The Halcyon Days

Rain lashed against the windblown canal. Streams of waters flowed down the flimsy canopy onto the pier, gathered in puddles under the feet of local grannies, patiently waiting for the ferry. Here many of them also dragged the shopping trolleys.

Maxim did not notice the tourists with suitcases so feared by him. No one shouted into a speaker or waved an umbrella with a pinned flag. Souvenir shops did not display stands with rubbish magnets.

A boat pulled up to the pier, grannies hobbled onto the deck. On the other side of the canal, the boats huddled under the tarp. Green slime of seaweed covered the grey stones of the bridge. Faint lights fluttered in the dark entrance of the church.

Maxim ended up at the monastery boarding house on a damp yesterday evening, taking a deserted ferry from the airport. An old-fashioned vessel with wooden benches crept through the whitish fog engulfing the lagoon. Empty cans rolled underfoot. Someone left a half-eaten sandwich on the seat. A couple of lonely passengers shivered in the cabin. Maxim went to the stern.

The sea was slowly sinking into darkness. Seagulls screeched over the ferry. He almost wanted to shove a small coin to a sailor with a rope, but the tired yawning guy did not resemble Charon. Out of dying habit, Maxim wrote down the address of the boarding house. Showing the sheet to the sailor, waving his fingers, he found out the name of his stop.

The boarding house was run by the friars. On a gloomy patch of garden, rain soaked a sad white marble statue of the Madonna. An elderly monk unexpectedly deftly handled an antique copying machine. Having returned Maxim his passport, he wished the Signor Professor a pleasant stay. The monk spoke English a little better than Maxim spoke Italian. His university Latin, however, came to the rescue.

Breakfast was also served convent-style. A quiet monk brought a square tower of burnt toasts. Maxim crunched on his toast, looking on the deserted bridge flying over a narrow side channel.

The little church stood directly opposite the guesthouse. The ferry went along a large canal, visible from here only partly. A flock of passengers was again waiting for the boat.

Maxim could not help thinking about the locked inner door separating his former cell from the next room. The professor could not look in there, but he was sure that the monks had furnished all the rooms in the same manner. The heater in his room was barely alive. He had found in an ancient wardrobe an unexpectedly warm blanket. The linens smelled faintly of lavender. Lavender soap was neatly laid out in the chilly bathroom, reminiscent of a pencil case.

On a plastered wall hung a wooded crucifix and a typed prayer. Maxim recognized, "Our Father." It seemed awkward to him to think about what might happen in his room or next door in a few days, but the professor told himself not to expect much.

She was delighted to learn that Maxim was also coming to Venice, but this might not have meant anything. It was on her recommendation that he rented the boarding house.

“It is always quiet there,” she wrote. “The area is near the center, but tourists should not be expected in those parts. December is hardly a tourist season anyway. Hope you enjoy it.”

She did not ask what Maxim was going to do in the city. He also did not know why he had appeared in the echoing space of walls covered with whitish fog, among the domes rising to the low sky.

A working boat chugged along the side channel, stopping under the arched windows of the second floor. A crane hook, ready for work, was already hanging out. The men fiddled with the refrigerator. Passing the dirty dishes to the monk, Maxim went out, plunging into the light rain.

He did not know the city at all. A paper map, picked up at the receptionist's desk, was almost immediately covered with water stains. The thing disintegrated in his hands. Throwing the useless lump out, Maxim surrendered to the will of the wind and fog. The city was like an echoing shell, wrapped around itself, separated from the rest of the world. Maxim had no idea where he was going. He vaguely recognized the bridges and cathedrals seen in the photographs. In the gaps of narrow embankments, he noticed the familiar landscapes multiplied by millions of postcards.

Maxim promised himself to return to them, but one step in the other direction led him to a backyard alley, where the washing machines were spinning behind the glass of a launderette. A heavily made-up woman was solving a crossword puzzle on a leatherette bench. At her knobby feet in felt slippers lay an untidy pile of wool. The lapdog, raising its watery pink eyes, grumbled lazily.

