “Girls, don’t you feel ashamed of yourselves?”

There was a silence in the office and, I surprised myself by inviting Asel to the cinema.

That evening we began to meet. In the depths of my soul, I had a hope that these new relationships would help me to forget the mysterious American girl from the music store, wrapped in florid sensual jazz. I cannot say that I was doing it very successfully, but I began to think about her less, being busy with interesting work, and spending my evenings with Asel.

She literally blossomed in my eyes and seemed so happy next to me, which

made me a little uncomfortable. Conversations with her gave me great pleasure. But the feelings that I felt for her were more like a bizarre mixture of friendship, respect, and gratitude for her adoration to me.

When she told me the story of her life while walking around the park with her younger brothers and sister, I understood what Sadik had in mind when he commented on her hard life.

- "My mother died when I was only 12 years old. Dad had a very hard time, but he was a generous fellow, as he did not give up and did not give us to somebody else. A lot of people were suggesting - give these kids to the orphanage or marry someone to look after them. He used to tell everyone that he would not exchange his children for anything or anyone. You cannot imagine, Medet, how I respect him and love him immensely for that!"

- "Yes, Asel, judging by your words, he is a miracle. I hope, we will make friends with him."

The girl only squeezed my hand more tightly, and I suddenly recalled sharply my best friend, whom his mother did not really need. In the meantime, Asel continued her story.

- "Ilyas was 10, Timur 4, and Gyuzel had not even turned 2. Dad was struggling with three jobs so that we would not feel deprived. Therefore, although we did not starve, we lacked communication with him. To somehow help him earn money, I began to knit all sorts of potholders, socks, and napkins. It's good that there were yarn stocks left from my mother. Our neighbor helped to put Timur and Gyuzel into kindergarten. Ilyas or I, and sometimes together, used to pick them up from kindergarten. Now it's easier - I work, and the kids have grown up."

That night before going to bed for the first time after returning from America, I mentally saw not only a stranger, but also a fragile 12-year-old girl who suddenly became her father's main support. It was unreal to imagine what their family had to go through during these long 6 years, and how Asel could remain optimistic and not become insensitive.

She didn't have that enigmatic look and gentle smile, compared to which the mysterious Mona Lisa seemed an open book. But did I only need mystery? I did not even know what kind of person that stranger was, and Asel was here. Real. Cunning. Open. My feelings prevailed over all rational reflections. I got tired of

comparing the girls, trying to find more features of the American girl in Asel. This, of course, failed, but I decided to take a chance and start building the relationships that initially did not have a hint of love on my part. At the moment, this option seemed absolutely right to me.

Chapter 17. Discovery

About four months had passed since the day that Asel and I began to meet. Everything was harmonious between us. My mother insisted that the girl must come to visit us, and they talked enthusiastically about everything in the world. At the same time, I happily noted that the girl did not forget about me either, involving me in the conversation. It was amazing how much tact she had.

I also visited her and met her father, who initially looked at me strictly, studying a person who had stolen his daughter's heart. Gradually, seeing the glow on Asel's face when she was next to me, he softened and allowed me to stay out with her until late. Sometimes she put the kids to sleep, and we went outside. Climbing to the roof, we admired the stars, listening to the gradually ceasing noise of the city. I kissed her and felt her freeze in my hands. Only the girl's heart was beating so hard that I could feel it. Asel loved me, but I could not awaken a similarly strong feeling in response. Such selfless adoration was new to me, but I was not going to use this pure love. She, without knowing it, awakened in me the noblest feelings.

We felt good together, and I was ready to connect my destiny with this cute and tender girl. I was ready to do this even without passion. I respected her very much for the purposefulness of that rare type, when a person does not go over peoples' heads, but achieves everything solely through her own efforts. I used to appreciate her for her modesty, an amazing sense of tact, ability to gently take care of everyone around her. When these qualities were added by neatness, smartness and outstanding culinary abilities, the image of an ideal companion for life was found.

I decided that it was time to think about getting married. Will you ask me about love? Well, it would come with time. Scientists say this about some kinds of biocurrents, pheromones, and so on, but no one knows exactly what it is. Perhaps in the process of living together these very biocurrents are induced and love appears? Even if this does not happen – I will already be lucky that my future children will have the most caring mother in the world. Time resolves

everything!

I wanted to make the offer beautifully, because Asel deserved joy and a fairytale despite her difficult life.

I found an elegant ring that would look amazing on her slender hand, and reserved a table in the best restaurant in our city.

At work, I arranged for an appointment with me, as I thought, future wife in the evening near her house. I was hoping that she would not guess. And, having asked to leave earlier, I dropped into a jewelry store and bought a ring. It was not pretentious. It had an amazing harmony: a strip of white gold stood out with an inlay from small diamonds against a background of yellow gold. Even such a simpleton in jewelry, like me, could understand they were an excellent quality. A larger stone was in the center. A definition of “brilliant of pure water” emerged from somewhere out of the subconscious mind. This definition and the whole ring were firmly associated with Asel in my mind. All these sparkling facets were like her precious qualities, based on an incredible ability to love.

I returned home and began to prepare. I took out a suit, although I decided not to put on a tie. I put the velvet case with the ring into my pocket. There was plenty of time and I thought that it would be quite nice to listen to good music and tune in for a romantic evening. I gently picked up one of the plastic bags with CDs, which all this time have been in the closet. At first I was afraid to touch these bags, because they kept the prints of the fingers of a mysterious girl. I admired them, but did not dare to open them. But on this day, having made up my mind to make abrupt changes in my life, for the first time I did not experience awe, looking at them. I neatly opened the package, as if it was alive, pulled out a plastic case with a CD. A four-fold sheet of paper fell on the floor. Straight lines of English letters, written in a hurried but legible handwriting, stunned me.

“Hello, stranger!

