

18+ Preference with Polunin



Short Stories

Yuri Yakunin



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Preferance with Polunin

«Издательские решения»

Yakunin Y.

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НЕЗАКОННОЕ ПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ НАРКОТИЧЕСКИХ СРЕДСТВ,
ПСИХОТРОПНЫХ ВЕЩЕСТВ, ИХ АНАЛОГОВ ПРИЧИНЯЕТ
ВРЕД ЗДОРОВЬЮ, ИХ НЕЗАКОННЫЙ ОБОРОТ ЗАПРЕЩЕН
И ВЛЕЧЕТ УСТАНОВЛЕННУЮ ЗАКОНОДАТЕЛЬСТВОМ

ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬ. «Preferance with Polunin» a «light' autobiography where I wrote about those who surrounded me throughout my life, trying to keep the tone humorous and light. It features stories, humoresques, and miniatures — a bit of everything, sometimes funny, sometimes scary, but mostly everything that actually happened to me. It contains all the things that didn't make it into my previous two books. I'll leave it to you to judge the result.

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Preferance with Polunin

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The Sadist Dentist

— One should protect not only their honor from a young age but also their teeth! —

When I was about 17 years old, I possessed not only excellent health but also perfect teeth. I looked after them like everyone else in the mid-70s, brushing them every morning with the salty-tasting «Pomarin.» One morning, I noticed something that looked like a cavity. Of course, even back then we knew about dental diseases and especially their consequences, so instead of going to lectures, I rushed to the dental clinic.

It was my first visit to a dentist, so everything felt somewhat interesting yet a bit frightening. In the morning, the clinic was almost empty, and I took a seat in the nearest chair. To my right, they were working on the tooth of a pretty girl who endured the execution of the electric drill quite calmly. However, just the sound of it instilled a sense of uncertainty in me — I had a feeling I wasn't going to enjoy this.

A young dentist approached me, listened to my concerns about the cavity, and asked me to open my mouth. Praising my teeth, he reassured me that it was just a tiny spot he could remove without any trouble. It would be over in a minute, and I wouldn't feel even a hint of discomfort. The doctor smiled, saying I didn't even need teeth whitening, showing in every way that his job was practically done.

Since we were already at it, I asked him to check all my teeth — just in case another spot was hiding somewhere — and opened my mouth again. Examining them with a small mirror, the doctor found a black dot on one of the molars and decided to remove it with the drill. I had never felt anything more painful in my life. When the drill touched that black dot, I practically jumped in the chair as if stung. The doctor looked at me and asked me not to be nervous or twitch, as he wasn't doing anything «serious» yet. I immediately wondered what would happen when he actually started doing something «serious.»

When the drill touched the black spot a second time, I couldn't bear it and flinched again. At that point, the damn quack pointed to the calmly sitting «Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya» to my right and shamed me, saying I was a man but behaving worse than a girl. At 17, that phrase hits like a ton of bricks. I gripped the armrests and opened my mouth wide.

What followed resembled torture. I imagine I felt exactly what those undergoing «interrogation with prejudice» at the NKVD felt — the ones who confessed to working for seven or eight intelligence agencies, assassinating Kirov, Lenin, and Julius Caesar simultaneously, and most importantly, personally planning to drown the world revolution in the blood of our dear and beloved Joseph Stalin.

Then came darkness and loss of consciousness. I came to from the sharp smell of ammonia. «Kosmodemyanskaya» on the right was still holding out bravely; looking at her, I felt a mix of admiration for her and shame for myself. The chief doctor, who had come running, diagnosed pulpitis. Seeing how pale I was, he started yelling at the «rising star,» saying that such a tooth should never be drilled without anesthesia — that a human is not an animal and the clinic is not the Gestapo. After giving me two shots of Novocaine and some Valerian drops, they drilled a bit more, put arsenic in the tooth, placed a temporary filling, and told me to return in three days.

Leaving the clinic, I breathed a sigh of relief, clicked my Novocaine-numbed jaw, and rejoiced that it was all over. In reality, that was just the prologue — the real story was yet to come!

The Inquisitor's Return

Three days passed. The arsenic was supposed to have done its job, and I returned to the same dental clinic. What a difference there was between the first time I whistled through the door of this «charming» establishment and today. As soon as I opened the door, my legs turned to lead, blood hammered in my temples like a sledgehammer, and my pulse was that of a sprinter at the finish line. When my nose caught that specific, now-hated «dentistry» smell, I thought:

— What if I just live with this temporary filling for the rest of my life? And when it falls out — I'll just die without surrendering!

But there was a lingering taste of arsenic in my mouth, and I didn't particularly want to die poisoned like Napoleon.

As luck would have it, there was no line again. Approaching the chair, my legs buckled and I flopped into it, reassuring myself that the revolutionary Kamo had endured worse. My «inquisitor» approached with a satanic smile, and I realized there would be no mercy. But, as a Caucasian man, I decided not to give up.

— Well? How are we? — By your prayers! — I replied. — Let's open the little mouth and take a look. — You're awfully tender today, maybe we should move this to tomorrow? — I said, my voice dropping.

The young apprentice-inquisitor looked at me like a boa constrictor. An internal voice whispered: — I'm with you, don't funk it! I didn't answer it, but I thought: — Sure, the internal voice is my friend, but these are *my* teeth!

To smooth over the awkward situation, I suddenly blurted out: — Have you been practicing? — I've spent these past few days drilling teeth with only your tooth on my mind.

Two objects glinted in his hands: a mirror and... a curved needle.

— Now, shall we open the little mouth? Remembering the previous pain, my soul sank somewhere into the region of my bladder, causing appropriate urges; my voice vanished. I felt a large bead of sweat slide from my temple into my ear. The feeling of helplessness was so profound that the expression «Mom, I want to go back» took on a literal meaning.

I closed my eyes and opened my mouth. I could feel the mirror and needle inevitably advancing on my helpless, arsenic-treated tooth, ready to finish it off — and me along with it. The tooth had been quiet as long as it wasn't touched, since I ate on the other side and avoided hot or cold drinks. But as soon as the «Holy Inquisition» cracked the filling and tested the nerve sensitivity with the needle, my pupils turned inward, and I saw the indescribably terrifying face of pain.

— You forgot the shot! — I hissed, jerking the butcher's hand out of my mouth. — I can't. I need to feel when you're in pain to know if the nerve is dead or not! — Well, it started hurting the moment you entered my mouth!

The sadist demanded I let him back in. — Does this hurt? — he asked in a chipper voice. I was stunned, gripping the armrests and biting down on the metal of the instruments, groaning inhumanly. — Bear with it, you're not the only one. I'll determine the state of the nerve, give you anesthesia, and everything will be fine.

When he finally took his tools out of my mouth, I realized there is no greater pleasure than winning the lottery or using the restroom after five mugs of beer.

The Breaking Point

— How do you react to Lidocaine? — What do you mean? — How does your body handle Lidocaine? Do you tolerate it or not? — I don't know! — Fine, we'll do Novocaine again. You reacted normally to that, right?

As this «man in white» filled the syringe before my eyes, I wanted to scream: — What for? I haven't done anything bad to you! — but I only managed to mutter: — Maybe we should just pull the tooth and be done with it? — Are you crazy? Throwing away teeth like these? We'll give you a shot, remove the nerve, and put in a filling. The tooth will be like new.

I had to accept the Novocaine block as inevitable, as I was bordering on a panic attack from the constant sharp pain. — Now, open the mouth and endure a little! — There's no turning back, open up, — the internal voice said. I began to doubt that this internal voice was actually mine; I suspected treason. However, there was no time to ponder — the dentist was already hovering over the tooth with all his sadism. I surrendered and opened my mouth.

As the needle slid along the jaw, searching for some canals, a «solitary manly tear» rolled from my eye. «Doctor Mengele» dabbed it with a napkin. — Go smoke for five minutes in the hallway until the shot takes effect.

I was out of that chair like a gust of wind. While I smoked in the hallway, the pain began to fade, and the internal voice mocked me: — Maybe just spit on it all and head home? If I had known what was still to come, I would have realized the internal voice was right!

When I sat back in the chair, not only was the pain gone, it felt like I didn't have a jaw at all. The Novocaine had worked. I looked at the doctor calmly and thought — let bygones be bygones. I forgave him everything.

Finally, I felt no pain during the drilling, only the smell of something burning, but that was bearable. Then, the doctor picked up the needle for removing the dental nerve. Since I had never been to a dental clinic before, I had no idea what the needle was for. I sat calmly, happy the pain was gone, waiting for it all to end.

When the doctor inserted that needle into the tooth canal, I did feel pain, but it was manageable. While the Novocaine held, I felt more of a scraping sensation than pain — the jagged needle rasping in the canal. Suddenly, the doctor pulled his hand out of my mouth, but the sensation of the needle being in the canal remained. I realized something irreparable had happened, mostly by the look on the doctor's face and the constant, though not yet sharp, pain from the needle stuck in the nerve.

— Well, here we go. The world is about to look very small to you, — the internal voice said. — Look at the quack's mug. The «Ripper» didn't have a face anymore; instead, he was one big question mark!

Then the dentist started behaving erratically. Realizing that once the anesthesia wore off, I'd be climbing the walls from pain, he decided to widen the hole in the tooth and pull the needle fragment out with tweezers. But by drilling further, the burr only pushed the needle deeper into the canal. Now it was impossible to reach. He should have stopped there, showing both prudence and mercy by simply pulling the tooth. But no, this «Kulibin of Dentistry» sent me out to smoke again while he went to consult with the chief.

Five minutes later, the «acupuncturist,» without saying a word, sat me in a strange chair that looked more like an electric chair from American movies — all metal with massive armrests. The apprentice-sadist strapped my hands to the armrests. — Is this an electric chair? — I shared my guess. — In every joke, there's a grain of joke, — my internal voice quipped. — Relax and close your eyes, — the «SS man» commanded.

It actually *was* a sort of electric chair where they kill the dental nerve with electricity. When they inserted another needle — this one electrified — into the broken one in my tooth, the pain

pierced my brain so sharply that my head jerked back, hitting the wall with full force. Sparks flew from my eyes.

That was the final drop of my patience. Freeing my hand, I stood up and leveled the «butcher» with a short hook to the jaw.

Bursting out onto the street, I caught a taxi and drove to the clinic where the wizard-surgeon Gvelesiani worked. When Batono Jumber — I believe that was his name — pulled the tooth, half a centimeter of the broken needle was sticking out of it.

I never had my teeth drilled again. I just had them pulled — and, of course, only by Gvelesiani!

Coma

Once, after yet another «domestic skirmish» at home, I moved in for a few days with my friend and colleague, Zuriko. At the time, Zuriko was about ten years younger than me and a divorced man. He was a high-level amateur expert in everything: from electronics to agronomy, from medicine to culinary arts. Even back then, he washed his socks in a «Vyatka» machine and his dishes with «Landysh» detergent. He was the best option for when you want to slam the door at home, declaring you're going to «go die at the train station,» but in reality, you just want to spend a few days in pleasant male banter and eating well.

That day, Zuriko decided to make golubtsi (stuffed cabbage rolls). I could only agree, since besides fried eggs, the only thing I had mastered since childhood was whipping eggs for gogol-mogol. We bought meat and cabbage at the market and spent half the day rolling them — well, Zura did most of the rolling while I grazed on the cabbage leaves that didn't fit the size.

