

Oh How Precious

I have forgotten where I have crossed paths with G, as I called him later and continue to call now.

I was leading an itinerant existence, drifting between my rented room in the huge apartment on the Vasilevskiy island, numerous artistic workshops where I modeled and no less numerous city pads where I partied. Leningrad had not yet become Saint Peterburg and I was not yet even nineteen years old.

Not many kids of my age managed to score themselves an office with a view towards the Bronze Horseman but that was a vista I enjoyed every day. I was a changeling, a diligent archival girl in the navy work coat by day and a nude model by night.

The trait for modeling runs in my family. Before the war my statuesque grandmother was a preferred model for the sculptures and murals. My petite mother exhibited her skinny frame and shock of raven curls on the paintings of underground artists in 1960s.

I appeared on the covers of the young pioneer magazines and was selected for the special brigade of kids reciting Soviet verses during the opening ceremonies of witches Sabbats as I unceremoniously called party gatherings.

Turning eighteen, I could officially model in the nude which brought more money. By the Soviet standards, I was from the well-off family, but the forty-five square feet of my room, with the original mahogany parquet and two marble fireplaces, cost some money,

although I enjoyed a magnificent river view, access to the roof and a private bathroom with the antique tube standing on the copper lion's paws.

Besides paying for all that glory, I had to finance my coffee and cigarettes habit, occasional pieces of solid calories, mainly in the form of carrots and a growing collection of contemporary art. I also had an antique habit and a vintage clothing habit, but both were quite cheap.

Behind the faded screen of the Japanese silk, next to my mattress, stood a perfectly working vintage Zinger sewing machine. With all my superficial likeness to the celestial creature, I could sew well. Alterations and repairs also earned me some cash.

My university cost nothing, the country still being the Soviet Union, but I always enjoyed spending money and could not bring myself to cut expenses. How can one cut the 1930s black velvet jacket and Tibetan brooch of lapis lazuli?

I worked the day job in the archive, sifting through the endless bureaucratic documents of the past century, studied in the evening and juggled a host of odd jobs to make the ends meet.

I was proud to be independent either of my parents or of a man. Even if I wanted to become a kept woman, I had no idea where to find rich of this world. I modeled for the almost destitute painters, occasionally had sex with no less destitute lead singer of the emerging rock band and wore the mended stockings. There were times when I survived on the money gleaned from the cache of the empty bottles left after the parties. I kept my alluring slenderness in the simplest possible way. I hardly had any money for food.

Twice a month I went to my ancestral apartment where my mother doled out some buckwheat and preserved fish. Dad quietly slipped me a couple of banknotes. My grandpa did the same and grandma always prepared something, as she called it, substantial for my

monthly visit. Besides their help, I was left to my own devices, all style with hardly any substance.

Now I remember where I have met G.

The wet March melted the snow in the city parks. The river broke free, carrying the jugged pieces of ice, hurrying to dispose of them in the grey expanse of the gulf. The wind was of a certain Saint Peterburg variety, the damp whiff of salt from the sea, softening the soul, moistening the eyes. Some unexpected things are known to happen under that wind.

The days of early spring are numbered, and one must seize them while it is still possible. It is always a pity to miss the greenish tingle of the evening sky over the mirrored dark water of the channels, the blissful silence of the city center devoid of the usual tourist crowd.

I wore that jacket of vintage black velvet, the dangerously pointy boots bought secondhand and a skirt of gray tulle. I could cut and stitch a skirt like that in less than an hour, if the customer brought her own fabric.

Being on the way to the party I needed to buy cigarettes. Usually, I went to the old tobacco factory couple of blocks from my home. The workers loitering outside after the shift, muttered 'Cigarettes, loose cigarettes, cheap prices'. The prices were not simply cheap but outrageously so. Those thieves have saved me a pretty penny. However, that day I was almost rich having received a commission from the sale of the painting.

The business ran like a clockwork. My crowd hanged around the few center hotels where the still rare foreign visitors lived. I spoke three languages and made money from taking tourists on the unofficial excursions. I showed them, not the city of postcards and pictures but the abode of Dostoevsky and Brodsky, the shady artistic workshops, the rehearsal spaces of the rock bands. Some of the tourists eagerly bought the paintings of my friends. The

commission fee of ten percent could feed me for almost a month save for my wretched penchant for the old books and even older jewelry.

A penchant for an older man I did not have. I barely glanced on the fellow standing in line after me. He was of Baltic-German stock, part of which I possessed myself. The tall, lean and wiry man with an unkempt attempt of the beard, sporting a battered tweed cap, looked at me with a strange mixture of amusement and admiration.