You have been coming to my store for two weeks in a row now. Do you like jazz? For me, this is the only real music. It would be great to know that our tastes are the same. Although... Do not be offended and do not think that I have too high an opinion of myself, but sometimes it seems to me that you do not come to my store for CDs. Maybe I'm wrong. Probably, I am mistaken ... It's unlikely that you might be interested in a simple salesgirl from a CD store when there are so

many beautiful girls around. I do not even know why I'm writing this letter to you at all. Probably, I just cannot think of another way to get to know you. If you read this letter, please let me know what you think about it.

Katrina”

I dropped the sheet. For a moment it seemed to me that all this was some strange absurd dream. I even squinted and rubbed my eyes, but the sheet did not disappear. It was still lying on the floor, and I saw the even lines of English words written on it. The hand involuntarily reached for the second sealed packet with a CD. I found another note in it.

“Hello!

I probably started all this in vain. You still do not react to my letters, but I cannot stop myself. You come to my store every day, and I'm starting to catch myself thinking that I'm looking at the clock, waiting for your arrival. It's funny, probably ... I raise my eyes and think: “Now that stranger will come!” I do not even know your name, but I wait for you every day. Strange feeling! I do not even know how to explain it. You probably think that I am a frivolous girl. Although sometimes it seems to me that you like me. You look at me in such a way that... I can feel your gaze, and I feel uneasy. I would like to know what you think, when you look at me? It is a pity that I cannot read thoughts. But, maybe, you will tell me tomorrow? I'll wait!

Katrina”

A message was hidden in the next one, too.

“Hello, mysterious stranger!

Are you all right? You did not come to me yesterday, and I began to worry. Maybe it's because of me? Are you tired of my stupid letters? I know, girls should not behave this way, but I like you. I realized this yesterday, when you did not come and I could not find a place all evening. I want to believe that we could make friends. What do you think about it?

Katrina”

I hurriedly opened the packages and found new messages. This could not be true, because it happens only in the movies or in some shows with silly pranks. It seemed that someone was about to shout: “Smile, you are on hidden camera.” But nothing like this happened, and the sheets kept telling me about my stupidity. I crashed on the sofa, reading another note.

“Hello!

When will you finally come up and look me in my eyes? You always look away. I feel that you like me. I already understood that you do not come to the store for CDS. Sometimes you even forget to take another CD, and your gaze gives you away. Why don't you want to get to know me better? Does something bother you? Please let me know if you really care about me.

Katrina”

“Now I know her name... Katrina...” - flashed through my mind.

It is difficult to describe what I felt at that moment, sitting in the middle of the room and crinkling her letters in my hands. Something broke in me. All this time the girl of my dreams waited for me to talk to her, and I did not even know it. If only I had known... If I had unpacked the CDs there in America... If I had been vigorous and talked to her as I planned... Continuous assumptions and perhaps ultimately lost an opportunity to find out if we could have anything turn out.

Muddled and confused thoughts flashed in my head like lightning. Staying at home was unbearable. I got dressed and went to get some fresh air. I had to put my rebellious feelings in order before meeting Asel.

Chapter 18. Hurricane

I was slowly walking along the streets and did not know what to do now. What could I tell Asel? Thinking of her my heart painfully contracted. I had planned to propose to her just 10 minutes ago. She was a beautiful girl, generously endowed with all virtues. I appreciated and respected her, but... “I do not love her ... yet”

my obstinate heart prompted, and “Never ever loved”. I finally heard it. All this time I had been driving this thought away from myself, convincing myself that I would be happy with a girl such as Asel. I understood that I hadn’t been in love with her, but kept initiating our relationship. I knew that another girl was in my thoughts and heart, but I kept kissing Asel. I closed my eyes and saw the stranger. Why was it so? Such a trivial love triangle, which you would not wish on your enemy.

I do not know what I was thinking, beginning to date Asel. Why did I deceive her? Why did I decide that I could deceive myself? How could I tell her the bitter truth about my frustrated bride? It would break her heart. How could I now look into her eyes? But I could not betray my dream, and my thoughts about Katrina were shining amidst the bitter meditations with bright flashes of joy.

Katrina, Katrina, Katrina ... I repeated these seven letters in my mind, sounding to me like jazz improvisations... It seemed to me that this name contained the barely held energy of passion hidden in the depths of her eyes and softened by the magic of her smile... Katrina - Now at least I know your name. In all other respects, you are just an unknown space for me. I find you so attractive. I want to know everything, because I'm sure that there is a wonderful character behind your bewitching appearance. I was convinced of this. I recalled that very recently, at the end of the summer, the news reported that one of the states in America, most likely Louisiana, was hit by a Hurricane called Katrina. Then I listened to this information only to make sure that Grandma Mary was not suffering. Fortunately, she sent me a letter and I calmed down. And now the black-eyed hurricane Katrina burst into my life with a bunch of notes, turning everything upside down in my life. Or vice versa? Returned me to myself? Short messages in absentia made me happy, even from realization that the beauty liked me. Although I had no idea what to do next, I felt almost happy.

For the thousand and first time I asked myself who she was. Just a girl who struck me with her appearance at first sight? Or the notorious “second half” from the parable of a man divided into parts, which my grandmother told me in childhood?

I mentally turned to my girl: “I guess you're my destiny, Katrina! Otherwise, why do I want to be with you so much? You drove me crazy and did not know it. You wrote that you did not know how I felt about you. I didn’t dare to admit it for a long time to myself, but all I've been thinking about all this time was you.

Those days that I spent in the store were the happiest in my life. As if I was a little boy, I was happy with your every look. And at the very moment when I was going to memorize all our silent dates as wonderful dreams, and keep them in the deepest heart, you appeared again. You emerged with gentle and frank lines, exposing your soul, just at the moment when, it seemed to me that I decided everything.”

I was slowly walking through the streets, and thoughts were swirling like a wounded beast. What should I do? How should I choose between Katrina and Asel? I love one of them and can no longer pretend. My soul reached out to her, although I did not know her at all. But I also deeply respected and appreciated the second girl. She loved me sincerely, she never lied, she was a real friend who always supported me in difficult moments and never betrayed me. Everything was perfect about her. Probably, besides that she was not Katrina... All this time I thought that I could fall in love with her. Was it worth destroying all this for the sake of “love”, which was not even real? Was it worth it to give up the present for the sake of the past? Imperceptibly, circling around the city streets in these reflections, I was at Asel’s door.