When the rolls were ready, the «feast of the belly» began. To be honest, Zura himself was about the size of a cabbage roll — well, maybe two — so I was the one doing most of the eating, perhaps remembering that if I were actually at the station, I certainly wouldn't be having such delicacies.

That night, I tossed and turned on the cot, unable to get comfortable. I finally fell asleep with great difficulty after a hefty dose of Valerian.

The Awakening

In the morning, I woke up around seven and headed to the bathroom. Suddenly, I felt a primal, animalistic fear — not pain, but a terror so sharp it forced me out of the bathroom. The moment I reached the living room... I collapsed, losing consciousness.

I didn't wake up because of a cast on my arm or because I was alone in the apartment; I woke up, apparently, because I simply didn't want to die! I was lying in a massive pool of blood, understanding nothing. I stood up; my head was ringing, and I was shaking violently. I went back to the bathroom, turned on the shower, and began washing the blood off myself. Even though the water was hot, I couldn't stop shivering.

A terrified Zura appeared; he had been at the neighbors' house calling the emergency services. He had woken up to the sound of a body hitting the floor. When he rushed in, I wasn't moving. Being familiar with the basics of medicine (his sister was a medical student), Zura ran a scrap of newspaper over my pupil. Seeing no reaction, he concluded I was dead!

Realizing I was actually alive, he was overjoyed. He tucked me into bed and piled every blanket in the house on top of me. The shivering wouldn't stop. The ambulance arrived, put me on a stretcher, and decided to rush me to the hospital. I felt otherworldly, but I tried to act tough. When the doctor asked, «Is he alive?» I replied: — I feel the way dead people feel, I suppose. I wouldn't know.

My blood pressure was dangerously low. Honestly, I felt wretched. At the hospital, I lay in the ER for a long time because the ICU was occupied by two corpses. I felt so bad I whispered: — Take me to the corpses; it'll save you a trip to the morgue later.

By some miracle, the head nurse of the department turned out to be the sister of my childhood neighbor. She recognized me and flatly refused to let them take me to the operating room, where they intended to «cut for an ulcer.» She declared I'd die on the table from blood loss and that, as the nurse on duty, she would watch over me herself. May God grant health to her children and grandchildren, for as it turned out later, the ulcer was never confirmed.

The Nirvana of Khashi

It was Friday morning. They put me in a surgical ward, hooked me up to an IV, took tests, and waited to see which way the wind would blow. Drinking and eating were strictly forbidden in case they had to operate. By evening, I felt almost human again, though I was dying of thirst and hunger.

Friends started dropping by. Seeing my face as white as chalk, they fussed over what hurt. Nothing had hurt before, and nothing hurt now — I just wanted to eat and drink. In our large ward, there was a communal table where everyone shared their food. The sight of roasted chicken, khachapuri, and tkemali was like medieval torture. Every five minutes, the head nurse would march in and bark: — Anyone who gives him a drop of water or a crumb of food will be responsible for his death if the bleeding starts again!

So I lay there, surrounded by people who ignored my pleading eyes. Only one man could truly understand me as a friend — my Vova (may he rest in peace; he recently passed from cancer). — Vovik, — I whispered to him. — Tomorrow morning, bring me khashi. Straight from the khashnaya, with lavash and garlic. — Are you crazy? You'll die! And then I uttered the phrase that would circulate among the «gastric patients» of the hospital for a long time: — I'd rather die from eating khashi than die from not eating it!

In the morning, Vova didn't just bring khashi. What he brought was a fairy tale, no — a song, no — it was nirvana. First, I devoured it with my eyes. My jaw muscles were clamped so tight I couldn't even open my mouth at first. The smell was such that everyone in the ward immediately ran to empty their provisions from the fridge onto the common table. Someone even produced chacha — because what is khashi without chacha?

In that moment, anyone in the ward would have sacrificed themselves to eat that portion for me. When my jaws finally unlocked, I began to eat with such voracious appetite that everyone present swallowed in unison with me, their eyes glued to my spoon.

I don't remember any of it, of course; I saw only the bowl. Vova told me later how the entire ward ate vicariously through me. After the khashi, washed down with Borjomi, I truly came back to life and decided that dying wasn't worth it. Nothing hurt anymore; I just had a bit of a «sexy paleness» left. I lay there like a boa constrictor, eyes half-closed, digesting.

Domestic Warfare and Hospital Pranks

The men in the ward were whispering, trying to figure out which of the dozen beautiful women who visited me was my wife. — None of them, — said a woman caring for her son. — A wife would have brought matsoni this morning and fed him with a spoon. She was right. My wife never showed up at the hospital.

We lived our whole lives in a state of siege, where rare truces were followed by fierce battles. Her jealousy wasn't a result of my actions, but a symptom of her psychological state. It wasn't just common jealousy toward other women — it was an clinical case that extended to everything, even books. The «right of the first night» regarding a book belonged to her and her alone. If she told a friend she was moved by a certain book, and the friend replied she'd already read it, that friend was instantly blacklisted as an enemy. She had many «enemies» and very few friends — only those who agreed with her or criticized me more than she did. Carpet-bombing my conscience and soul was a privilege she reserved for herself.

By Monday, I had settled in. There were seven beds in the ward. To my left was Vakhtang, a polished, dignified man from a prestigious district. His wife, Namtsetsa (which means «Crumb» in Georgian), was actually quite tall with a tongue like a razor. Every time she walked in, she'd ask me: — Yura, I saw a woman in the hall. Was that your wife by any chance? — No, Namtsetsa, not mine. By the fourth time she asked, I snapped: — It's her husband's mistress. We didn't speak after that.

Across from me was Beno, a two-meter-tall giant from Western Georgia with the innocence of a first-grader. His wife barely reached his waist. They both had hernia surgeries scheduled. Before the operation, I asked Beno: — Did you shave? — Yesterday, can't you tell? — he said, touching his chin. — I don't mean your face! They're cutting for a hernia. You need to shave everything from your chest to your knees yourself. Otherwise, the nurse will scrape you dry with a dull razor in the OR.

Beno looked at Vakho, who had gone home to «freshen up.» Beno got an electric razor and worked under the blanket, then sent his wife for a real blade. For an hour, his wife scrubbed him in the shower. When he returned and opened his robe, «woolly» hair poked out from his underwear down to his knees, while everything above the knee was plucked bald — he looked exactly like a half-scalded rooster. The whole ward roared with laughter, and later, the doctors did too.

The Stitches and the Knot

A few days later, they were removing the stitches. Vakhtang went first, then Beno. Vakhtang came back, read a paper, and fell asleep. Beno returned, happy it didn't hurt. I whispered to him: — Are you crazy, walking around? They took the stitches out! If you walk, your guts will fall out. Look at Vakho — he's not moving a muscle!

Beno dove under the covers and lay perfectly still for two hours. When his wife arrived, he begged for a bedpan. — Go to the toilet yourself! — she said. — I can't! The stitches will burst! I walked a little and now everything hurts!

When Vakhtang finally woke up and stood up, Beno's wife tried to force him back down. — You can't walk! Your guts will fall out! Beno walked and now he's in pain! Vakhtang looked at me, then back at her: — Maro, since my wife isn't here to catch my guts, I'll just go quickly and come right back.

Beno refused to get out of bed for two days, insisting he was in terrible pain. Finally, the doctor made him show exactly where it hurt. It turned out to be his lower back. When they cautiously rolled the giant onto his side, they found the culprit: he had been lying on a thick knot in the drawstring of his underpants.

I «stayed» in the hospital for twenty days, but they never did figure out what caused the hemorrhage that led to the coma. They discharged me with a diagnosis of «Non-infectious Hepatitis» — mostly because they couldn't let me go without some diagnosis. I'm just glad the neighbor's sister didn't let them cut me open for an ulcer!

The Doppelgänger

Today I will tell you about my double — a man with whom fate crossed my path several times, one way or another.

Case One: The Stolen Jacket

Back in my school days, we had a theater troupe. I performed almost like a star; I truly loved the stage. Our collective was made up of students from different grades, and we were a very tight-knit group.

A year or so after I graduated, I bumped into a group of guys. Among them was Merab, a good friend of mine who had been in the school theater with me, though he was a grade ahead. I walked up to him to say hello. What happened next left me in utter bewilderment.

— Hello, everyone! — I said. — Hey, Merab! Merab didn't offer his hand. Instead, his eyes flashed with anger, and he hissed through his teeth: — Get out of here before I tell the guys who you are and they turn you into a steak!

I was stunned. — Merab, don't you recognize me? It's Yura! We were in the school theater together, remember? — I haven't just remembered you; I think I'll remember you for a long time. — Finally! You remembered. — Yura, why are you playing the saint? Did you forget how you and your gang robbed me in Vake Park a month ago? You took my sheepskin coat, my watch, and all my money! — You're joking! — I smiled, certain Merab was pulling a prank. — What do I have to do with a robbery in the park?

But then things took a turn. If Merab's words could be taken as a joke, the group of five or six guys lunging at me certainly couldn't. — Merab, is this him?! This shrimp stripped you? I should mention that Merab was over six feet tall (180+ cm), and the others were about the same. At 174 cm, I was definitely in the «shrimp» category.

The guys had already switched to heavy profanity, and three of them were holding me, shouting for Merab to hit me. — Merab, think of our years of friendship! Would I really strip you and beat you? — That's exactly what I told you then! — Merab yelled. — And when I talked about our friendship and the theater, you laughed and told your goons to let this «Caruso» go. They didn't beat me; they just left me there shivering and naked. And I won't beat you either, I'll let you go. Just tell me one thing: why did you speak perfect Georgian then, but now you speak Russian and your Georgian has an accent?

— Maybe it wasn't me! — I said sadly, realizing how stupid that sounded. — Oh sure, a doppelgänger or a twin brother, right? Only I know you don't even have a brother, let alone a twin!

I was silent. What could I say to such absurdity? — Let him go, — Merab told the guys. — He didn't hit me then, so I won't now. But I'm taking the watch back — even if it's not mine. They stripped the watch from my wrist and let me go. — Try to never cross my path again. I never thought you'd become a thief.

Case Two: The «Casanova» at the Bus Stop

In the mid-70s, during my third year of university, I got married. My days of skipping lectures came to an end — or so it seemed — because I was now the breadwinner, and skipping meant losing my stipend. Consequently, my health «deteriorated» rapidly; I still skipped, but now it was «out of necessity» due to illness.

One evening, while I was stuck in bed with a fever and a sore throat, my sister Tanya came to visit. She was unusually agitated — her face was flushed and blotchy, and she couldn't keep her hands still. Usually, she was calm, almost sluggish. Before she even fully entered the room, she erupted: — Sick, are you? Fever? But this afternoon, you «dog,» you were perfectly fine!

For me, knowing my sister, this was as shocking as seeing my wife (who could barely do the breaststroke) enter a cross-Channel swimming marathon. I braced myself. My wife, however, decided to jump right in: — Tanya, did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed? Let me get you some coffee. — To hell with your coffee and your «Yura»! I've spent my life covering for my brother, protecting him, and for what? He's grown up and look what he's doing! I would never rat him out to his wife, but I won't stay silent now. He's not just a womanizer; he's a jerk!

My wife's ears perked up at the words «dog» and «womanizer.» — Well now, Tanya. How did this «baobab» tree upset you? Was he out with a girl?