Turning into the first alley to the left, Maxim rested against a cast-iron gate. Behind it raised Jacob's ladder of ancient steps. Clay pots disappeared into a veil of fog. The secret garden was overgrown with the lush greenery of thorny bushes and ivy entwining a trellis. Maxim stood there for a while, examining the wet petals of a rose drooping under the drizzle.

He did not remember that day very well. Maxim was drinking coffee in cheap places with plastic counters. He ran into a cramped supermarket, where, confused by European money, he bought a piece of cheese and a roll. Maxim chewed on them, listening to the splashing water. A seagull squinted with a black eye at his bread. Having received its share, the bird screamed gratefully, soaring to the leaning bell tower of another church.

Maxim also peeped into the churches along the road, dark caverns with almost indistinguishable frescoes. No one asked who he was or why he came to the city. He sat on the creaky bench next to the entrance, stretching his buzzing legs, resting before moving on again, lost in tangled alleys and low arches.

Towards evening the city opened up in front of him a square. The rain poured down the clotheslines stretched over the narrow canal choked with motorboats. Boys in brightly colored jackets kicked soccer balls against the gray church walls. On the corner shone a yellow light of a small restaurant.

Maxim always felt out of sorts in such places. At the obligatory university dinners, he tried to settle in a corner, acutely aware of his awkwardness. His long legs and large body seemed unsuitable for restaurant tables. He ordered the same as his colleagues and chewed quickly,

waiting when the waiters would take away the dishes when it would be possible to talk over coffee.

Stopping at a restaurant, he found that it was almost eight in the evening. The day was passing into oblivion. Dimly lit circles appeared around the flashing lanterns. The wind from the sea climbed under his jacket. Maxim did not know where he was, but he reasoned that somebody in the restaurant would explain how to get to the boarding house.

It was a place where people go in sweatpants. Children are kept on the knees, and dogs are allowed under the table. Television football flickered over the wooden counter. Nobody approached Maxim. He decided to settle at the first table near the exit, covered with a thick plastic wrap. Soles shuffled nearby. An elderly man tried to give Maxim a leatherette folder.

“Menu, menu,” said the grandfather in broken English, “tourist menu.”

Maxim did not expect to pass for an Italian. Grandfather wore a shabby sweater, but he tied a striped scarf with daring unattainable for Maxim. A man was wearing sharp-toed patent leather shoes.

“Pizza,” Maxim said timidly, “pizza?”

The little eyes of the grandfather looked sternly at the ignorant visitor.

“Pasta,” firmly answered the restaurateur, “bigoli in salsa.”

Maxim nodded obediently. A plump aunt in a rustling synthetic robe and a dirty apron brought him a humongous plate. Maxim tried to chew silently, but the commentator yelled on the TV, and a dozen Italians were making noise nearby. He reasoned that no one would hear his satisfied groan.

At the bottom of the earthenware plate, there was left a divine salty sauce with sweetish onion rings. The bread, given to God’s creature, returned to Maxim as roughly chopped slices in a wicker basket. The Italians wiped their plates with might and main. Finally licking his fingers, Maxim exhaled happily.

The old man brought him a tiny cup of gooey oil of coffee. He showed five fingers, but Maxim poured all the remaining coins into his large palm. Seeing a piece of paper with the address of the boarding house, the old man shook his hands several times.

Maxim had to go left and turn left again. Hiding from the rain under the canopy of the restaurant, he allowed himself a cigarette. The university doctor did not like his rare smoking. His heart fluttered, but Maxim attributed this to excitement.

A day remained before her arrival. Maxim wrote down the name of the restaurant. He wanted to appear to her a connoisseur of the city, even if he had stayed here for only two days. Maxim remembered the word with which the Italians who had dinner interspersed their speech.

“Allora,” he repeated the sounds, tasting them, “Allora.”