Chapter 19. Dotting the “i”

I was about to go upstairs, but she came out to meet me herself. Young beautiful Asel, in a beautiful dress with a small handbag and a cardigan in her hands. We were looking at each other silently for a few seconds and the girl spoke first.

- “Hello, Medet.”

- “Hi, you look great!” - my words were sincere and I just did not know how to tell her everything. I was going to cause terrible pain to the girl who loved me and tried to delay the unpleasant moment. – “Let's go?”

- “Let’s go.” - she nodded in agreement, and if I was not so busy with my thoughts, I would have noticed the hint of doom in her intonation. – “Although I'm not hungry at all.”

There was charming twilight in the restaurant, but even it could not disguise my confusion. Asel, a sensitive, loving girl, seemed to have immediately felt my mood and asked carefully:

- “What's wrong with you, Medet?”

- “What? No, everything is fine,” - I lied without even thinking. – “I did not sleep well at night. Sorry, I do not want to spoil the whole evening. What shall we order?”

- “I'll probably limit myself to a dessert and coffee,” - Asel said, glancing at the menu.

The local well-trained waiters seemed to have had even more strange orders. At least, Arlen, as it said on his name tag, did not even look surprised.

We were silently picking at our desserts. To be honest, I did not even taste. I asked, to somehow dispel the awkward silence:

- “Is it tasty?”

- “It's amazing.” - she said. She was trying to catch my eye and when she did, she asked, as if looking directly into my soul. – “Are you happy with me?”

I did not know what to say to her. Another lie literally got stuck in my throat under the gaze of the insightful eyes of my companion. She smiled gently without waiting for an answer.

- “You do not have to say. I was at your home today.” - she said softly. – “I met your mother on the street and offered to help to pick up her bags. She invited me to have tea, I had time before meeting you, and I agreed.” - the girl paused for a moment and continued. – “I like your mother and communication with her gives me such pleasure that I just cannot express.” - Asel put her icy cold palm on mine. – “She asked me to bring a chair from your room, and I entered your room. It was just a coincidence. Nothing more. I saw these letters in English. Curiosity was greater than I was, I'm sorry...”

- “Asel...” - I could see her eyes glistening wetly and wanted to comfort her, but I didn't know what to say. It was unbearable.

- “Don't, don't say anything...” - she interrupted me. – “Medet, let's go from here, I want to get some fresh air. Let's go for a walk?”

It was amazing how Asel understood my mood, because I was also burdened by this enchanting atmosphere with muffled romantic music. It was ideal to make an offer to marry, not to part in this restaurant. I paid and we went outside.

Autumn had not crossed the threshold beyond which there was slush, but it was cool. Asel wrapped herself in a cardigan and we silently walked into the park,

where we strolled so often.

- “Forgive me.”- I could only say, when the girl, as if her strength had suddenly left her, sank down on a bench, and I settled down beside her.

- “You don’t have to apologize. I shouldn’t have come to this meeting so as not to put you in an awkward position. But I wanted to spend another evening with you so much. I wrote you a note and just wanted to give it away, but I could not...”

- “Asel, please forgive me. I'm so guilty. You are perfect, the best and the sweetest. You are worthy of the strongest love, and I almost fell in love with you, but...”

Asel put her finger to my lips and did not let me finish my sentence:

- “But you love another. I understand. But I love you and I want you to be happy. I naively thought that I could make you happy, but now I understand that I cannot. I did not know that there was someone else between us, although I felt that you sometimes seemed to be growing distant. You were kissing me, being somewhere far away. Now I know why...”

- “Forgive me!” - I kept repeating as an incantation. – “I never meant to hurt you. You do not deserve this and it seemed to me that we would succeed, but then I found these letters and I do not know how to beg your pardon.”

- “You don’t have to.” - she found the strength to smile at me, although I could see how desperate she was, holding back her tears. – “You're not guilty and I don’t blame you. You cannot tell your heart what to do. I'm glad that I met you, we’ve had a nice time together, but I know that I have to step aside. It hurts to say this, but I would always be in second place and sooner or later you would come to resent me just because I'm not her. So, you won’t be happy with me. You love her, probably as much as I love you.”

- “Asel, I really appreciate and respect you. You're a wonderful girl and I...”

She shook her head, raised my hand to her lips, and kissed it, forcing me to become silent in surprise.

- “There is no happiness without mutual love.” - the girl sighed. – “Sorry, I really have to go home.”

- “Wait, Asel!” - I said, taking the case from my pocket. – “I want you to know

that I've never played with your feelings. Take it as a gift from a friend who admires you. I bought it for you, and I want you to accept it and not be upset with me.”

There was a whole gamut of emotions on Asel's face, and she took the box after a pause that was agonizing for me.

- “Thank you, Medet, I am not upset with you. You never promised me anything, and all my dreams are my problems and stupid fantasies. I do not believe in friendship between a guy and a girl, but I'll accept your gift. My only request is - tell your mother that I will be happy to hear from her and see her if she wants. And now I'm sorry. I'm very tired and I want to go home.” - Asel got up, took her purse and headed towards the exit from the park.

- “Wait, I'll escort you.” - I touched her hand and felt her tremble. – “Wait, please. I'll call a taxi to the central entrance, you're completely frozen.”

Asel nodded silently and walked ahead. I quickly called the dispatcher, but I managed to catch up with the girl almost at the exit from the park. The taxi came almost immediately, and she looked at me with her sad eyes, which turned red after the tears she had hastily wiped away. Asel handed me an envelope:

- "This is for you. Know that I will always love you. Goodbye, Medet, and be happy!"

- "You too, Asel. You will be happy. Goodbye!"

I walked home, amazed at how dramatically my life has changed during less than a day. Having nodded to my mother and refusing to eat supper, I went into my room and unfolded the sheet from the envelope. There was a poem dedicated to me.