Tanya looked at me with such a scorching gaze that I felt like a rabbit before a cobra. — I might regret this later, but I'm saying it now! Today, during my break, I went to the grocery store. On the way, at the bus stop, I saw this idiot — Tanya pointed at me — with some vulgar girl. As I walked by, Yura looked at me, his own sister, as if he wanted to lure me into bed! I couldn't stand it and walked up to him. Go on, tell me and your wife: what did you say when I said hello?

I nearly choked. What could I have said to my sister at a bus stop in the city center when I hadn't left the house in two days? — Tanya, have you lost your mind? What girl? What bus stop? I've been sick in bed for two days! Tamara has been treating me! Tanya's voice hit a high pitch: — You think I'm an idiot? Were you wearing a mask? When I said hi and asked when you started wearing that «airport» style cap, you — you bastard — called me a prostitute in front of that brat and told me to get lost! When I asked if you were in your right mind, you said if I didn't vanish, you'd strangle me!

My wife looked at me, then at my sister. She knew I hadn't left the room, so she began to think Tanya had finally snapped. — Tanya, you must have been mistaken, — Tamara tried to calm her. — Think about what you're saying! He's my brother, I've known him for 20 years! It's easier to mistake a parsnip for a carrot than to mistake Yura for someone else!

Tanya walked over to me, felt my forehead, and seeing I actually had a fever, calmed down slightly. — Open your mouth. Let me see your throat. Strange. Tamara poured her coffee, and Tanya murmured: — And that cap... when did Yura ever wear caps? Wait! That guy had a gold tooth somewhere on the side! Ugh, such a resemblance is just magic. I obviously got the wrong guy. It's a good thing he didn't actually hit me!

Case Three: The Grapes of Wrath

In Soviet times, Georgia was one of the most Russian-speaking republics. People would switch between languages mechanically. We'd use Russian for technical terms (since there's no Georgian word for «garage») and Georgian for «profound» insults. Georgian profanity is far more multifaceted and offensive than Russian; it's an art form that often leads to knife fights.

One day, my wife and I were coming out of the metro and decided to buy some grapes. We approached a makeshift stall — about 30 crates and a scale. The seller was a loud, mustachioed «Mimino» type. He refused to let people pick through the crates, shouting that he wasn't going to pay for the leftovers out of his own pocket.

By the time it was my turn, the crate was full of «trash» — crushed berries and unripe stems. I asked him to open a new crate. — Hey, kats-o (man), who is going to buy this? Am I supposed to take it home? Take this, and I'll throw in two good bunches from the new crate. Don't hold up the line! — he said in a tone that brooked no argument.

He didn't know my character was worse than his. I stood my ground and monotonically demanded a new crate. The line behind me started grumbling. I gallantly offered my spot to a complaining lady, saying I'd wait. After ten minutes of standoff, the seller lost it. He grabbed the small hatchet he used to open crates and shrieked: — Either take what's there or get out, otherwise, I won't be responsible for my actions! I'll kill you!

— I think it's better for you to open a new crate with that hatchet than to rot in prison, — I replied coolly. — And it's not certain who will crack whose skull first. Though I doubt you have a

brain to crack! Are you really going to spend the rest of your life on a prison bunk over some grape mush? I spat through my front teeth for dramatic effect. My wife was frozen in terror, her philologist's mind already envisioning Crime and Punishment.

The confrontation was at a peak when a second «Mimino» appeared. He rushed over and whispered frantically into the seller's ear. The hatchet vanished. The seller's eyes returned to their sockets, and a forced smile appeared on his face. The second man turned to me: — Batono (Mr.) Georgi, forgive this fool! He's still «green» — he grew a mustache but no brains. We'll fix everything!

The first man opened several new crates and filled two bags with the finest grapes. — Respected Georgi, forgive me, I didn't recognize you! Here are your grapes — it's a gift, no need to pay. Come back anytime, dear friend!

I didn't bother telling them I wasn't «Georgi.» Yuri and Georgi are practically synonyms anyway. My wife spent the walk home looking at the grapes, then at me, wondering if I led a double life. — Don't push it, and you'll live! — I grunted as we entered the house.

Case Four: The Mirror Image

In the mid-70s, I was riding a bus in the sweltering August heat of Tbilisi. The asphalt was melting under the tires. I was sitting over the rear wheel, sticky and miserable, when a guy leaned over me, gripping the handrail. He was practically lying on me.

I moved away and looked at him. I was about to say something «pointed,» but I stopped. His face was incredibly familiar. A guy about my age. I felt like I knew him well, but I couldn't place him. My fixed stare caught his attention, and he looked at me with the same intense interest. We rode for one stop, taking turns glancing at each other, both clearly trying to remember where we knew this face from.

When the bus stopped, the guy got off. He walked around the bus, knocked on my window, and smiled — revealing a gold tooth on the side. The bus pulled away, and only then did it hit me: that was Georgi. My doppelgänger. And he had just realized the same thing.

We never met again. I often wonder what would have changed if we had talked. Two opposites from different social worlds. His path crossed with my loved ones and led to trouble for me — I wonder if the reverse ever happened to his friends?

As Yuri Nikulin used to say: «It just wasn't meant to be!»

Wolf Messing

In 1968 or 1969, Wolf Messing performed in one of the halls on Leselidze Street in Tbilisi. I was still a schoolboy then, and my teacher brought me to the show. She simply happened to have an «extra ticket» and suggested I tag along.

Before that, I had seen a performance by another artist of that genre named Strakhov — I don't recall his first name, unfortunately. But that was a show built on sleight of hand, where «random» people would walk up and suddenly find someone else's watch in their pocket, or various mathematical tricks. Strakhov was bursting with energy; he was fast, and before anyone could process what was happening, the «next dish» was already being served.

Messing was the complete opposite of Strakhov. At the time, I didn't just know nothing about Wolf Messing — I hadn't even heard of him.

Our tickets were near the very back of the hall, where the view wasn't great. Being a spontaneous person, I simply walked down and sat in the aisle on the floor, not far from the stage. A woman rushed over to send me back, but I told her I had terrible eyesight and had lost my glasses on the way there. Apparently, she took pity on me.

On the stage was a man well into his years, with a weary face. He demonstrated standard acts of hypnosis and suggestion, as well as feats involving the body's hidden resources. He also had numbers that were quite unconventional for a typical stage hypnotist.

That day, Wolf Messing spoke about his performances in... India. I don't know why India specifically, but he told a story about how he could instantly count the number of cows grazing past a train window. Right there in the hall, he demonstrated this skill by instantly counting the number of audience members who stood up; it took the rest of us about ten minutes to verify the count.

Messing also conducted searches for hidden objects belonging to people in the audience. I knew for a fact it wasn't a setup because I was the one who hid his handkerchief. Messing chose me for this task — likely because I was sitting right there on the floor near him. I hid his handkerchief in the inner pocket of a man's jacket. The man was sitting somewhere toward the back of the hall, and most importantly, by the time Messing began his search, I myself was unsure exactly which man I had given it to. Messing took me by the hand and, without asking a single leading question, simply walked straight to the spectator and retrieved his handkerchief.

However, the next act left the deepest impression on me. Messing threw a small ball into the crowd. He tossed it far into the hall, and it was hard to aim at anyone specific since many people tried to catch it. The person who caught it was supposed to write down a request — something they wanted Messing to do. A boy about 12 or 13 years old caught the ball, but he didn't know what to ask for, so his mother wrote the wish instead. Messing walked up to the woman and signed her concert ticket. That was exactly what had been written on the piece of paper.

Messing left an indelible impression on me that day.

Preference with Polunin

The late eighties, Daugavpils, Hotel Latvia. During one of my business trips there, Vyacheslav Polunin — the world-famous clown — was on tour. When I saw him in the hotel, I was stunned. It was mind-blowing: he was right there, within arm's reach, with his iconic shock of hair (not white back then, but dark). He walked and talked exactly as he did on stage. Most importantly — his room was right across from mine!

At nine in the evening, grabbing a bottle of chacha I'd brought from Tbilisi, I knocked on his door. A young, attractive woman appeared, her face a silent question mark. I decided to go on the offensive:

— Are you Madame Polunina? — Hardly! — she replied. — Did I get the wrong room? — You got the wrong city! — Are you joking? — What is it you want, anyway? — What are you — the KGB? — I shot back. — Hardly! — Then you're nobody! — I'm Lyolya. — I'm Yura. — And to what do I owe the pleasure? — You owe me nothing! — What's that in your hand? — Chacha!

She turned toward the room and shouted: — Slava, I think this one's for you! From the depths of the room, a voice drifted back: — If there's chacha involved, he's definitely for me. Come on in!

That was it. I was in Polunin's room — the legendary «Asisyai» himself! — This is from Georgia, — was all I could manage. The reality was exceeding all my expectations. Props were scattered everywhere, the room was thick with smoke, and in the center stood a table where a game of Preference was being mapped out.

— Do you play Preference? — he asked me. — I've never tried it on stage, but at the table — yes, — I tried to quip. — Sit down then, you'll be our fourth!

The third player was some humorist writer; I'm ashamed to say I don't remember his name. I can honestly say I haven't had that much fun in my entire life as I did during that night of cards. I can't recall specific lines because I was in a near-constant trance, weeping with laughter. Anyone who knows Preference and remembers Polunin's «Telephone Conversation» skit can imagine the bidding done in that style. It was a wild, non-stop improvisation.

Not wanting to be outdone, I immediately switched to a thick Georgian-inflected Russian. Like a «Knight in the Panther's Skin,» I fought for the *misere*. To show that there are no cheapskates in Georgia, I even bid without taking the blind! I won the bid but was swiftly punished and sent «up the mountain» with penalty points.

The alcohol did its job too. It was merry, soulful, and felt completely natural. We played until three in the morning. Slava gave me a large poster with an inscription: — «To an artistic Preference player, from a Preference-playing artist!» He even invited me to the show via the stage door.

How tragic that when I left Daugavpils for Riga at 6 a.m. the next morning, that poster remained hanging on the hotel room wall.

The Dancer

The next day, when the tour bus arrived, Lyolya invited me along as if I were one of their own. The bus was packed with musicians, dancers, and props. It was a loud, boisterous ride. Polunin was their god and king, but without a hint of arrogance; the girls swarmed around him — he was their idol.

Stately, beautiful, yet wiry dancers moved back and forth. By evening, I was practically a member of the troupe — the banter and the teasing felt familiar. When we went for dinner, I already knew many of them by name. Approaching a girl named Tanya with large, striking eyes, I asked simply:

— Want to come to my room? — My husband is calling at 11. Does midnight work for you?

Just like that. At 11, the husband; at midnight, me. — I'll find it myself, — she said. — I noticed your room this morning. You have a Caucasian accent. Are you Georgian? — No, I'm Russian. — Well, I left my Russian at home! — I'm from Tbilisi. — Georgian-Russian, then. Good. I'll come after midnight. Don't forget the champagne.

At midnight, Tanya arrived. She was slender, about my height, with small breasts but enormous brown eyes and a short haircut. I'd had many different women in my life, but never a professional dancer. My mind was racing with fantasies of splits, bridges, and whatever else flexible dancers can do. But what Tanya did next eclipsed all my fantasies.

She simply said: — I'll show you what I can do, and you make sure I enjoy myself.

I think we were both very satisfied.

Dzhibo

I had an Armenian neighbor nicknamed Dzhibo. I never knew his real name, as everyone in his family called him Dzhibo. He was a good man, kind, but... unlucky. We were great friends, even though we were completely different people.