I could see his faded Levi's and a vintage kidskin jacket were genuine. Later I learned that the coat was a remnant of the glorious past of his family. It allegedly belonged to his grandfather, one of the celebrated Soviet aviators, who, perishing in the Arctic, evaded the Stalin's purges.

He was staring at me as if I was the newly discovered and an especially precious piece of art.

I was aware of my physical beauty. One of the painters I sat for, the distinguished professor of Academy of Arts, proclaimed me to be the thing closest to the aesthetic perfection. I did not fancy being called a thing, but the aesthetics provided a helpful shield against creeps. As the same professor said, one could hardly desire to fuck the Venus of Milo.

The curiosity in his gray eyes gave way to the mild smile, barely touching the corners of his lips. He was flanked by the two burly fellows in the familiar uniform of the lowlifes from the city outskirts – the fake Adidas pants and the no less fake white trainers. I thought them to be merely other customers but soon understood my mistake.

Purchasing a pack of cigarettes, I heard the soft voice behind my shoulder 'You seem to be restrained in your habits'. Not answering him, I asked the salesperson to exchange the pack of the cheap stuff for the Marlboros which I usually smoked only caging off somebody a couple of cigs.

Giving him the way to the counter, I inhaled the aroma of coffee tangled with something alcoholic. He was already drunk, even though the evening had just started. He asked for a bottle of the most expensive vodka, the Swedish flavored one, but did not pay for it. One of the surly Adidas guys settled the bill.

Turning to me, the strange man smiled again 'I have gone your way', he nodded at my cigarettes, 'and scrubbed up my act'. I raised my chin nonchalantly 'Not that I care' I snapped 'excuse me but I'm quite in a hurry'. He asked, 'May I inquire where are you going?'

He was excessively polite in the usual Saint Peterburg manner where even the subway attendants sound as if they are announcing the grand entrance of the Emperor and not simply reminding one to stand on the right and pass on the left.

'I am on my way to the party' I said briskly 'not that it is any business of yours'. He removed the cap, baring sad-looking dirty blond locks, shot with gray. I judged him to be on the lesser side of forty. The Adidas twins stood silently and respectfully at the side. Wondering why this fellow as if a member of the royalty did not pay himself, I thought Adidas people to be his relatives. Later I have learned they were bodyguards.

'Allow me at least to introduce myself' he said with the same natural grace 'my name is G'.

Oh, I could fell in love with such a name! It was so nice that I involuntary said 'You have a very lovely and unusual name'. He did not miss a beat, 'I am a very lovely and unusual person'. I replied, 'This is not exactly what is written in the original'. G nodded 'I know. Pardon my forwardness, but when of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world you walk into mine' he paused 'I am a little lost for words'. He did not look like he can ever be lost for anything. I contemplated a tiny speck of time. 'I think' I said finally 'that can be a beginning of a beautiful friendship'.

We had sex that very night, or rather in the early morning, after returning from the party where he was an instant hit with all the girls and an object of scowls from the boys. He played the guitar and the ancient out-of-tune piano, recited classical poetry and spoke almost perfect English.

He was also drunk to the point where he could barely stand straight. 'I need to take you home' he slurred his words 'I cannot let you wander the streets alone at this time of the night'. The March was ending, but the dawns were still wintry. The barely discernible strip of cranberry red gleamed above the eternal perfection of the sleepy city. I did not argue since he was one of the few men who had stirred in me something close to desire.

The Adidas twins deftly installed us in the back of the car. The vehicle appeared as if out of the thin air at the entrance to the building where the party was winding down. Since at the beginning of the evening the same twins had flagged down a taxi for us, I enquired about the ownership of the vintage white beauty.

One of the twins drove, the other one sat squarely in front of the car. G had taken my hand. His long fingers were surprisingly warm 'It's mine' he shrugged 'Chevrolet Impala, from seventy-two'. This was the year of my birth.

Later I discover G to be twenty years older than me but during the short ride, I was not concerned about the difference in age. I was more interested in how the hell one acquires the car from the pages of Western magazines and two silent shadows that were, as I clearly saw now, armed with assault weapons.

He told me part of his story after surprisingly, considering his drunken state, lengthy and lovely sex, lying on my mattress among the threadbare sheets. G was very direct with me. 'I will give you money' he said. Noticing my grimace, he corrected himself 'I mean I will get you out here to some nice place and...'. I continued 'Give me money. No' I touched his hand

'I am fine as I am now, thank you. But you're welcome to call me, G'. On the bare corridor wall hung a vintage black telephone, one of those his grandfather might have been using.