“For Medet

You are my distant and close,

The most native and strange.

Simultaneously high and low,

Simultaneously mine, and not mine...

You are my bitter tears,

You are my happiest laughter.

*You are my reality and dreams,
You are my failure and success...
You know me, and don't know at all.
You are a reflection of me and someone else.
You are my happiest laughter,
And the most bitter grief...
You are my secret, and the light...
The night spills the sparks across the sky -
Maybe the night is writing me the answer:
Why are you distant and close?
Best friend and a barely familiar...
The night will spill the sparks across the sky -
Maybe the night will tell me who we are?
Why is my close one so far from me?*

Sincerely yours Asel... ”

My heart sank from the feeling of sympathy for the selfless and generous girl whose feelings for me caused her such pain.

But then I read Katrina's letters and began to plan a trip with anticipation of something magical.

Chapter 20. Return

By that time, at work I had reached the enjoyable level for a system administrator when almost everything was debugged and my constant presence was not always mandatory. With Iraida Rustamovna's permission, in my spare time I was engaged in programming, and she gladly helped me to promote the scripts I created. My boss repeatedly told me with sadness and at the same time

with pride that I had already outgrown my position. One day she even promised to give me the most excellent recommendation, if suddenly I decided to leave. Therefore, I had no problems in taking a leave at my own expense for two weeks. In addition, due to modern technology I could solve most of the issues that might arise from anywhere in the world.

The visa and ticket were in my hands, along with the hope of seeing Katrina, who fascinated me, I set off across the ocean, having told Grandma Mary about my visit. I brought souvenirs from me and my mother.

This time the flight did not seem so tiring to me. Honestly, I was not completely sure that I was doing the right thing. I was as worried as before my most important exam. Probably, even more than before the exam. But my heart was telling me that I was on the right track and everything would turn out well. I wanted to believe it, and I was driving my doubts away, looking forward to meeting the girl of my dreams.

America greeted me with warm sunny weather, as if my return made it glad. I called Grandma Mary from the airport. Hearing my voice and learning that I arrived, she became very happy and with feigned severity told me to immediately come to her and to not even think about spending the night in a hotel, as I wrote her in my letter.

Everything seemed so familiar: the house, the trees, it seemed that even the boys on the basketball court were the same. I would not be surprised if it was so, after all only a year had passed since the moment I flew from here to my homeland. More precisely, already a year.

Grandma Mary's "toy" house had not changed at all, just like herself. The same evening we again were sitting in a small cozy living room, drinking hot chocolate and sharing our news. Having made sure that everything was fine in my homeland, Grandma smiled slyly, again reminding me of the mischievous girl of my age.

- "Now tell me, what brought you back to the United States?"

- "Unfinished business." - I smiled back. - "It seems I left something important here."

- "Really?" - she raised her eyebrows so deliberately in surprise that I almost laughed. - "And what did you leave?"

- "My heart."

She laughed cheerfully and very contagiously. I smiled too, watching her and feeling the incredible warmth and tenderness that was spreading inside her.

- "Do you mean that girl from the store?" - Grandma Mary asked, although I could see from her eyes that she already knew the answer to her question.

- "Yes, I told you about her. You will not believe, but she also had some feelings for me. She used to write me letters and leave them in the CDs, and having lost my head from love, I did not even look inside. It's just incredible! I never thought this could happen to me."

- "What did I tell you?" - Grandma Mary frowned, but this was just a game. After all, Grandma Mary was a born actress.

- "Fate rarely gives you a second chance." - I recalled and quoted the words spoken by her shortly before my departure.

- "Exactly." - she stopped frowning and smiled again. - "You are very lucky, my boy. Do not let this opportunity pass you by."

- "I will not let it pass me by," - I said firmly. - "Tomorrow I'll go to that store. I hope she still works there, but even if not... I'll find her, whatever it costs me."

- "With such an attitude, you will succeed." - Grandma Mary smiled.

- "Do you think so?" - I still had some doubts about my decision.

- "I'm sure! It's America - the country where dreams come true!" - Grandma Mary smiled enigmatically.

There was something in her words and her mysterious smile.

- "Grandma Mary... but... You have not become an actress."

- "Not yet." - she paused effectively. - "Filming will begin in two months, so you're very lucky to find me at home. If you came later, I would not have been able to invite you."

I did not understand the meaning of her words.

- "Filming?" - I asked, not believing my ears.

- "Yes." - she smiled shyly. - "I was lucky enough to become acquainted with a director who was passing through our city, and stopped to have a snack in my

cafe. I read Katerina's monologue from "The Storm" to Mr. Minelli, you know, the one where the heroine regrets that people cannot fly like birds."

She recited a few phrases, which were familiar to me from school. In English they sounded amazingly spontaneous and harmonious, but most importantly - I was fascinated by Grandma Mary's talent.

- "Everything happened so unexpectedly. Mr. Minelli and I were talking about you, my boy. We were recalling how you ran around the city, helping everyone. I told him about your letters. About how you got yourself settled in Kyrgyzstan. That's why I thought about the Russian playwright, because it's not far from your Motherland. I saw it on the Internet. So I recited from the heart what I was feeling at that moment. I did not notice that there was complete silence in the cafe, and after I finished, applause sounded. And soon one man came up and introduced himself as a director. At first I did not believe him. I thought it was a prank or some kind of filming with a hidden camera. But he handed me his card and invited me to audition as in the dreams from my youth! I was worrying terribly, but I decided to take the chance that fate gave me."

- "Oh, Grandma Mary! I am so glad for you. By the way! Can you imagine, the name of the girl who took possession of my heart is Katrina."

- "Sounds almost like Katerina! I think it's a good sign, Medet." - Grandma Mary looked at the clock over the fireplace with an expressive look. - "Tomorrow you need to look perfect, so even though it is nice to talk to you, it's time for you to rest. Your room is waiting for you!"

I did not think that I could fall asleep, but it was morning when I opened my eyes. Grandma Mary cooked breakfast as she always did and wished me good luck, standing on the threshold of her "toy" house.