Dzhibo spoke six languages: Russian, Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Kurdish, and, as I later found out, all of them only orally. I loved his unsurpassed sense of humor, his friendliness, openness, readiness to help, and his passion for music and machinery.

He drove a KamAZ truck. I often tagged along with him on weekends out of boredom, and it was always interesting to chat with him. Once, as we were driving somewhere, we decided to stop by his garage first so he could collect his wages. To my utter surprise, instead of signing the payroll sheet, he simply marked it with a cross — and this was at the end of the twentieth century! Apparently, my shock was written all over my face, because Dzhibo smiled and said:

— I spent my time traveling with my father, helping him; there was no time for school. It doesn't really get in my way. Of course, I learned to write my last name in block letters, but it's just easier to put a cross.

We were almost the same age. Since he was always behind the wheel, he rarely drank, much like me. However, unlike me, once or twice a month he would «shoot up» to forget himself. When he got married, his lovely wife bore him three daughters. On the fourth try, they finally had a boy; he looked normal, but as it turned out later, he was a bit «touched» in the head.

Dzhibo often went to Russia to work as a long-haul trucker. He would drive for six months, and the family lived for a year on that money; he even managed to buy out his KamAZ.

Once, seeing me come home from my job as an electronics engineer, he asked me to look at his TV, saying it was showing everything in green. After eating, I went up to his place with my toolkit, turned on the TV, and saw that the screen was... red.

— Are you colorblind? You're mixing up green and red... — I joked, knowing he was a driver. — Well, yes, I'm colorblind. So what?

After a pause while I processed this, I asked: — How on earth do you drive a truck? How do you tell the traffic lights apart? — Give me a break! I'm colorblind, not an idiot! I see the light is on, and I know perfectly well that the red is on top and the green is on the bottom. And why the hell does the traffic police torture poor people with those tests? A tenner in the right pocket during the medical exam, and you're not colorblind anymore!

I recalled my friend who was blind in one eye but, also for a tenner, managed to see with both.

One day, some repairs were needed on his KamAZ. On his day off, Dzhibo called a mechanic friend to the garage and took his son to the amusement park. The mechanic worked on the truck's chassis near the house for a long time, but when Dzhibo returned, the man was nowhere to be seen. His tools were in the cabin, but the mechanic was gone. Dzhibo assumed he had stepped away, got into the truck, and... drove off to check the work.

Who could have known that his friend had fallen asleep in the shade under the KamAZ? It was a horrific situation. I knew both men, and there was no doubt it was a fatal accident. However, the friend's wife declared in court that Dzhibo was under the influence of drugs and had run over her husband on purpose to avoid paying him. People's souls held a lot of filth even back then. Dzhibo was sentenced to one year (everyone understood it was a tragic accident), but the money it took to get only one year left the family destitute.

A month after Dzhibo was imprisoned, his father died. He had been working as a taxi driver in his old Volga until the very end to feed the family. A short while later, his mother passed away too. His father, Vazgen, and his mother, Nana, were very kind people; all the neighbors loved them, including me.

In the mid-nineties, I got married for the second time and moved away, leaving the apartment to my first wife. I only met Dzhibo a few times after that. He was a different man. Broken, he had grown a beard and no longer joked. The last time I saw him was at a bus stop; I picked him up in my car, and we went for a beer. We sat in a khinkali house, and Dzhibo — with temples greyed beyond his years, unkempt, after a bit of beer — suddenly said:

— Yura, you're a great guy. The neighbors respected you, and I was proud to be your friend. Even though we are completely different people — you have a university degree and I can't even write — we were bonded by a man's friendship.

I patted his hand: — Dzhibo, what are you talking about... We've always been friends, and we always will be.

And then Dzhibo said something that stayed with me for life, and every time I try to process it, it makes me shiver:

— You know, I feel like I've lived someone else's life, and I never got around to living my own.

We drove home in silence; heavy thoughts were spinning in my head. When we reached his house, Dzhibo looked at me and said softly:

— There weren't many bright spots in my life; you were one of them.

He got out of the car. A hunched old man, broken by life, entered the building.

Later, I accidentally learned from a mutual acquaintance who worked at a gas station that while Dzhibo was in prison, his eldest daughter had gone down a dark path, and the final blow he couldn't bear was his wife's cancer.

Dzhibo sold his KamAZ so the family would have some money for a while and... he took a fatal dose of drugs.

I cried. I felt so very sorry for him.

Business: It's Not the Price Tag, It's the Pocket

Germany was reuniting, the USSR was collapsing — and finally, in the early nineties, my ten-year-old son and I made our way to Germany.

My eyes were darting around so much from the sheer abundance that I couldn't focus on any one thing. For the first two days, I just wandered through the shops in a daze. Right away, I felt that all the pretty salesgirls had a soft spot for me — they were smiling so openly, with such hints of interest. Later, when I saw one lovely salesgirl smiling even more radiantly at an ugly dwarf who was buying trousers, I started to suspect something was off. In the Soviet Union, a salesgirl wouldn't even smile if you gave her a compliment and a bar of chocolate. Something was wrong here; surely these beautiful girls weren't such idiots that they'd just smile at an ugly dwarf for no reason. By the second day, I looked closer and realized: those smiles were «glued on.» You can't fool us Russians with cheap tricks! That's when I pivoted to commerce.

Since we had changed very little money, we naturally had to shop in the little backstreets filled with tiny stalls run by Poles or former Soviet citizens. I was walking down a street with an endless row of shops the size of a large suitcase, all carrying almost identical stock. I was amazed by the stupidity of the sellers. In one shop, a watch cost 12 marks; right next door, the same watch was 7 marks. All their business was like that. I couldn't help but laugh.

We bought some hot dogs. Munching on them, I said to my son: — These people are crazy. Who's going to buy a watch for 12 marks if you can buy it for 7 right next door? — Papa, — he said, — they're competitors. They don't go into each other's shops and they don't know each other's prices.

After eating, we stepped into the shop where the watch cost 12 marks. It was run by a former Soviet guy. Deciding to do a good deed and save him from bankruptcy, I said in a friendly tone: — My dear friend, it's none of my business, but you probably don't know that in the shop next door,

the same watch is only 7 marks. You'll go broke! You people shouldn't have driven the Jews out of Germany back in the day!

The seller suddenly slid open a small window and shouted to the neighboring shop: — Fima, get over here quick! We've got a civilian here teaching me commerce and worrying that without us Jews, Germany will go extinct!

I stood there, totally confused. What did Fima have to do with anything? Fima walked in and offered me a cigarette. — What's your name? — Yura. — And your son? — Denis. Fima took a keychain from the counter and gave it to Denis as a gift. — Yura, — he said, — when will you Russians finally understand that business isn't what's written on the price tag in the morning, it's what's in your pocket in the evening?

Let me explain so it's clear: — Both of these shops, and eight more down the street, belong to my brother and me. You bought a watch from me for 7 marks and, seeing that my «idiot» brother was selling it for 12, you were thrilled that you saved 5 marks. In reality, you gave us 4 marks, because the watch only costs us 3. If both shops had it for 7, you probably wouldn't have bought it at all. But most importantly: first, you saw the watch in my shop for 7 marks and kept walking. When you saw it at Gosha's for 12, you came back and bought the «bargain» from me. Or it could have gone differently: you could have walked into Gosha's first and bought it for 12 immediately. Then you'd see it at my place for 7 and, feeling lucky, you'd probably buy another one for your brother because it was so cheap. That, my dear friend, is business. No matter — walk around and learn!

Fifteen years later, when I had my own real estate firm, I would try to convince my clients that grocery stores, pharmacies, and restaurants shouldn't be scattered, but placed right next to each other. But the new Georgian businessmen, buying commercial space from me, would look at me like I was insane.

Over time, though, they all started clustering: pharmacies near hospitals, restaurants on Perovskaya Street. Many boutiques also «lived» side-by-side. Because the law of commerce — whether it's Fima in Germany or a businessman in Georgia — is exactly the same.

Intuition

In May 2006, my wife and our six-year-old son, Georgi, were at a concert. Suddenly, Lika called and told me that Georgi had stomach pains and spasms. I arrived immediately. We decided to go to the nearby children's hospital. The pain and spasms were periodic. In the ER, they examined him: his temperature was 37.8° C, there wasn't much pain during palpation, his tongue was moist, but the blood test showed an elevated white blood cell count. They diagnosed him with appendicitis.

I disagreed. They called the surgeon on duty — it was already evening by then. He was categorical: an emergency operation was needed because complications could arise by morning.

I voiced my doubts regarding the symptoms. He had never complained before, he wasn't pulling his right leg, and the pain was exactly in the center of the abdomen, as my son described it. They laughed at me, saying that symptoms in children are different from adults. I still refused to give consent, and they allowed me to take Georgi home after I signed a release, on the condition that I return in the morning for a consultation with a panel of surgeons to make a final decision.

Georgi was given a fever reducer; his temperature dropped, and the night passed relatively quietly. But at 6 a.m., the abdominal pain started again. Ever since he was little, Georgi was very precise when explaining his condition to doctors — he pointed specifically to his stomach. The pains were again periodic with spasms, and the fever returned.

At 10 a.m., we arrived at the hospital. A new test showed an even higher white blood cell count. A panel of three surgeons diagnosed him with an «acute abdomen» and insisted on immediate surgery for appendicitis. Things just weren't adding up in my head. My own appendix had been removed, and I remembered the sensations; my older son, Denis, also had his removed after an attack. I expressed my doubts to the doctors again, only to be told once more that in children, everything happens differently. Denis was 8 when his appendix was removed, and I clearly remembered his attacks: the pain was prolonged and less sharp, localized in the lower abdomen — unlike Georgi's — and most importantly, he had been pulling up his right leg. Georgi didn't have that symptom at all.

I decided to take the child to another children's hospital. A friend of mine worked there as a surgeon — and in our world, «blat» (connections) is everything! They also called a panel of four surgeons. Three agreed with the diagnosis from the first hospital, but upon learning that I had refused surgery there, they were less categorical. They sent me to a private diagnostic center for a full abdominal ultrasound.

The ultrasound lasted an hour. They couldn't find the appendix at all, but they found some «neoplasm of unknown etiology.» After the phrase «neoplasm of unknown etiology,» Lika was in a near-faint. The conclusion was that the nature of the growth could only be determined through surgery. Immediate operation required!

With the photos and the diagnosis, we raced back to the hospital. On the way, Georgi clung to Lika, crying and telling us to say our goodbyes to him!

At the hospital, the surgeons spent a long time scratching their heads over the ultrasound report. When I mentioned that Georgi had eaten a meat patty with buckwheat that morning, the «neoplasm» suddenly took on a very «concrete shape.» Then Georgi remembered that the day before, after school, his grandmother had fed him some «street» pizza. Our friend, the surgeon on duty that day, suggested admitting Georgi to the surgical department for detoxification — to pump his stomach and put him on an IV — and making a final decision about surgery in the morning. I won't describe the ordeal of the IV and the stomach pumping, or the toll it took on everyone's nerves, but by morning, everything had returned to normal.

The fever broke, the pain stopped, and at 11 a.m. the next day, we arrived home in perfect health!

If I had agreed with the surgeons instead of my intuition, Georgi would have had his appendix removed, while the pain from the food poisoning would have continued through the post-operative period. What would have happened then, only God knows!

Manych

In Rostov-on-Don, on Engels Street, diagonally across from the Intourist Hotel, lived my Rostov uncle, Izya — my grandmother's nephew. He lived in a pre-revolutionary building, in an attic space converted into a communal apartment.