He called quarter an hour after he had left my room. 'Come to my place' he said softly 'I miss you already. The car is waiting outside'. I got together my washbag and jumped into, yet another vintage beauty parked outside the entrance to my apartment. It was a red Corvette Stingray. G had a penchant for the brand.

His place had an even better view than mine, with the golden spire of Peter and Paul Fortress raising almost directly in front of the window. Nowadays the huge, empty space on the last floor of one of the fin-de-siècles building on Petrogradskaya Side would have been called a loft. Then I thought of it as an attic.

G told me that he had purchased property after release from prison. I have already understood what I landed myself into, but I did not want to stop or slow down. G was a professional criminal, a big-time crook and now, with the liberalization of the economy, an aspiring businessman.

Perching myself on the windowsill I smoked the first of my many cigarettes in this apartment. The rooms remained bare during the years of our liaison. G appreciated the finer things in life but could never be bothered to take a firm grip on them. He lived out of suitcases and slept on the mattress, not unlike the one I had. He spent his days at the antique round table with an inlaid chess board made from semi-precious stones. The Empire piece was museum-worthy, but G used it as an overall dining and working area.

He possessed an extreme rarity at those times, the mobile, or, as I called it, the immobile phone. The device was carried behind him by the bodyguards. It hardly ever worked, so G used the sleek black machine that could call and send faxes. He also had a desktop computer where he mainly played Solitaire or newly popular Tetris.

The rest of the eight or ten apartment rooms were simply left empty. Sometimes he mentioned his plans to acquire the country pad, but the project never materialized. G was always too preoccupied with other things, too busy to concentrate on something at hand, too easily bored.

He was also an alcoholic, although he did not do drugs, save for smoking the occasional joint. I decided I could manage that. The allure was too strong, the appeal was too powerful. Except for the sudden bouts of violent jealousy, he was too lovely to miss.

He said I was the only creature in the world who never ceased to amaze him. He was known for his abrupt manner, cutting the conversations in mid-flow, throwing the phone across the room, firing people on the spot. I was sure he also killed some of his, as he called them, enemies or, rather, arranged for their death, although I had no desire to investigate this side of his life.

I was content to sit at the round table with my cup of coffee and my reading or university work, half-listening to G's phone calls, utterly mysterious for me. I never ventured into his business or inquired about the nature of his comings and goings. G praised my good upbringing and the lack of idle curiosity, a trait he despised, but I just could not be bothered. I was content with his constant admiration surrounding me like a protective shield, illuminating my path whenever I went.

My sitting on the windowsill was enlivened by the cup of coffee and a shot of brandy, brought by G. The walnut-colored liquid sloshed around the antique cut-glass. I caught the trace of sparks, not being sure whether they came from an exceptional brandy or the leaden heaviness of the noble crystal. 'Is it French?' I enquired. I've occasionally drunk the expensive foreign stuff purchased by the tourists, but this brandy was way better than anything money could buy.

His gray eyes glimmered with a soft laugh. The sun was rising over the perfect vista of the city. The golden spire of Peter-and-Paul fortress illuminated the horizon. The azure dome of the great mosque jostled for attention with the more remote bronze cupola of Saint Isaac's Cathedral on the opposite side of the river. The dawn pastel colors were changing into the bright oils of the early afternoon.

G smiled as if amused by something 'No, this is the homebrew' he winked 'I have a friend who takes care of my needs in this department'. G was a great believer in networking, as one now would call his style of life. He had friends in most unexpected places. This one resided next to the Caspian Sea. 'We did time together' explained G 'now he has access to some vineyards. He sends me their production, now and then'.

Later I would go with G in one of his vintage cars to the cargo train station in the bleak industrial zone of the city. Adidas twins silently drove or sat on the front seat of the car. They treated me with great reverence as if I was also some kind of royalty. Once I asked G whether all his other girls enjoy the same privileges. He laughed as if hearing a good joke. 'There are no other girls' he said tenderly 'why would I need anyone besides you?'

My presence at the cargo station was pointless but G liked to see me around. I knew that he was possessive but could also understand his desire to show off. 'If I were to own something as precious as you are' he said once 'for example, a great painting, I would never hide it from the people. Everyone needs some beauty in their life. Thank God I have found one I always longed for'.

G was if not devotedly but somewhat religious as most of his crowd, although he did not have the customary tattoos of the churches anywhere on his body.