Chapter 21. Meeting with a dream

Being incredibly excited, I went to the store where Katrina worked. On the way I dropped into the flower shop, having recalled one of Grandma Mary's numerous aphorisms that all girls love flowers, even if they say the exact opposite.

I liked scarlet roses. These beauties were gazing proudly down at me, although their buds were located at eye level. After looking at me closely, the florist and shop owner in one person with a proper name (or pseudonym) of Flora, asked

me to listen to her opinion and then make a choice.

- “I can see it on your face that the girl for whom the flowers are meant means a lot to you. Scarlet roses are too simple. These are the basics of romance, and you need to tell her much more, did I understand you correctly? I can make a special bouquet for you, if you tell me about her. What is she like?”

There are incredible women on my life's path! Even such casual acquaintances see me through. I was a little shocked by this proposal, because I almost didn't know how to answer the question about Katrina. She seemed kind, gentle, mysterious to me. I voiced my thoughts to the flower girl.

Flora nodded, smiled and proceeded to the magic. She masterfully took a few stems of small white roses, which barely had had time to blossom, added daisies and some other flowers, similar to fluffy cornflowers or asters.

- “Go on.” - Flora smiled.

I was calling out the qualities that the girl of my dreams seemed to possess, and for every word there was a flower that immediately joined the others. Finally, without hesitation I shared the observation that I associated the girl with jazz music.

- “Excellent!” - said the woman with a smile, - “I have a decent final chord for you!” - she randomly, as if a magician, pulled out one paper from a huge basket with multi-colored packages. – “It will be this paper with printed notes and silvery saxophones.”

It was fantastic! The bouquet turned out to be unusual and the more I looked at it, the more I became convinced that the flower vendor's arrangement was much better for Katrina than the bouquet of roses, which I wanted to buy at first, though they were perfect too. The owner of the flower shop handed me her creation and wished me good luck and winked. I rushed to an appointment with my destiny, sincerely thanking Flora.

After a lifetime, but in fact not more than half an hour, I was standing at the door of the shop where the girl of my dreams was working. As soon as I grabbed the door handle, I felt a sense of excitement and awe, just like on the first day of our acquaintance. Fearing that if I hesitated another moment, the doubts would return, I resolutely opened the door and entered the comfortable room, still filled with the sounds of jazz.

She appeared after a few seconds. She came out of the utility room as soon as she heard the door open. At first she was just looking at me, not daring to smile, as if she did not believe her eyes, and then her eyes shone and a smile lit up her face. I missed that smile so much!

- “Katrina...” - I uttered her name, feeling all the excitement in me. – “I have come... to you. Here...” - I held out the bouquet to her.

I guess I looked very stupid at that moment, but I didn't care. She accepted the bouquet with a smile, covered her face with it, inhaling the fragrance of flowers. I watched her with a blissful smile, and could not get enough of looking at her. I could not believe in the reality of what was happening. She was very close, just a few steps away. She took my bouquet and was obviously glad to see me.

Katrina arranged the bouquet on the counter and hurriedly looked around, slapping her pockets, as if she was searching for something. Then she gave me a little embarrassed smile, gestured for me to wait and disappeared in the utility room. Those few seconds that she was not in the store seemed to me an eternity. All sorts of stupid thoughts crept into my head, and I carefully drove them away. Katrina's behavior seemed strange to me. Where did she go? What for? What could she need in the utility room right now? And why did she not even say hello to me when I entered?

Finally Katrina came out from her room, writing something on her notebook as she was coming. When she finished writing, she handed it to me, smiling guiltily. I looked at the notebook:

“Thank you! The flowers are very beautiful! I'm very glad to see you! Have you really come to me?”

After reading the inscription, I looked at the girl of my dreams, who froze, nervously biting her charming lips.

- “You cannot talk?” - I guessed.

She sighed and spread her arms, smiling guiltily.

- “Can this be cured?” - I asked for some reason.

Katrina shook her head and reached for the notebook again.

“I was born this way. Sorry, I should have warned you, I guess.”

She looked at me expectantly, and I did not know what to say to her. Thoughts

tangled themselves in my head. How? Why her? The girl whom I loved and for whom I was torn apart and flew from another country across the globe. Why was fate so unfair?

All this was probably visible on my face, and Katrina took everything personally. She took the flowers carefully and carried them to her room. She did not come out for several minutes, and I did not wait for her. I just turned to the door and left the store. I probably should have called to her or followed her, but at that moment I did not have a good understanding. The sudden shock of what I found out was too much for me.

I do not remember how I got to Grandma Mary's house. She was waiting in the hall, but when she saw me in such a lost state, she decided to postpone the conversation till the morning. I went into the room, which again became mine for the duration of my vacation in America, and fell onto the bed. The fatigue and emptiness inside me did their job, and after a few minutes I fell asleep.

In the morning, I was very ill because of an acute sense of guilt. I did not understand why I reacted that way. So what if she cannot talk? What's the big deal? She has such expressive eyes that you don't need any words! I realized what Katrina might have thought about me. She was so happy about my arrival, and I spoiled everything. A selfish fool! Idiot! It seems that I could become a champion in breaking the hearts of girls who love me. I was so angry with myself, and I was so ashamed!

Chapter 22. Eloquent silence

At the breakfast I sat silently staring at the bowl with cereal, carefully prepared by Grandma Mary. She was bustling around the stove, making tea and checking the cinnamon buns baking in the oven. I did not want it at all. I was mechanically stirring the cereal expanding in the milk, and thinking about what I should do now. Go back home? Had it been worth it to come at all?

- "Medet!" – Grandma Mary put a glass with orange juice on the table in front of me with a loud knock, tearing me from my painful reflections. – "What happened?"

I had never heard her speak so strictly. And it was not just a manifestation of her acting talent. For a few seconds I looked with amazement at Grandma, who was really frowning, and then exhaled:

- "Katrina... she's deaf..."

- "So what? That's all?" – Grandma Mary grinned.