Maxim had no idea what that meant, but he liked the word. The rain rustled on the stripped plaster thundered in the rusty pipes. The Italian's stingy gestures were accurate. Having run along a deserted alley, Maxim found himself next to the canal. Beyond the bridge, the ocher walls of the monastery rose in the gloomy haze. Candle lights fluttered in the dark opening to the left.

Pulling the hood off his graying head, he stepped inside.

He did not know when the churches were closed, but it seemed to Maxim that this one always keeps the doors open. At the entrance stood a simple wooden box with a crucifix. The cross was ineptly burned into the wood. Maxim imagined a monk engaged in the childish craft at his leisure. Fumbling in his pockets, he threw a stray coin in the slot of the box.

The church smelled of centuries of candle wax and river dampness. White marble has long darkened with a bloom of soot. The gilding of the frames peeled off, the colors on the frescoes faded.

Walking around the cramped church, Maxim lingered before the fluttering lights. Flames snatched from the darkness fragments of white robes, palm branches billowing into the azure sky of the walls of Jerusalem. He made out a young man sadly stretching his hands forward. Taken from the cross, Jesus was drowning in darkness, but the boy seemed to be about to jump into the water to save him.

A trampled stone lay underfoot. Maxim realized that he was standing on a tombstone. He felt embarrassed, but someone's name was also carved next to him. The stones stretched out in all directions. Maxim decided to walk along the edges, which he managed until he almost hit the statue of the Madonna. Something like a stone box was arranged in front of the sculpture.

On the pedestal, Maxim was surprised to find Russian letters, only carved in the Latin style. The name turned out to be feminine. He did not want to fumble in the box, but his hand reached inside anyway. A battered paperback book lay in his palm. Having dealt with Roman numerals, Maxim realized that the book was published the century before last. He recognized the words on the binding.

“Marble,” Maxim moved his lips, “marble and soul. Or the marble of the soul?” He hid the book in his pocket.

The former monastery cell was equipped with a dim table lamp with a yellowed lace lampshade. A beaded fringe dangled around the edge. Maxim, amused, imagined another monk, patiently picking up beads. He returned to the boarding house ten minutes before the hour indicated on the formidable sign next to the counter. The brethren locked the doors at ten and retired. Shuffling awkwardly, Maxim tried to speak to the monk in English. He acquired a page torn from a school notebook. The monk drew him a path to the university library.

The book burned his hands, although Maxim would not understand anything anyway. His Latin was about viruses and bacteria, not soul and marble. It was impossible to endure any longer, and the professor settled down under the lamp. The brochure was published one hundred and fifty years ago. Leafing through the fragile pages, Maxim hoped to find a portrait of the woman who wrote them. Her name was the same as on the plinth of the marble statue.

Hers was a sonorous name, the name of the west wind and the golden sun over the river, of bell ringing. The one for whom he was waiting here also bore that name.

Maxim decided to consider the coincidence a good sign. He wanted to prepare a gift for her, but nothing could compare with the city she has given to Maxim so generously.

“I've never been there,” he said last summer, “but I always wanted to come.”

She raised her eyes the color of the northern sky. A fine rain poured down the lead canal. On the deck of the flat barge, passengers crumpled under umbrellas. The steamer rustled in the direction of another ragged facade, painted with shades of paradise pastel.

“So, come,” she said, “I will show you everything.”

Maxim promised himself to drop by the church tomorrow morning. He vaguely remembered the features of the marble Madonna. Strangely, the statue resembled the one he had been waiting for here.

Maxim decided she would be interested in poetry.

“Only first I need to go to the library,” he hoped for the strength of his university certificate, “and find out who the author of the book was and how it has got here ...”

He carefully turned the fragile pages, snatching out familiar words. The canal splashed in the stone bed under the house. The night left him only the voices of wind and water, stone and marble.