'This is old-fashioned' he explained 'and I have never liked them'. By virtue of birth, he should have been Catholic but went to the Orthodox church.

I barely knew anything about his family, except for the famous grandfather perished in the North, who bore the Polish surname. G's other side was Saint Peterburg German, just as a part of my own family. I suspected he was a black sheep in otherwise illustrious Soviet stock, but I did not want to probe into his past, reminding myself that, despite his constant and somewhat obsessive plans to marry me, our liaison was not meant to last.

While the Adidas twins signed the documents and put in the car boot the wooden casks of brandy, G and I always went for a coffee in the cheap glass-front bar nearby. That was one of his favorite haunts. The director-cum-owner of the establishment, another chum of G, brought us coffee himself.

The casks amounted to the fifty liters of the first-rate brandy, of the kind usually sent to Moscow for the enjoyment of the Party scoundrels, as G called them. Learning about the size and frequency of the shipments I was astonished that anyone consumed so much alcohol in a mere month. Soon I have realized that G, just like a monarch of the small state, kept a court that expected to be fed at the royal expense.

I was inevitably present at those dinners, some elaborate, served by invited chefs, some simpler ones, in the most unexpected places, like a cantina attached to the obscure training base for the Olympic squad. I had no idea, what relation G had to Olympians, but the Georgian food there was exemplary. Despite having at his disposal, the grand apartment, G liked to spend nights at the hotels. They also varied from the suite with the view of Saint Isaac cathedral to the tiny room with a Soviet plastic décor at the said base.

The love we made did not change. G was always more tender, affectionate, and caring than anyone I met either before or after. Every night I felt that he wants to go further, to claim his possession once and for all, to marry me and have a child but I eluded any talk about such outcome, reminding G that we have a lot of time, although those were the years when people

like him were gunned down right, left and center. I knew he was impatient to gain full ownership of me, but I was not likely to surrender easily if surrender at all.

Sometimes G invited to those dinners outsiders. One had particularly drawn my attention. He was of a diminutive stature, blond in a pale northern manner, with a nondescript face that could belong to every other man on the street. I did not like his inquisitive eye or the silence he kept during the meal. From what I understood G was interested in this guest because he was a personal assistant of the city mayor, a flamboyant intellectual and a political activist who, before becoming a household name almost overnight, was a mere university professor.

Later I complained to G that I felt uncomfortable under the gaze of this nameless person. G chuckled 'That's because he is a former KGB man' said he amiably 'although there is no such thing as former KGB. Don't worry' he promised 'you'll never see him again'.

Years later I remembered this conversation watching the nameless man on the TV screen, shaking the hand of another person who was introduced to me by G.

Ever astute in his business dealings, G never missed the chance of milking the system, as he would succinctly put it. Russia was in the process of privatizing the former governmental property and G sensed and seized the opportunity.

That was first of our many trips to Moscow, always taken in style, in the luxurious two-bed berth of the Red Arrow, the train of choice on the Saint-Peterburg-Moscow line, departing exactly at midnight. G never drove or flew to the capital or anywhere else. He boyishly loved the trains, especially the vintage carriages of the Red Arrow, with their walnut paneling, bronze door handles and plush red velvet of the beds, adorned with an old-fashioned, laundry fresh linen. The Red Arrow arrived at Moscow at around eight in the morning. Not being an early riser, at home G only drank coffee and brandy until the late

afternoon lunch, but while traveling he never missed the chance of the slow breakfast in the train restaurant.

The ritual was finely tuned so that he always finished his third cup of coffee when the train was drawing to a platform of the Leningrad train station in Moscow. One of the Adidas twins would already stand there, having brought one of the G's cars to the capital the day before. The other twin traveled with us and took care of the luggage while G would ceremoniously offer his hand, helping me to descend to the platform.

Sometimes we stayed in the hotels but more often G took me to the mysterious apartments in the center of the city, belonging, as he would explain, to his friends. I remember one of those pads, in the Stalin skyscraper, with an unsurpassed view of Moscow from the twenty-something floor. The bathroom was done in black tiles and mirrors. The apartment also boasted a video player, still a rarity, and an extensive collection of the porno films and magazines. G only smiled since he treated pornography in a disdainful manner. 'I have outgrown such things' he would explain 'besides, I have a vivid imagination'. Indeed, he did and, as I suspected, so did the others.

G never invited to the dinners with his superiors. The other side of life had a very strict hierarchy where he was at the top but not yet at the very pinnacle of power. He said that female companions were not allowed at such meetings. Moreover, as he simply put it, were I to attract an interest of the top guy, he would have to relinquish me to this person. 'Which' added G 'I will never do. To avoid unnecessary bloodshed, it is better for you to stay at home, I mean entertain yourself in the way you see fit'.