- "What does "all" mean?" - I was a little confused.

- "Didn't you tell me that you would overcome all obstacles for this girl's sake?"
- a bitter grin sounded in Grandma's voice. – "And here, you've faced the first difficulty, and, believe the old woman, not the most difficult one, and you want to surrender at once?"

- "I think I offended her and she will not want to see me again..." - I tried to justify myself, but it sounded like pitiful babble even to me.

- "Then go and apologize." - Grandma Mary shrugged and set a fragrant bun in front of me.

- "Just like that?"

- "Why make it complicated? You still have to apologize, even if you decided to give up on your dream. And if you did not give up - beg. Ask for forgiveness, swear, stand on your knees and apologize until she forgives you!"

She uttered this tirade with fervor. She looked at me attentively, stopped frowning and smiled. It was much nicer and more customary to see her smile, but I still felt like a child who had miraculously escaped punishment. However, because of this, I felt even guiltier.

- "What's so extraordinary about what you have learned? Did Katrina change? Has she become worse than she was before you learned about this particular thing?" – Grandma Mary said softly.

- "N-no..." - I answered uncertainly.

- "Then what has changed, Medet?" - she looked into my eyes, and again it seemed to me that she saw through me, saw my soul, which was tormented by stupid doubts and guilt. But she was right. Katrina had not changed and had not become worse. As soon as I recalled her smile, my heart began to tremble again.

- "I'm a fool." - I sighed and did not answer Grandma Mary's question.

- "Yes, you are. Because of excitement or something else, you did wrong." - she agreed easily. – "And you are twice the fool since you are sitting here and talking to me while you still can fix it. Go and talk to her. The store is probably

already open. Tell me the address, I'll call you a taxi.”

- “No, thanks! There are probably traffic jams on the streets now. I'll run faster.”

- “Run, Medet, run!” - my wise hostess repeated the phrase from the Oscar-winning film, which we watched at least two dozen times.

My feet carried me to the music store. I was in such a hurry that I did not notice anything around me: neither the astonished looks of passers-by, nor the shrieking of the cars passing by, nor the fact that the scarcely growing rain had gradually turned into a real downpour. Without catching my breath, I swung the door open. The room was filled with blues. It sobbed just like the sky outside. A saxophone was moaning and calling for help. My beloved girl, whom I offended so badly, was at her place behind the counter. I almost cried out, paying no attention to a couple of customers fingering the CDs.

- “Katrina!”

She looked at me with a little surprise. Then she rose slowly and crossed her arms over her chest. The question was clearly seen in the girl's eyes “What else do you want from me?” The counter separated us.

- “Forgive me!? I offended you yesterday, but I did not want to!” - I was in a hurry to express everything, fearing that doubts and fears would again take hold of me. – “Please forgive me!?”

She reached for her notebook, but I grabbed her hand. I felt as if I was electrocuted from her touch, and then a warm feeling of possible happiness spread throughout my body, because she did not pull her hand away. I spoke, trying to express everything I felt for her.

- “Please listen to me!” - I begged. – “I came from another country just to see you again. I left everything to see your smile. I don't care that you cannot talk. It does not make any difference to me. I am sure that we will find a way to communicate. We'll write notes to each other. It's even more romantic, you know. The only thing that matters to me is to be with you. I will definitely learn sign language, and it will become very easy for us to communicate.”

She listened to me attentively, and I saw how her expression changed. Irritation and reproach were replaced by sincere surprise and confusion. My God, what an expressive look she had! No words were needed to understand what she was feeling and what she was thinking.

Katrina released her hand from my hand, reached for the notebook and wrote only one word in it: “Why?”

- “Because I love you!” - I breathed out. – “I fell in love with you from our very first meeting, but I was frightened of my own feelings, which were too new and unusual for me. I was afraid that if I came up to you and tried to speak, you would think that I was crazy. I could not even imagine that a beautiful girl like you could pay attention to someone like me. After all, I'm an ordinary guy. Plus, I am a foreigner. And I knew that I would have to leave and decided to leave it as it was. I used to come, buy CDs and did not even open them. I was listening to the very first CD, which became for me a symbol of our first meeting. I flew home, but could not forget you. And then I found your letters. And here I am. I came only for your sake. And again I spoiled everything because I was frightened. I'm a coward and a fool! But I love you and all I want is for you to forgive me and give me another chance. Please?!”

The flow of my words dried up, and I became silent, looking straight into her eyes. I wanted Katrina to believe that I was sincere. For a while we were just standing and looking at each other, keeping silent, and then she slowly raised her hand, clenched into a fist with a raised up her little finger. I watched her, feeling that something important was happening. Her fingers jerked and started to move. Then she lifted her index finger, straightened her thumb and the rest of her fingers remained tight. I did not understand the meaning of this gesture and the next one when she spread out her little finger and her thumb, squeezing the rest of her fingers. I did not understand, but I was trying to remember every movement.

Katrina took a notebook and quickly wrote a few words that made me the happiest guy in the world.

“It means: I love you!”

She was smiling again.

- “Is it like this?” - I gently repeated her movements the way I memorized them. Katrina laughed and showed me again, and then she drew the printed letters I, L and Y in the notebook, showing how they are denoted in the sign language. I diligently repeated these movements after her again and again. I did it a little awkwardly, which made her laugh again. I felt that I would not be able to live without this incredible girl who gave me a second chance.

I don't know how long we stood silently looking at each other, having forgotten about everything, when someone behind me coughed gently.

These were customers who involuntarily became the witnesses of our communication and apparently ran out of patience, but did not dare to rudely destroy such a truly silent conversation.

Katrina served a middle-aged man and a woman who approvingly patted me on the back, and wrote something in a notebook and handed it to me.

“The store closes at 19-00. I'll be happy to see you in the evening. And now you have to go change your clothes - you're all wet and can get cold. I cannot allow myself this. Come again, Medet.”