Izya often visited us in Tbilisi. I was fond of this man; he was something of a «loser,» but he was the kindest soul who could spark a conversation with anyone nearby in an instant. He struck me with a trait that seemed to be a complex of those «unsuccessful» Jews who couldn't hide behind a Russian surname like «Sidorov.» When the subject of nationality came up, instead of saying he was Jewish, he would call himself a *zhid* (a slur).

In Tbilisi, Izya would often use this word about himself, which utterly bewildered his listeners. In Georgia, that word wasn't used then, nor is it now; antisemitism as such is virtually non-existent there. Izya was always surprised when people, after hearing him say *zhid*, would simply ask, «Oh, so you're Jewish?» Because in Georgia he felt like a Jew rather than a slur, he didn't just love the country — he adored it.

One day — and such is life — we received a telegram saying that Izya's mother had passed away. I immediately flew to Rostov. The funeral for Grandma Rachel was a somber and strange affair. Their «apartment» was at the top of a spiral staircase so narrow that a coffin couldn't possibly be carried down. We had to carry her out through the neighbor's apartment to reach the main stairs.

The cemetery in Rostov shocked me. In Tbilisi, cemeteries usually consist of family plots for three to six people, with benches, trees, and small tables for remembrance. In Rostov, the graves were exactly the size of a coffin — rows upon rows of two-meter plots with no greenery or fences. It felt stark.

It was summer, and to ease the heavy feeling of my ten-day stay, Izya decided to take me fishing on the Manych River.

Izya had a cousin in Rostov named Misha, who lived with his family in the Nakhichevan district. Misha was a die-hard fisherman. He and his buddies often took their motorboats out for the weekend. We arranged to join them. There were about ten people in three boats. Misha and his crew left a few hours before us, as we got delayed, and we headed out in the evening.

I had never traveled by river in a motorboat before; it was like a fairytale. Compared to the Kura River in Tbilisi, the Don was incredibly wide, with fabulously green banks dotted with little houses or campsites with bonfires and the sound of guitars. Ships scurried past at dangerously close range. There wasn't a single mountain to be seen all the way to the horizon. I was stunned by this unexpected beauty!

And when, at sunset, a massive red sun began to sink directly into the Don, a mesmerizing scene unfolded. Endless flocks of birds, flying from the fields to their nesting grounds, gracefully crossed that giant red orb. It was an overwhelming beauty for someone seeing such exotic landscapes for the first time.

I was neither a fisherman nor a hunter; I was going more as a tourist. But I had to prepare like a pro. Near the Manych, there was a fish farm that, as «bait,» seemed to breed «Michurinian» mosquitoes — monsters that could bite through clothing. Izya had an ointment, some hellish concoction that the mosquitoes avoided like the plague. The trick was to smear every bit of exposed skin.

We arrived at the meeting point after dark. We couldn't find Misha and his friends, so we decided to camp and look for them in the morning. We moored, ate, and slathered ourselves with that foul-smelling but life-saving ointment. We lay down on a pile of branches and fell asleep.

When I woke up, my head was ringing like a cathedral bell. Below the horizon, I could see nothing because my gaze hit my own upper lip — it was swollen to an absurd size. Apparently, while

smearing my face, I'd missed my lip. It throbbed with pain. Izya laughed; I tried to. We drank tea from a thermos, ate some cookies, and set off to find Mikhail & Co.

We found them instantly in the daylight. The boats were at the shore, and the men were on the bank. They were all dead drunk. Those still asleep were the lucky ones; those awake were suffering through agonizing hangovers. Of a whole case of vodka, only five bottles remained. They made excuses, saying they hadn't touched our share, and quickly threw together a «feast» of canned sprats in tomato sauce and a slab of lard — minus the bread, which they'd forgotten in Rostov.

Since I don't drink and Izya wanted to show me «real» fishing, he limited himself to a quarter-glass of vodka and a non-kosher piece of lard. He squeezed his eyes shut and let out a grunt so loud the sleeping men stirred. It was clear the rest of them would just spend the day nursing their hangovers, buy some fish at the pier on the way back, and return home claiming it as their catch.

That didn't suit us. We went fishing. We had no gear except rods. Between the two of us, Izya was the «expert,» only because he'd been on a few of these drinking-trips before.

We stopped about 20 meters from the shore. I was at the stern, Izya at the bow. A boat passed by with two fishermen using a device to slap the water, making a loud «gulping» sound. Izya said it was a lure for catfish, but I suspect that sound scared away every fish for miles. We moved further away and then... it started!

The moment I cast my line, the rod bent. A shiver of joy and surprise ran through me. I thought I'd caught that very catfish the others were lure-calling! I yelled at Izya to get the net and yanked the rod with all my might. Out of the water flew a five-centimeter goby — the tiny fish famously sold in tomato sauce. The little squirt fought so hard to escape that it gave the impression of a massive catch.

Izya was catching *shemaya*. I must have hit a nest of gobies because, in two hours, I caught over fifty of them. That was all I caught. We were so engrossed that we didn't notice a large passenger ship bearing down on us. It honked desperately. When we turned around, we gasped — it was only 30 meters away. Rowing was useless. I could have jumped and swam, but Izya was older and swam about as well as an axe, so I stayed in the boat to save him if needed. The ship passed so close that the bow wave simply tossed us out of its path. We escaped with a scare and some choice curse words. That was enough fishing for the day. Back on shore, Izya dug out a stash of cognac, and we finally relaxed.

When we got back, it turned out Uncle Misha was a much «luckier» fisherman than us. His catch was not only heavier but included sterlet, which was illegal to catch. My gobies were fried and... given to the yard dog. It was a pity, as that was my first and last catch.

Even though those days were tied to mourning, Uncle Izya did everything to ensure I remembered Rostov for more than just a sad time. The beauty of the Don and its banks was etched into my memory so deeply that the following year, my wife, my friend Lyonya, and his wife decided to spend our vacation in tents on the Don.

Unfortunately, the story of that vacation on Alitub Island — full of adventures and nervous clashes of personality — was lost, along with a hundred others, due to unforeseen circumstances. I've managed to restore a few small ones, like the story «The Ghost,» but many are gone forever.

The Ghost

Many people feel fear when listening to ghost stories, but when a ghost actually appears — holding an axe and speaking — the fear isn't just panic; it's the kind of terror that puts you on the brink of a heart attack.

Right after graduating from the institute, two ordinary students — Lenya Konkov and I — found ourselves as newly minted engineers: jobless, penniless, but married. We decided to organize a high-quality vacation with minimal expenses. Since I often visited my uncle in Rostov and had seen the beauty of the Don River firsthand, I suggested we go camping there in tents.

This incident happened at the very beginning of our journey, when the four of us were still full of energy and high hopes for the trip.

I don't know what the streets in Rostov are called today, but my relative lived on Engels Street, diagonally across from the Intourist Hotel. It was a pre-revolutionary building. During the Soviet era, the attic had been converted into a communal apartment with paper-thin walls and all the «charms» that come with it. My uncle's room in that attic was barely larger than a suitcase, so it was impossible for all four of us to sleep there. However, his neighbors, Volodya and Valya, whom I knew from previous visits, had gone to the seaside on vacation. Knowing I was coming with friends, they left us the keys to their room and their squeaky «proving ground» of a bed, where the four of us could settle in for the night.

We spent the whole day wandering through Rostov's shops, stocking up on a month's worth of supplies: canned goods, soup packets, grains, condensed milk, rusks, and God knows what else. We ended up with two backpacks, each weighing about forty kilograms.

That evening, with our legs aching from fatigue, we sprawled out on the «proving ground.» The bed was indeed wide — evidently a pre-war family project. This venerable piece of furniture creaked mercilessly at the slightest movement. In that partitioned attic, the acoustics were like an opera house. Because of this, when Valentina and Volodya tried to «improve the country's demographics,» they usually put on opera records. If the music stopped playing for too long, the neighbors would start worrying... wondering if they'd fallen ill.

During a previous visit, the elderly neighbor, Dusya, while bumming a cigarette from me in the hallway, remarked to the air: — «As I see it, both Volodka and you listen to the same aria at Valentina's. I listen to Lensky's aria, too, but her version is sung by Kozlovsky, while I prefer Lemeshev. It's clear Valentina knows men better than she knows opera.»

We lay there chatting, and when we turned out the lights, the creaking began to remind us of ghosts. Naturally, you can't really sleep with four people on one squeaky bed, so Lenya and I started telling scary stories. Our wives were already squealing with fright. We tried to outdo each other, recalling bone-chilling tales from Poe, Chesterton, and Roald Dahl — along with plenty of our own bloody inventions. The girls were practically whimpering, but Lenya and I kept ramping up the horror. When our repertoire was exhausted, I began to improvise:

— «Imagine,» I whispered, «that we're lying here and suddenly the door creaks open and a real ghost enters the room.»

Everyone pressed themselves against the headboard, their imaginations firing.

— «The ghost will be a woman with disheveled hair, wearing a white nightgown. In one hand she'll have a candle, and in the other...»

My wife pleaded: — «Yura, please, stop! It's scary! What if a ghost actually appears right now?»

But I was on a roll: — «And in the other hand, she'll have a large kitchen knife to slit all our throats!»

A tomb-like silence followed. In that silence, we distinctly heard the door creak. It slowly began to open, and a sliver of candlelight pierced the darkness.

We froze in terror; I personally lost the power of speech. The door kept opening, inch by inch, until a woman in white appeared — disheveled hair, a candle in one hand, and an axe in the other!

In the flickering light of the candle, paralyzed by inhuman fear, we stared at each other for about five to ten seconds — seconds that felt like an eternity! The spell was broken by Marina's scream as she dove under the covers. The ghost slammed the door shut, but a moment later, it opened again, and a raspy voice asked:

— «And who might you be?»

While I was trying to swallow the lump in my throat, Lenya «sang» out: — «We're not locals, we're guests...» and began to cross himself like a madman.

The ghost stepped closer, illuminating us with the candle. — «Yura, is that you?»

My heart nearly stopped. — «Did you forget about the arias?»

And then I recognized her: it was Dusya, the opera lover and fan of Lensky's aria, the neighborhood cat-lady. With her hair down, I hadn't recognized her at all.

Dusya flipped the light switch by the door. In the bulb's glow, the axe instantly turned into a rolling pin, and the ghost became a sweet old lady in a nightgown.

It turned out that since we had arrived late, Dusya hadn't seen us come in. Hearing noises from the neighbors' room and knowing they were at the sea, she decided to investigate. That Dusya had some heart — she nearly sent the four of us to the next world.

The next morning, while we were having breakfast in the communal kitchen, my wife asked: — «What arias were you talking about last night?»

Dusya glanced at me and smiled: — «Yura, lying in that bed, reminded me of Hermann. I was talking about *The Queen of Spades*.»

In Memory of Chicha, the Mutt-Girl: Forgive Me, Friend!

In my childhood, we had a cat named Vaska and a female cat named Murka — my grandmother's favorites. I don't remember them as kittens, but as they grew up, Murka became the most desired cat in the neighborhood, and Vaska acted as her «pimp.» In the spring, they'd put on such «concerts» near our house that if you didn't know they were cats, you'd think someone was torturing children and call the police. The neighbors demanded that Grandma get rid of them. Usually, «March» would pass and the concerts would be forgotten, but when Vaska started stealing delicacies from the neighbors' tables for his Murka, their patience snapped. An ultimatum was issued:

— Either Grandma gets rid of Vaska and Murka herself, or the neighbors poison them with strychnine!