Maxim tried to make out the faint candlelight behind the bridge, but the darkness, descending on the roofs, spread over the city. Longing to save at least something from an abyss, Maxim covered the warm pages with his palms.

On the way from the library, Maxim found himself on a cobblestone square with a squat church. Young footballers were still at school. Local people swarmed at the corner restaurant. The men were standing with glasses at the old TV set that was brought out into the street.

In the morning, a light rain was falling, but by noon the weather cleared up. The sky above the ocher-tiled roofs remained gray, but it was as if someone swept a brightly shining brush across it. A fleeting glimmer of azure appeared among the clouds. Lingering at the window opposite the restaurant, Maxim found himself looking at photographs of apartments.

It seemed strange to him that one could buy an apartment in paradise. The prices were also of paradise scale. The professor did not and could not have this money, but Maxim still figured out where he would put the table and whether his favorite sofa would fit against the wall. The church clock chimed five times.

Patrons besieged the entrance to the restaurant. Maxim did not want to fight his way through the crowd. The professor decided to have a bite to eat at the station. She asked not to meet her, but Maxim wanted to see her as soon as possible. He hoped not to get lost on the platforms.

“I will stand at the exit,” he wanted to stretch out his tired legs, “where is this inscription with an arrow?”

He learned the local word for a railway station second after allora. Maxim understood that the latter carried an all-encompassing meaning and could turn into anything.

“Allora,” he heard, “chichetti e ombra.”

The old man in a worn-out sweater no longer offered him a tourist menu. The restaurateur nudged Maxim on the shoulder.

“Il jardino,” he smiled, “allora,”

Following him through a noisy restaurant, Maxim found himself in paradise.

The wet branches of the olives rustled under the light wind. Glossy laurel leaves glittered above the wrought-iron table. The last lemons yellowed in a carved stone house with an old wooden roof.

“Ombra,” the old man put a glass of white wine in front of him, “chichetti.”

There was something delicious on the plate. The soles shuffled, Maxim was left alone.

The garden ran into a secret channel. Blue lightning ripped through the moist air. The kingfisher, circling above the water, disappeared into the gold of the sunset.

On a humpbacked bridge, Maxim helped an old woman, fighting with a battered shopping trolley. A bunch of unexpectedly purple greens was sticking out of it. The sky above the lagoon also turned purple. Motorboats and low ferries darted over the bronze water of the canal.

Maxim wanted to tell his grandmother that he was going to the station to meet a woman, but that would have sounded ridiculous. He struggled with the desire to confess this, first to the librarian, with whom he spoke in English, and then to the old man in the restaurant. It seemed to Maxim that they both would understand him.

Birds circled over the domes, the clear evening stretched over the city. The professor recalled a poem from a book that remained in his jacket pocket. The librarian, moving his lips, roughly translated the lines.

“It's about death,” said the Italian, “she grieves for her beloved, like the ancient Greek Halcyone.” Maxim was always confused with the Greek gods. Noticing his bewildered face, the Italian explained.

“After the death of her husband, following his fate, Halcyone threw herself into the sea and became a kingfisher. The Greeks called the quiet winter days after her name, believing that at this time, the kingfishers were hatching their chicks. Ovid writes,” He closed his eyes.

And through the pity of the gods above,

at last, they both were changed to flying birds,

together in their fate. Their love lived on…

Each winter during seven full days of calm

Halcyone broods on her floating nest—

her nest that sails upon a halcyon sea…

The librarian added.

“A wonderful poem,” he looked at Maxim probingly, “only this book is not in our catalog,” the Italian showed the professor the last page of the brochure, “because it is a posthumous family edition. You are probably holding the only surviving copy; only five books have been printed.”

Maxim became uncomfortable with his theft. He promised himself to return the brochure to the church, although the professor did not give up the hope of learning more about the author. The university librarian had never heard of a woman who died one hundred and fifty years ago. For some reason, it seemed to Maxim that she, too, had drowned, like an ancient Greek heroine.