I was not completely aware of what I was doing because of the overwhelming feelings, but I leaned over the counter and kissed Katrina tenderly. Suddenly I was overcome with the incredible feeling of flying! A slow blues song playing in the store seemed very romantic after my apology. But we were interrupted by another customer, who glanced into the store and I reluctantly went to the exit. At the door I turned around, signed “I love you” and was rewarded with the most radiant smile I had ever seen.

Chapter 23. Not regretting anything

I did not have the strength to keep the joy inside, and I literally flew “on the wings of love” to Grandma Mary's “toy” house. The door was closed, but the key, like a year ago, was under the flower pot. I read the note on the table.

“Medet! My help was urgently needed in the cafe. Come if you can. You know, I am already burning with curiosity.”

After having changed my clothes, I went to the familiar address. It was difficult to hold in this feeling of infinite happiness - Katrina loves me, as I do her, and in the evening we have our first real date. Judging by my radiant appearance, Grandma Mary immediately understood that my apologies had been accepted. She embraced me and, treated me to tea at a cozy corner table. She suggested when the stream of visitors died down:

- “Medet, bring her to us. The weather is not good for walking outside. I will be happy to see the girl, who was capable of capturing such a sensible young man's heart from first sight. I will have to leave you, though.” – Grandma Mary smiled

slyly. – “You know, even actresses have every minute of the evening planned.”

- “Thank you! If you do not mind, I'll cook dinner from our national cuisine and bring my chosen one to you like to my real grandmother.”

- “Medet!” - tears flashed in the eyes of Grandma Mary. – “I will consider this a high honor.”

I cordially said goodbye to Mr. Minneli and collided in the doorway with Sarah, whose boyfriend once beat me up. We greeted each other. Soon John entered. I did not have any negative feelings for him, and I extended my hand to him first. He slapped me hard on the shoulder, apologized for the past and complimented me. He said I was a real man and overall looked like a successful businessman. I realized with joy that the past no longer had power over me.

By the evening I cooked dinner, learned a few phrases in sign language from videos on the web, and met my beloved one with a prepared greeting. I was rewarded by the joyous gleam in her eyes. Katrina came out of the store with a saxophone case in her hands and in the evening played a feeling-filled improvisation in Grandma Mary's hall.

The woman who gave us her house for the most important date, was sitting and crying. I myself could hardly restrain the storm of emotions that the music was causing.

Katrina was an excellent teacher and, after only a week, she no longer needed to grab the notebook every time when she wanted to tell me something. We used to understand each other perfectly. Sometimes even the sign language was not needed, only one glance was enough. When I asked her to leave with me, she agreed, without even thinking. Her determination fascinated me.

Surprisingly, bureaucratic obstacles practically did not disturb us. After a little waiting, I met my beloved on my native land.

I cannot say that my mother was delighted when I introduced her to my American bride. I think she could not forgive me for breaking up with Asel, because she could only dream about such a daughter-in-law. I knew that they used to see each other, but the girl did not come to our house.

My mother did not express an open discontent and maintained a polite neutrality in relation to Katrina.

As for Asel, we maintained warm and friendly relations. She became acquainted

with Katrina and joked that she would not compete with such an angel. I was glad that she was not angry about the fact that our relations did not turn out successfully. We were able to remain friends - and that was the main thing.

When Katrina got used to the new situation a little, we went to my grandmother in the village where I had passed my childhood. I told her about the dream that was torturing me at night when I was in the United States.

- "I was so worried about you!" - she said. - "I thought you forgot about us. I used to pray for you every day, so that everything would be fine with you. So that only good and kind people would cross your path. I used to pray that you would find happiness. I wanted to see you so much! You have grown up. And you have a beautiful bride. It's a pity that she is... but this is fate, this is life. The main thing is that you love each other. The rest is not important."

It seemed to me that an infinite happiness was waiting for us ahead. The eyes of my beloved promised this to me.

Chapter 24. Blacker than black

The strongest positive emotions probably cannot last long and the dazzling bright streak was followed by the black one.

Daniyar was finally found. More precisely - his already decayed body. I learned about it from his mother when Katrina and I returned from my grandmother's. Aunt Gulya was horrified to learn about what had happened to her son, and only a miracle prevented her from losing her mind from grief. Daniyar was buried in a closed coffin, so it was very difficult for me to believe in the reality of what was happening. When everyone left, I stayed at the fresh grave. I wanted to say so much to my best friend, but I could not find the words. I left the "Tumar", which he gave me before leaving to go to America at his grave. It has been my security all this time, now let it secure his peace.

I was intolerably tormented by the question of how it was possible to identify the remains. I went to the investigator at the police station and saw the conclusion of the DNA examination with my own eyes. Due to the strong degree of decomposition, the exact date of death was not established. I refused to believe in 100% accuracy of the analysis, so somewhere deep in my soul I had a hope that one day Daniyar would call me as before and will say my name. Let it be almost paranoia, but I regularly checked the box with a number of my cell phone

in our “secret mailbox.”

I was sitting at a wide table and, as long as I had time, I was finishing these lines that were so difficult for me. After the last point I put down, I was treacherously choking back tears. The trouble did not come alone into my life that time, and it almost broke me...

I heard a child's voice. A three-year-old kid was holding out a picture that he had just painted.

- “Daddy?” - frightened eyes glared at me. They were so familiar to me...

- “Everything is fine, baby.” - I hastened to reassure him, quickly gesturing with my trained fingers. – “Daddy just needs to drink some water.”

- “Daddy, juice!” - tiny little hands gave me a baby non-spill-bottle.

- “You are so caring! Thank you!” – having taken the bottle, I took a sip. – “You look so much like your mother!”

My thoughts returned with a painful outburst to the most difficult period of my life.

Katrina appeared in my life quietly and left just as quietly, leaving me happiness, the meaning of life and two reasons to continue my existence.

She had complications during her pregnancy from the very beginning, but no doctor could convince her to abandon the twins she was carrying under her heart to save her own life.