It was a plot straight out of Hop-o'-My-Thumb: a parent leading children into the woods so they might survive on their own. Grandma stuffed the cats into a sack, boarded the No. 10 tram, and took them to the marketplace. She shook them out (figuring they'd find food there), sighed, did her shopping, and took the tram home. Imagine her surprise when the «sweet couple» was already sitting by our door, bellies sagging from a good meal, looking up at her with pleading eyes. After that, all experiments ended — the neighbors surrendered!

Regarding Dogs:

My grandfather loved dogs, but in our communal house, even the cats were looked at sideways, so a dog was out of the question. Grandpa found a loophole: we'd go around feeding all the local chained dogs. There was Sharik, the black dog belonging to the stadium watchman, and the fearsome Buyan, a Caucasian Shepherd that Grandpa especially liked. Buyan guarded the yard of the Paramilitary Training center. The head of that place was a tanker, Colonel Malyshev, our neighbor.

He used to give us kids rides on a T-34 tank across what is now the Physical Education Institute stadium; I still remember his gold-toothed smile.

While I loved Sharik, I was terrified of Buyan and usually played with him from behind my grandpa's back. One day, when Grandpa wasn't home, I volunteered to take a bowl of borscht with a bone to Buyan. When I got within fifty meters of his kennel, Buyan lunged, snapped his chain, and charged. I saw his eyes and, paralyzed by fear, dropped the bowl and thrust my hands forward. I remember it like it was yesterday: Buyan clamped down on both of my thumbs. I don't remember screaming, but apparently, my cries saved me. Uncle Vanya Malyshev shot the dog with his TT pistol right then and there.

Lord, where is the world heading? A few weeks ago, I met his son, Zhenya, at the Navtlughi market. He was selling... old bolts and taps, while reading Arthur Hailey's *Airport*. We talked about old friends, but it was hard to look each other in the eye. Back then, I had to endure 40 rabies shots in the stomach. As it turned out, Buyan had actually gone mad. You can imagine how I felt about any dog taller than my knee after that.

Enter Chicha:

In the early 80s, living with my first family in Vazisubani (a residential district in Tbilisi), I walked out the door for work and found a tiny, shivering puppy — a little white ball of fluff. Naturally, I brought it inside, gave it some milk, and... it stayed. My eldest son was about five then, and he was beside himself with joy. We named the dog «Chicha» — don't ask why, I already get enough teasing from a friend who shared the same nickname. I'm no dog trainer, but this dog amazed me with her intelligence and devotion.

If we were home, Chicha behaved like a lady. But the moment we left her alone, the apartment looked like it had been hit by a Mongol raid. Her favorite spot was the bed, with the bedspread crumpled on the floor. She enjoyed her comfort so much she often didn't even notice us coming home. When she finally heard a shout, she'd scramble off the bed, press her head to the carpet, tuck her front paws under, and crawl toward us, wagging her head back and forth like a broom. Then she'd flip onto her back as if to say, «Go ahead, kill me!» Of course, we'd just smile.

We watched TV together; she'd lie behind my knees, resting her muzzle on my legs, seemingly engrossed in the plot. But if I whispered «Chicha,» she'd instantly scramble up to join me on the pillow. I have a sea of stories about her:

— The Sugar Trick: I'd hold half a sugar cube in my teeth, Chicha would take the other half, and we'd stay like that until I snapped my fingers. Only then would she swallow her piece.

— The Duet: She «sang» to Denis's accordion — long, mournful howls that could make you cry. If Denis stopped playing before she was done, she'd walk up to the accordion and continue howling and barking at it.

— The Circus: She loved jumping through a hoop made by my arms and would press her chin to the floor after every jump.

— The «Guard»: She was fine with neighbors unless they tried to take something — be it a potato or a cup of sugar. Once, she even pulled the skirt off our neighbor Keto, who then told everyone we were training our dog to strip women.

— The Watchman: If we were all asleep and someone approached the front door at midnight, she'd wake the whole house. It wasn't right for someone to be at the door while the masters slept.

— The Leash: My friends gave me a leash, but Chicha (a poodle mix, shorter than a boot) hated it. If we put it on, she'd plant her feet and refused to budge.

— The Brave Protector: She thought the whole world belonged to her. She'd approach huge dogs, bark incessantly while looking back to make sure I was behind her, but if the other dog barked back, she'd vanish in a flash and end up in my arms, from where she'd continue barking even louder.

The Heartbreak:

My car was her signal. She could recognize the sound of my engine from 300 meters away. Until I pulled up, she'd sit on the windowsill, whimpering and scratching at the wood in anticipation.

But my wife, Tamara, didn't bond with Chicha; she wasn't a «pet person.» She started pestering me to give the dog away. Who takes a grown mutt? For a month I suffered, and when the ultimatum finally came — either the dog goes or... well, it was «either/or» — I drove Chicha to the Aragvi restaurant and let her go. My heart was bleeding.

I didn't sleep a wink that night. In the morning, I went back for her. I searched everywhere, called her name, asked the watchmen, but she was gone as if she'd vanished into thin air. For a long time after, whenever I drove past, I'd stop and hope... but she never appeared. I've never owned a dog since. I feel such guilt toward Chicha that even now, I cannot forgive myself.

«You'll Even Confess to Killing Kennedy!»

I wasn't just a witness to the events described below — I was an active participant. Two phrases from that time are etched into my memory, phrases that could have led to tragic consequences.

The first was barked at me by a KGB officer: — «You'll confess not only to stealing the gold but to killing Kennedy as well!»

The second was one I said myself: — «The thief isn't the one you'd suspect right away; it's the one with «Honest' branded on their forehead.»

It happened in the early 2000s. Naturally, the names have been changed. A woman named Meri Vasilievna called me, claiming a recommendation from mutual friends. She wanted to meet about selling her apartment through my real estate firm.

Real estate agents differ from taxi drivers in one key way: taxi drivers know every street and house, but agents know the streets, the houses, the layouts of the apartments, and exactly who lives inside them.

The apartment was in a prestigious, elite building — six rooms, about 200 square meters, taking up the entire floor. It had a unique feature that made it one-of-a-kind (I'll skip the details to keep the people involved anonymous). Meri asked me to sell it quietly, through «private channels,» without ads or «tourists,» because her husband, a KGB General, was away and she wanted no publicity.

For a week, I brought high-end clients. Meri, the typical wife of a high-ranking Chekist, couldn't help but spill «details» about the neighbors — calling them thieves, informants, and prostitutes. I had to spend a few evenings drinking tea with her just to convince her to stay in the kitchen while I showed the place. Her housekeeper, Vera — a relative of Meri's late son's wife — baked delicious buns and served tea, mostly keeping to herself.

Eventually, my pool of wealthy clients ran dry, so I teamed up with a colleague from another firm. His broker, Merab — a lovely man, a doctor by profession who worked in real estate to support his family — brought a potential buyer. While Merab showed the client around, I kept Meri in the kitchen. The client liked the place, especially the two large semi-basement rooms. We left in high spirits; he promised to buy it after showing it to his wife.

That evening, Meri called. Her voice was like a thunderclap: — «Yura, all the gold is gone. I left my jewelry box on the vanity in the bedroom. Now it's empty. Get here now.»

Half an hour later, I was looking at an empty malachite box. Meri had already decided: the thief was the «bearded guy» from the other firm. She wanted his address so her husband's colleagues could «shake the gold out of him.»

I tried to reason with her. Merab was a doctor, an intellectual. Even if he were a thief, he wasn't an idiot — nobody steals gold from a KGB General's house during an official viewing. — «Thieves don't look like thieves, Meri. If they did, no one would let them in. The real thief is the one with

«Honest» branded on their forehead.» — «Well then, you stole it,» she joked, «because no one would ever suspect you.»

The next morning, two «wardrobes» showed up at my office — two huge, menacing security officers from «The Office» (the KGB). — «Let's go. Show us this bearded suspect.»

They wouldn't listen to explanations. They sat me and Merab in a car. The atmosphere was suffocating. One of the officers leaned toward Merab: — «Look, Merab. We don't want a formal investigation. But if we go to the basement for an 'interrogation with prejudice,» you'll confess to stealing the gold *and* killing Kennedy. Just return it now, pay a fine, and no one has to know.»

Merab, panicked, tried to deflect: — «Why me? Maybe Yura and the owner staged the whole thing!»

I nearly choked. The «method of elimination» I had run the night before didn't seem so clever now that I was being accused. However, when the officers found out the buyer was a high-ranking Member of Parliament, they hesitated. They gave Merab a summons and dropped us off.

I sat in my office, playing *Lines98* on the computer to calm my racing mind. Suddenly, a «Stierlitz-level» idea hit me. I printed out a fake «police statement» and headed back to Meri's.

Vera, the housekeeper, opened the door. — «Did they find the gold?» she asked eagerly. — «Almost,» I replied. «The big boys are on it.»

Over coffee, I spun a colorful yarn about how Merab had been smirking and acting tough with the officers. — «You were right about him, Meri,» I lied. «He refused to talk until a formal case is opened.»

Then, I pulled out the paper and read it aloud: «*To the Head of the Police Department: I, MP Fridion Sozvanidze, request an interrogation of the five people present. Since high-ranking figures are involved, all participants have agreed to give testimony under hypnosis. Under hypnosis, a person's will is bypassed, and they will reveal exactly where the gold is hidden.*»

I pointed to the bottom: — «The MP, Merab, and I have already signed. We just need yours and Vera's signatures to proceed.»

I hadn't even finished the sentence when Vera turned red as a beet. She threw her hands up, claiming she'd left an iron on at home, and bolted out the door.

Meri was speechless. — «Did you see that? Was it Vera? After twenty years?»

I finished my coffee and admitted there was no MP statement and no such thing as a «hypnosis interrogation» without a legal case. It was a bluff.

The next day, the «Christmas miracle» happened. Vera «found» some of the gold inside a duvet cover while cleaning. When she saw Meri's skeptical look, she broke down. She had stolen not just the jewelry, but also money from a house sale they hadn't even missed yet. She claimed she did it for her grandson, fearing that if the apartment were sold, the «outsider» (me) would take everything and leave the boy with nothing.

The story ended like a fairytale: Meri called Merab to apologize, the deal went through, and everyone ended up with their money.

Operation Furniture

Once, a little, stout man with a pockmarked face came to my real estate firm. He played the part of a simpleton, claiming that his relative — a famous violinist — had left for Germany on a five-year contract and asked him to rent out her apartment. He specified that it should ideally serve as both an office and a residence for a wealthy local businessman. We went to see the place, and I was simply breathless. The large three-room apartment was packed to the brim with antique furniture. I wouldn't say it was furnished with great taste, but the value of all those various antiquities was certainly no less than the value of the apartment itself. It was stuffed like an antique shop. Only one thing stood out — there were no «Rembrandt or Renoir» paintings — but otherwise, it was a complete set, ready for filming a movie about the life of the French bourgeoisie.

— Aren't you afraid to rent out such unique pieces of antiquity to someone?

— Are you kidding? I can't wait!

— I wouldn't risk it, what if... well, anything can happen!

— My dear Yura, we have different tasks. You get a percentage from the lease and risk nothing; I, however, risk a lot, but I will also earn significantly more than you, — «Sancho Panza» smiled. — You just find me the client I need — preferably not a foreigner — and after that, it's my problem.