He liked my preference for museums and theaters and even went with me to the latter, always procuring the best seats in the house. He loved opera as much as I did and appreciated classical music. He never said it out loud, but I knew he enjoyed the whole process of

dressing up in one of his bespoke suits, polishing the shoes made for him by a private cobbler and fastening his cufflinks of antique silver.

‘People will think that I am your father’ he used to say, ‘you are indecently young, especially in this frock’. I stitched together a daring evening dress of the trophy black silk brought by my grandfather from China in 1945. The dress fell to my ankles but exposed the back which G has always compared to the Canova marble. Not needing a bra, I could cut the dress as low as possible and, of course, did exactly that.

When G had finally taken me to see one of his bosses, he asked me to dress more demurely. The man was in his seventies and of the old upbringing. ‘He is a Georgian’ said G while we were driven outside of Moscow ‘they have traditional values’. I wore a modest dark skirt and a sweater of softest possible cashmere.

At the palatial villa of the patriarch I was seated with a few other women, all clad in black, all speaking in Georgian. Banished to the gilded side room, we weren’t invited to the main table. The patriarch, however, noticed me.

On the way back to the capital G admitted ‘I was quite worried at some point. He said you are the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life. The chef added that if you were to live in the time of the Father of the Nations’ thus G called Stalin ‘you would not escape his attention’. ‘How would he know’ I snorted. G answered in his good-natured manner ‘He would. Forty years ago, he worked as a sous-chef at Stalin’s dacha at Lake Ritza’. I fell silent, remembering the exquisite Georgian dinner, served at the mansion.

During our first visit to Moscow, we breakfasted not on the train but in the dreary Soviet-style monstrosity of the ‘Russia’ hotel. G had taken the suite there for the sake of the perfect view of Kremlin and the convenience of location. After breakfast, he suggested ‘Let’s go upstairs. We have a chance to see how the country’s fate is decided’.

I expected to encounter at least the meeting of the shadow government. In the bare room sat lone red-headed young man, furiously typing something on the keyboard. The computers then still had the green letters of the screen.

‘He is buying vouchers’ explained G ‘the privatization certificates’. The screen constantly updated itself. G and the nameless youth spoke about some business dealings. The Adidas twins remained in the corridor, guarding the entrance to the room. G went out to make a phone call. ‘Please wait here’ he said, ‘I shall return soon’.

The door closed, the young man looked at me. ‘Do you want to stay with him’ he asked, quite plainly ‘because if not, we can disappear now. I assume you have the passport with you. I mean the external one, for foreign travel’. I nodded, he muttered ‘We need to get the visas first. Damn, this can take some time’ he brightened ‘but we can go to Kiev or Riga and then abroad. I have money’ he pointed at the two suitcases in the corner ‘it will be enough to live comfortably’.

Not bothering to ask permission, I opened the luggage. Previously I saw neat packs of hundred-dollar bills only in the movies. ‘They are real’ seriously said the young man ‘you have to decide. In ten minutes, we can be on our way to the airport’.

I shook my head ‘He will find us and kill us. I don’t know about you, but I have no intention of dying so young. It was a pleasure’ I extended my hand ‘I don’t suppose we’ll meet again’. I was correct since after that I saw him only on TV.

I lived with G until I graduated from university. Being offered a grant to study in the West I took it as an opportunity to leave everything, including G, behind. I packed and abandoned my rented accommodation. G did not know the phone number or address of my parents, so I was safe. I had no idea what had happened to him afterward and I did not want to find out.

Oh How Precious

I studied, acquired a doctorate, moved houses, countries, and continents, shared life with different people, became a parent.

Every summer I go back to my native city, trying to get there in the time for white nights, the elusive, short stretch of northern twilight.

Last time I was there while passing the bell tower of Saint Nicolas Naval Cathedral, I remembered G proclaiming it to be the perfection in architecture. 'Oh, how precious it is', he would say, 'just like you'.

In the milky glow of the early night, I noticed a couple of drunkards occupying the part of the granite embankment. The canal gleamed with pearly, ethereal shimmer. The legless man in the battered wheelchair, bald, wrinkly, with an unkempt beard, looked at me. I saw something familiar in his grey, cataract eyes but did not stop. The church bell chimed midnight, the drunk devotedly crossed himself. 'Oh, how precious' said he to my back, 'how precious are you'.