As her interpreter, I went with Katrina to all the consultations and immediately learned the bitter truth. To survive, my beloved one had to give up the idea of becoming a mother. The doctors were pouring out the terms and risks, but Katrina did not pay attention. She grasped the phrase, which I translated, that the chance of saving her was only about 3%. Desperately gesticulating, she assured me that 3 was her favorite number, which meant that everything was going to be fine. Even my persuasion and vows that I did not need children if she wouldn't be with me did not help. Having heard this, she grew morbid and got upset with me for almost the whole day. Then we went to the store, where she chose a large, beautiful, and thick notebook. At home Katrina wrote a phrase in it: “Our children are the most desired and loved ones” - and asked me to repeat it almost

100 times. She said with gestures:

- “Every time you feel bad, write in this notebook.” - Katrina fell into reflection. A playful smile flashed in the corners of her lips. – “And someday let's print the story of our love. Our children will grow up, and they will always have a reminder of me in you.”

The planned cesarean section was performed by the best surgeon. The anesthesia was performed by an experienced anesthesiologist. The doctors fought for Katrina, but they managed to negotiate only a small delay from death. Perhaps, the fact that my beloved was able to see our children was the main blessing and a gift for her. The girl, Adel, was born absolutely healthy. The ailment, which deprived Katrina of the voice, passed our daughter by. The boy, Daniyar, was less fortunate. He was diagnosed with the pathology, which was inherited from his mother - he did not hear anything at all. Doctors made a not so comforting diagnosis, saying that this was possible for his whole life. But I was encouragingly smiling at my brave beloved, who fought for the life of our children.

At some point, I almost believed that everything would be fine. But, apparently, I had too much happiness with Katrina. It was such an impossible, all-consuming and magical happiness. Our accidental meeting changed our lives forever. I would never forget what had happened between us. But, probably, fate appointed a corresponding price for such an incredible happiness.

I had just returned home from Katrina's hospital ward when I got a call.

The doctor said:

- “Medet, condolences to you. Katrina left for another world. A blockage occurred and we...”

The words poured from the phone. I listened to them, but could not understand, as if the doctor was speaking in an unknown dialect.

That time I understood the expression about the fallen heavens. Grief nearly crushed me and I hardly remembered all the sad ceremonies. I was going somewhere, negotiated with someone and decided something. I took the children from the hospital together with my mother, but later I somehow neglected them. I got lost in my work. Coming home, I ate quickly and went to the computer. I used to put on headphones, turn on jazz, write programs or just look at the

monitor without really seeing anything.

It was the same way the evening when my meditation was suddenly interrupted. Somebody took off my headphones. I was indignant:

- "Hey, Mom, I am actually working!" - I turned in the chair.

But instead of Mom, I saw Asel in front of me.

- "Hello, Medet!" - the girl's voice was soft.

- "Hello, what do you want?"

- "I do not want anything, but your children need a father, food, diapers, and love. You let all the worries fall on your mother and withdrew!"

- "Why do you care? This is my life, so leave me alone, okay?"

Asel did not raise her voice, but her every word sounded stronger than screaming.

- "I thought you were strong! I respected you! And you... You just gave up! You sit and pity yourself! Look around, finally! Look at your mother! She gets up to take care of your children in the middle of the night, nurses them in the afternoon, massages their tummies when they have colic and feeds them. Do you even know that she had to leave work? Did you think about when she has time to look after the babies, to cook for you, an adult fool, wash and comfort? Do you know when she sleeps and does she sleep at all? Do you understand that the children are going on their second month already, but you have not even gone to get them birth certificates?"

I listened to Asel, who was flushed with anger and boiling with resentment. Her words were more than fair, but I blurted out, surprised at myself:

- "Katrina died because of them!"

I did not have time to finish the conversation - the girl slapped me, tears streamed down her cheeks. She turned and left. I felt as if a veil fell from my eyes. I think, only thanks to my burning cheek, I realized what I had dared to say. I had been sitting on a chair in confusion for a couple of minutes, and then I entered the hall, turned into a nursery. Mom and Asel were holding the children in their arms, and it struck me like a shock: I could not even understand who of them had my son and who had my daughter.

- “Mom, go, rest, I'll handle the baby.” - I said with an almost imploring intonation.

From that evening, gradually, day by day, my love for my children was manifesting itself more and more, and was becoming stronger.

Chapter 25. On the threshold

My children are my greatest happiness and joy! They are the meaning of my life and for their sake I live! How could I blame them for Katrina's death? I lost my wife and friend - it broke me, and I behaved simply disgustingly. I truly, truly regret my stupid actions. I hope the children will forgive me for them...

Our little girl was named Adel, in honor of Katrina's mother. Our son was named Daniyar in honor of my best friend. They are beautiful, like their mother... I often thought of Katrina, telling the kids how wonderful their mother was. I wanted them to know everything about her. About her and about me. About everything that I experienced. We remain alive while we are remembered. For me the girl of my dreams and my best friend was still alive. The traces may disappear, time can pass, everything can change, but memories will always live in the heart... It's nonsense that time heals! We just get used to living with a constant pain, which is triggered when you hear a song that you both love, a whiff of perfume, or an image seen in a dream.

Delicious smells came from the kitchen, and I realized that I was hungry. And it was time to feed the children. Sometimes, the kids and I completely forgot about everything and spent hours playing, talking or just doing something side by side. Actually, so far I talk more, but it's just a matter of time.

- “Medet, Daniyarchik, let's have dinner!” - sounded Asel's voice from the kitchen. – “Adel and I have already prepared everything.”

Tender, infinitely loving Asel and my “sunshine” were practically inseparable, like true mother and daughter. I was distracted from my son for a second, smiling at this fact, and only then realized what had just happened in front of my eyes - Daniyarchik turned his head to the velvety female voice filled with love. He rose from his chair himself, took me by the hand and persistently, like a child, pulled me towards the kitchen.

Tears rolled from my eyes as we crossed the threshold to meet our girls. In fact,

we all just entered the new phase of our happy life.

That night, I filled the last pages with a phrase, which Katrina wrote me. Having closed the notebook, I kissed the cover and hurried to my faithful, understanding wife Asel.