Ten days later, the apartment was rented as a private office by a young businessman who spoke both Russian and English fluently. We drew up the contract in due form, and the firm received its commission — one month's rent.

I learned the rest of the story a week later.

There were three brothers: one owned an antique furniture store, the second was a traffic cop, and the third held a high rank in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Once, furniture had been stolen from their relative's rented apartment. They could never find the thief, so they decided to set a trap.

They filled one of their apartments on the second floor with antiques from the store, placed advertisements about the rental everywhere possible on behalf of my firm — even on television — and began to wait. When a client came to meet me, they were «accidentally» stopped by the traffic cop on their way out; he checked their documents and, with a salute, let them go. The data flowed to the brother in the Ministry.

Finally, «the stars aligned,» and I was told they agreed to rent to the latest client. Three days later, the «businessman» pulled up a truck to the house and began loading the furniture. He told the neighbors he was bringing in office furniture and returning the old pieces to the owner. Even the neighbors helped load the furniture, including «Sancho Panza's» own son.

Following the loaded truck all the way to the city of Gori was an inconspicuous, old green Moskvitch.

That night, police raided the businessman's warehouse in Gori. By morning, two trucks arrived in Tbilisi with furniture from two different apartments. As for the businessman, after some bargaining, «Operation Furniture» cost him a couple of hundred thousand dollars and his freedom.

A Bluff Worth a Life

In April 1996, we decided to quietly travel to Moscow to surprise my mother-in-law and sister-in-law — we were going to get married in a church, not in Tbilisi, but at the Yelokhovo Cathedral in Moscow (at the time, it was the main cathedral in Russia).

I ran a real estate brokerage back then. My firm, «Savane,» was located on the second floor of the «Tsekavshiri» building. Those were dark, lawless times. Racket was semi-legal; tax, fire, and health inspectors were rampant; and criminal brotherhoods cruised the city in Mercedes cars armed with Kalashnikovs. There was no protection except staying out of their way.

A few days before our flight, we had a successful deal — a large apartment was sold. On the very last day before we were to leave, we finalized the paperwork and received our commission. Around 6:00 p.m., we were about to head home when six men with assault rifles burst into the office. They forced everyone onto the floor and demanded the full amount of money from the apartment sale.

As these «gentlemen» with grim faces explained, the apartment we had sold had been «written off» — meaning it had been seized by a gang from the owner for debts. According to them, the sale was a scam I had orchestrated personally. The only thing they achieved by racking their bolts and pressing rifles to my temple and chest was the return of the commission I'd earned — and causing one of my employees to faint.

I asked them to let my staff go — one woman and two men — and keep me until the issue was resolved. They searched everyone, verified the safe was empty, and realizing the bulk of the money wasn't there, they let the staff go to avoid a scene with their families. They warned them: «Call the police, and we won't go easy on your relatives.»

Once we were alone, they turned the pressure on me. — «Alright, we let them go so you wouldn't lose face. Now, give us the money!» — «You have what I earned from the deal. For the rest, look for the seller.» — «Do you think we're idiots? The owner of the apartment is in prison.» — «His brother sold it through a power of attorney.» Four of them immediately bolted out of the office; I heard tires screeching outside. — «Can I call home? My wife and I fly to Moscow in the morning to get married in a church. I don't want her to worry.» — «I don't think that's going to help you!» — «Better I call her. She's a woman; she might panic and call the wrong people.» — «Give us your address instead. We'll pay her a visit in the morning.» — «Are you saying that because you're actually brave, or because you're holding a rifle?» — «Look at this brave guy! I'll shoot you and be done with it!» — «Let's settle this like men. We'll measure our 'manhood.' Whoever's is shorter gets shot. Whoever's is longer gets to go have fun in the morning!»

The guy slammed the muzzle into my mouth, breaking a tooth. I felt a chill — I realized I'd gone too far. — «Are you crazy?» the second thug jumped up. «What, are you scared? Come on, show him!» The first guy pulled the rifle back, confused. There was a moment of stunned silence. I spat out the broken tooth and wiped away the blood. — «Calm down,» the second one laughed. «You shot him without even pulling the trigger! Look at Merab, he's gone pale. He earned it! Merab, put the gun away if you're not willing to measure up.» He roared with laughter again.

It was about 9:00 p.m. I called Lika, told her I had some minor issues and might be home late, and told her to keep packing. Merab was still seething; his wounded pride was boiling over. — «Tell me where the money is or I'll shoot you like a dog,» he muttered, though he stopped waving the rifle.

I realized I had bluffed and won. My «equipment» is perfectly normal, and if women loved me, it was for my skill rather than my size. I also realized the second thug — named Okro — was somewhat rational and could be talked to. — «I sold the apartment because legally it was clean,» I said. «You 'claimed' it, but only in words. Did you even put a sign on the door? How was I supposed to know?» — «All the neighbors knew! That's how we found you. They said Yura came and sold

it on the sly.» — «Then why didn't they tell me the apartment couldn't be sold? I know them.» — «They gave you up because we punched the neighbor who was supposed to be watching the place!»

Okro sent Merab to get some food. — «So,» Okro said when we were alone, «is it really that big?» — «No, it's ordinary.» — «I said show me!» I did. — «It's normal. But next time, I wouldn't recommend gambling like that. It's like Russian roulette with three bullets out of six. I believed you from the start because most people wet themselves when faced with six rifles. But you...» Okro laughed again. «You offered a measurement contest!»

The phone rang. Okro picked up, and as he listened, he slowly raised the barrel of his rifle. A bead of sweat ran down my spine. *This is it*, I thought, looking for something to hit him with. Then the door opened and Merab returned with food. — «Good thing you didn't shoot Yura,» Okro said. «They found most of the money.»

The realization that the danger had passed hit me, and my legs began to shake. The adrenaline ebbed, and fear finally showed its ugly face. — «They said not to hit you, but not to let you go yet. Let's eat. Hey Merab, Yura showed me his 'gear.» Good thing you didn't bet against him.» Merab smirked: «Can't you tell just by looking at him that he's a gambler?»

They drank vodka and ate bread with sausage. I ate too. The gang spent the whole night racing across the city and managed to recover almost the entire sum; the sellers had only spent 10,000. Around 3:00 a.m., the boss came in. — «They told me you didn't act like a coward. You're flying to Moscow at noon to get married?» — «Yes, the flight is at 12.» — «We lost 10,000, but because you didn't lie and didn't flinch, that's your reward — you actually get to go. You were a hair's breadth from a hole in the head. But your commission stays with us to cover the loss! Okro, take him home.» — «Thanks, I have my car.»

They left. I took a swig of the remaining vodka straight from the bottle and called Lika: — «Put the kettle on, my joy. I'm coming home.» I got home at 3:30 a.m. At 12:00 p.m., we were on the plane to Moscow. I slept through the entire flight.

A Series of Stories from Student Life

1. Don't Believe Your Eyes

During my first year at the institute, Technical Drawing was among our general subjects. In our very first class, we were assigned an «album» — a standard set of drawings: circles, ellipses, projections, and an isometric view of a simple part.

In high school, I didn't have shop class; instead, I attended a school with a technical drawing focus. So, while others were sawing wood, I was drafting. I was good at it — I even won several school Olympiads. I drafted with inspiration; I loved my work to be not just accurate, but pristine. If I made a mistake, I'd rather redraw the whole thing from scratch than use an eraser. There were no visible construction lines, and certainly no compass punctures in the paper when drawing ellipses. When it came to isometric views, I even added shading. I truly enjoyed the process. The only problem was the lettering — I hated it, and my handwriting was atrocious.

I finished the album perfectly. The isometric view with shading was flawless — there was absolutely nothing to find fault with, except for the captions, which stuck out like a sore eye. But it was what it was.

Watching the instructor criticize my classmates, I looked forward to his reaction to my work. Since my name was last on the roster, I was the last to submit. Mentally, I had already prepared a little speech about how well drawing was taught at my school and how anyone could achieve this with patience and practice.

But what I heard from the instructor was something I couldn't have imagined in my worst nightmare.

— None of you can draw worth a damn, of course — he began — but I can see effort and a desire to do well. However, there is one «smart guy» among you who thought that if a professional did

the work for him, he'd kill two birds with one stone. He forgot one thing: his work is being graded not by a gym teacher who can't tell a prism from an enema, but by a draftsman who knows the difference between a student's work and a professional's.

He jabbed a finger at my album: — There are no construction lines for the centers of the ellipses, no compass holes. I've seen plenty of «artists» who traced drawings over glass, but even they poked holes to try and fool me. But I've never seen a fool quite like you. If you had at least traced it, I might have given you a «C» for the effort. This is an «F.» To fix it, you'll bring a new album to the next class — one you've drawn yourself.

I stood there, completely stunned: — You're mistaken. I'm just that good at drawing.

The instructor showed my drawing to the group and sneered: — Oh really? You drew it yourself but had a professional do the lettering for you?

— No, I did the lettering too. You can see it's poorly done.

— Young man, are you sane? I can see you did the lettering — it looks like a chicken wrote it. But you didn't do the drawing; that's as clear as two plus two!

— No, you're wrong. I did both.

— Don't push me! — he snapped. — Bring a new album next time, take your «C,» and we'll have a friendly laugh about this failure. Sit down, I'm being generous today.

Then, in front of everyone, he tore my album to pieces.

I didn't sit down. My confusion had turned into pure rage: — How about we sit down and draw right now? Let's see who does it better and faster.

The instructor's jaw dropped: — Not only are you a liar, but you're arrogant! You know perfectly well I won't compete with you. Instead, I'll have you draw an isometric view of a pipe coupling from life right now, and then I'll kick you out with a failing grade to teach you your place.

The whole group stared at me as if I were insane, walking straight into a noose. A sheet of paper and a metal coupling were placed on the desk.

— You have one hour. Either I give you an «A» and excuse you from the rest of the course, or you'll labor here like a slave for the rest of the semester.

As I drew, he kept mocking me, offering his chair for comfort or asking if I could find the compass in my set. The group laughed. I was laughing inside too, knowing I'd never have to see this «peacock» again.

After a while, his comments ceased. All that could be heard was a quiet: — Don't believe your eyes... I've never seen a person write like that and draw like this. No one will believe me when I tell them.

There was no shading on the final drawing, but there were no compass holes either. The instructor kept his word: he gave me an «A,» excused me from class, and apologized to the group. By then, I wasn't even angry anymore.

2. And I Thought He Was an Alcoholic! (Translation)

I'll tell you about a funny situation I had with Nikolai Nikolaevich Yushkov, who taught us «Electrical Machines.» Nikolai Nikolaevich was a graduate of the Imperial Saint Petersburg University; he knew his subject brilliantly and never raised his voice at students. He dressed almost as if he were at home — it seemed like he just swapped his slippers for shoes and walked straight to the institute. He never «terrorized» anyone during exams or term projects, but he demanded real knowledge. His sophisticated appearance and fatherly way of speaking automatically ruled out any possibility of a bribe.

In every group, there are students who excel at making friends but don't exactly shine when it comes to writing papers or passing exams. We were assigned a term project on electrical machines, and I ended up writing and drafting three of them at once: for myself and for two buddies — Kolya and Irakli.

There were no issues with Irakli's project; it looked nothing like mine. But Kolya was a problem because his assignment was identical to mine, save for a couple of initial parameters. Since the projects were almost clones and I had done both, we decided that Kolya would go to Yushkov first, and I'd find a way to talk my way out of it later.

As expected, Kolya and Irakli defended their projects without a hitch. Nikolai Nikolaevich even praised them, not expecting such good work from them, and gave them both «B's» since they declined to answer the extra questions required for an «A.»

Finally, it was my turn.

Let me make a quick digression: as I mentioned in «Don't Believe Your Eyes,» I drafted like a god — no compass punctures, no visible construction lines. And that's exactly what got me caught.

When Yushkov saw my project — identical to Kolya's but with a perfect drawing — he immediately «figured it out.» My drawing was flawless, while Kolya's was «normal,» complete with compass holes and construction lines (after all, I didn't want to give Kolya a professional-grade drawing since he couldn't draft to save his life). The professor concluded that Kolya had done the work and I had simply traced it over glass.

No arguments could move him. I couldn't exactly tell the professor that I was the one who did Kolya's project.

— Young man, — Yushkov said, — because you at least took the trouble to copy it, I'll give you a «C.» But if you persist in lying when the truth is plain as day, I'll give you an «F.»

Now, imagine this: I have straight «A's» in my grade book, and suddenly I'm looking at a «C» for Electrical Machines.

I asked the professor not to write anything in the official record yet and bolted out of the office. I found Zamkov, our practical lab instructor, and explained the situation. We returned to Yushkov's office together.

— Nikolai Nikolaevich, — the lab instructor said, — Yakunin is actually a straight-A student, even if he's a chronic truant. If anyone copied from anyone, it was Kolya from Yura, not the other way around.

Nikolai Nikolaevich, while writing an «A» in my grade book, suddenly turned to Zamkov and said, almost as an excuse:

— Well, how about that! I took one look at him — red eyes... and I thought to myself: «He's an alcoholic!»

Of course my eyes were red and my face was puffy — that's what happens when you write, draft, and explain three different term projects in a single night before the deadline.

3. Why Did You Come to the Exam Naked?

At our Tbilisi Polytechnic Institute, there were two professors — Nikolai Yushkov and Grigory Sisoyan. These were two titans, two mastodons who had graduated from the Imperial Saint Petersburg University! They weren't tall men, but they knew their subjects inside out. In character, however, they were polar opposites. Yushkov was soft and polite, using old-fashioned words like «dear fellow» or «my good man»; he ate home-packed lunches and was never seen in a formal suit. He looked just like the actor Pugovkin, only without the mustache. Grigory Sisoyan was the complete opposite: always in a navy-blue suit, buttoned to the top, wearing a tie, with the stern face of a proletarian deep in thought about the bourgeoisie.

I have many stories about them, but today's is about Sisoyan, who taught us Theoretical Foundations of Electrical Engineering.

It was June, the summer exam session. The Tbilisi heat was unbearable, so I showed up for the exam wearing a mesh tank top — they were very popular back then because of the weather. I sat at the front desk, right before the lectern, hoping to be among the first to finish and escape the stifling classroom.

In walked Sisoyan: clad in his navy-blue «armor,» wearing a red striped tie, his face shaved to a bluish tint. He said hello, scanned the room with an eagle eye, and suddenly stopped, staring at me. His gaze was like that of a state prosecutor looking at enemies of the people.

— How dare you come to an exam naked, especially in the presence of young ladies? — he thundered.

I didn't immediately realize he was talking to me, so I turned around to see who on earth was sitting there naked.

— Yakunin, don't turn around, I'm talking to you! — he snapped. — Have you ever seen me come to the institute in a mesh bag one uses for the grocery market? And yet, here you are!

— But it's so hot, Grigory Stepanovich...

— And am I not hot? And you ladies, what are you looking at? A student shows up naked and you're all pleased! It's a good thing he didn't come in mesh underwear!

Then, pointing toward the door with a dramatic, Leninesque gesture, he added:

— Tomorrow, same time. Suit, white shirt, tie, and your grade book — come see me.

The next day, in 100-degree heat (40° C), I arrived in full formal attire. Drenched in sweat as if I'd just stepped out of a sauna, I handed Sisoyan my grade book.

Opening it and writing an «A» in the appropriate column, he said:

— Well, now I know that in addition to knowledge, you also possess a suit and a tie. Don't be offended by an old man. It's just that if I hadn't reacted to your lovely tank top, tomorrow someone else would have shown up in their swim trunks because of the heat.

4. Taking the «Electrical Machines» Exam

I'll continue with the topic of our «titans.» As I've mentioned, Nikolai Nikolaevich Yushkov was a man of extraordinary delicacy. While Grigory Sisoyan kept us in the iron grip of his Saint Petersburg etiquette, Yushkov wore us down with his sheer kindness. Still, taking an exam with him was a challenge — he could see right through a student.

In our fourth year, we had to pass the «Electrical Machines» exam. It was a difficult subject with a mountain of formulas and even more diagrams. As usual, I relied on my visual memory and my ability to think on my feet.

I walked in and drew a ticket. The questions weren't the most pleasant, but they were manageable. I sat down to prepare. Nikolai Nikolaevich was walking between the rows, softly peeking into our drafts and whispering: — Oh, my dear fellow, why did you do that?... The vector is pointing the wrong way here. Think about it, my dear, think.

Then it was my turn. I rolled out my answer and drew the diagrams — everything was sharp and clean (remember, I drafted like a pro). Yushkov listened, nodded, and smiled: — Excellent, Yuri, simply excellent. Now tell me, my friend, how will the magnetic flux change if we increase the gap right here?

I started reasoning. My logic seemed ironclad, but I could feel the professor squinting at me slyly. — Eh? — he asked. — What if you give it another thought?

That's when I realized I was lost in the woods. Yushkov wouldn't just give you a failing grade; he would start «conversing» with you. Ten minutes passed, then fifteen... I was sweating more than I did during Sisoyan's exam in a full suit. Nikolai Nikolaevich shook his head regretfully: — Ah, my dear fellow... You have the knowledge, but not a penny's worth of diligence. You calculated this exact gap yourself in your term project!

I froze. I remembered that frantic night when I did three term projects at once. — Nikolai Nikolaevich, — I said, — I didn't just calculate it; I «lived» it three times over in one night.

He suddenly burst out laughing, likely remembering the «alcoholic» incident and my bloodshot eyes. — Very well, very well. I see you haven't forgotten. Give me your grade book. But next time, my dear boy, come well-rested — the magnetic field does not appreciate haste.

Another «A» appeared in my grade book. That's the kind of men they were — they could kick you out for a tank top or take pity on your red eyes, but they always made sure you respected the subject.

5. The Key

There was an instructor at our Polytechnic Institute named Vakhtang Alexandrovich. He was a brilliant specialist and a decent man, but he was an incredible pedant — a trait that sometimes bordered on the bizarre. For instance, he insisted that students sit strictly in alphabetical order but forbade anyone from taking the seats of those who were absent. By looking at the «gaps» in the rows, he could instantly spot the truants. If this rule was broken, he would politely ask you not to make that mistake again, but his gaze made it clear there would be no second warning. He never raised his voice, usually saying:

— If you find it unbearable to sit through my lecture, let me know and I will simply let you go without any consequences. But if you force me to raise my voice, you can expect «payback» at the end of the semester.

When he entered the classroom, he never called for silence. He would simply take out his heavy horn-rimmed glasses and buff the lenses with a yellow suede cloth until the room fell into complete silence. Yet, he wasn't a «dry» man; he had a good sense of humor.

His strangest quirk was how he handled exam tickets. He shuffled them like a deck of cards and kept them in his desk. On the morning of the exam, he'd pull out the deck and force every student to take the top card. Picking from the bottom or the middle was strictly forbidden, as he believed this eliminated any chance of guessing the ticket. However, he forgot the old saying: for every clever nut, there is a bolt with a special thread.

Some students from the Georgian-language department had either found or made a key to his office. Before an exam, they would sneak into the empty room and write down the exact order of the tickets in the deck. Then they distributed the tickets among themselves: each student studied exactly one ticket. The key was to enter the exam room one after another, strictly following the list. If someone failed to show up, it caused a total breakdown of the system. This key was passed down to the next class like a relay baton. Its existence was a state secret, but some people knew — and I was one of them.

One day, I was walking down the hall and saw a group of Georgian students nervously discussing something. I was a bit of a «celebrity» at the institute; there were constant «skirmishes» in the dean's office over whether a straight-A student could be expelled for chronic truancy. The dean was waiting for me to slip up, but I never did, proudly maintaining my title as the «straight-A truant.»

The guys rushed over to me: — Help us out!

How could I help the Georgian department? My Georgian was non-existent. But they asked me to go into Vakhtang's office right then and... take the exam. Specifically, ticket number seven. I chuckled: — Are you guys practicing for a comedy show? Do I look like an idiot?

That's when they told me the story of the key and explained that the student who studied ticket number seven hadn't shown up, and the whole plan had ground to a halt. My own exam was scheduled for the next day, so I was prepared. They promised me beer and khinkali, so I went in.

I told Vakhtang Alexandrovich: — A friend of mine is getting married tomorrow and I'm the best man. I urgently need to take the exam today.

I took the top ticket from the deck — number seven — and gave a perfect answer. Vakhtang looked at me, smiled, and said: — Since you came to take the exam early for the sake of a friend, I value your loyalty and will bump up your grade a bit.

I got an «A.»

6. Chocolate Joe

Somewhere in my third or fourth year, right after the semester had already started, a new subject was added out of the blue — «Thermal Power Plants.» If they had added it to the «Power Supply for Cities» group, it might have made sense, but for us — future high-voltage line engineers — it was as useful as skis in a sauna. It was immediately clear that the professor was someone's «son-in-law.» That's exactly what the students called him from then on — «Son-in-Law.»

The professor was short but quite portly. When he drew on the board, his belly would brush against the chalk tray, leaving a white streak across his stomach. When he noticed the smudge, he would stick his rear out in an unnatural way to avoid touching the board, which looked incredibly comical. Since the subject had been crammed into the schedule late, there were no large lecture halls left for us. We were stuck in tiny rooms meant for 10—15 people, where the first row of desks was practically pressed against the blackboard.

One rainy, miserable day, about twenty of us packed into one of these tiny rooms. I happened to be sitting in the very front row. As «Son-in-Law» enthusiastically drew steam boilers, his plump backside would pass mere centimeters from my desk. We would place a book on the edge, betting on whether his rear would knock it off or not.

In my group, there was a charming girl who clearly had a soft spot for me, though her personality was unbearable. Smart, sarcastic, and a total contrarian, she would bet me a bar of chocolate on any occasion. She almost never won, but every time she brought me my «winnings,» she seemed to take grim pleasure in imagining me developing diabetes. That day, she handed me a bar of «Gvardeysky» chocolate. In the seventies, the foil they used was only slightly thinner than roofing metal — when you unwrapped it, the crunch was loud enough to wake the dead.

Imagine throwing meat into a tiger's cage and telling it to wait an hour. Twenty pairs of eyes were fixed on that chocolate bar. I started breaking it into pieces, but the treacherous foil crunched through the entire room. «Son-in-Law» kept turning around nervously, but I would quickly put on an angelic face. Eventually, I managed to share the pieces with my starving comrades. Just as I was about to pop my own piece into my mouth, the professor turned around. I froze — mouth open, chocolate in hand. Not knowing what to do, I looked at the chocolate, blew on it as if dusting it off, and... swallowed it.

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