The librarian, advising him to go to the city archive, noticed that the woman could have been buried in Russia as well.

“Or her body was not found, “said the Italian, “and the Madonna is only a monument. In those days, many drowned people went missing ...”

Having run down the steps of the bridge, Maxim listened to the chime of the clock. The churches of the channel were ringing in unison. The wind had subsided, the golden light of the sunset spilled around.

“These are the Halcyone days, “the professor recalled, “now it is also December.”

Maxim childishly loved station buffets. He liked the hiss of the coffee machine, the clatter of white earthenware cups, the whistle of an approaching train.

The station on his campus was small. The professor could always excuse himself by pretending to go to the capital or return from there. Sometimes Maxim came to the station only to drink coffee and stand on a platform, wishing he was waiting for someone.

Into a local cafe, he found a large hall with a battery of shiny, steam-hissing structures. She was supposed to arrive in fifteen minutes. Having paid for coffee unexpectedly less than in the city, the professor went to the trains.

Maxim regretted having arrived here by plane. The rails disappeared in the darkening azure of a clear evening. Sunset gold fluttered over the water. The city hesitated next to the land, connected to it by a shaky thread, ready to get off the ground, to float, or to soar into the heavens.

A provincial train with green carriages pulled into the next platform. Passengers with plastic mall bags poured out. Women pushed their carriages. A flock of teenagers with lighted cigarettes and football scarves around their skinny necks passed by. The inhabitants of paradise returned by ferries to their apartments, to dinners and televisions, to toothpaste and beds.

He had never slept so calmly as here. Last night he listened to the darkness, waiting for the usual honking of cars, but then Maxim remembered where he was. He has not heard even the echo of the footsteps of rare passers-by or the noise of motorboats. Bell ringing woke him up.

Looking sideways at the local train, he decided to ride to the nearest station on land.

“Just to see the lagoon,” the professor hastily explained to someone unknown, “don't think I'm leaving you.”

It was impossible to abandon this place, just as it was impossible to leave paradise on your own accord. Having settled down under the lantern, Maxim leafed through the book of poetry again. The unknown woman left behind only two dozen pages.

“She will translate everything for me,” the professor coped with a pounding heart, “her train is coming.”

To Maxim's relief, the platform was completely empty. There was no way for them to miss each other. The black dot was approaching. A woman's voice from the speaker said something beautiful, long. The professor recognized the names of the cities. She came from the capital.

The heart was still fluttering, Maxim rubbed his face. A guy in a uniform jacket passing by asked something anxiously. The professor waved him off with “Bene.” Everything was really great.

“Never the better,” Maxim peered at the few passengers, “she put on a coat. It's winter, albeit a mild one.”

The professor remembered her in summer, with tanned legs in shorts, with a striped vest, revealing sun-kissed shoulders, with lips smeared by blackberries. She smelled of pines and sand. The sea breeze ruffled her bronze hair, barely marked with silver grey. Now she was

wearing a child-sized black coat. She tied the striped scarf with the same recklessness as an old restaurateur.

Tomorrow Maxim wanted to take her to a secret garden with a lemon and a wrought-iron table. The professor thought the old man would like her. She stood there smiling. Maxim barely remembered to take her bag.

"You came to meet me," she said admiringly, "I always wanted someone to meet me at this station."

"That's why I am here," in paradise, he no longer worried whether he could take her hand, "allora, let's have coffee."

"Allora," she repeated. Maxim stopped.

"Please, say again," he asked.

Her word was soft, like the outlines of domes, like glowing water in canals, like cries of birds over a lagoon. He tried to pronounce it exactly as she said.

"Allora," she nodded affectionately, "let's go, dear."

She had a local travel card, a white plastic thing with a greenish-blue emblem. The same pattern was painted on the side of a low vessel, puffing along the canal among church domes and towers lit by the setting sun, between palaces rising from the turquoise water, under the evening sky swinging open to the west. Giving a cardboard ticket to the sailor on the gangway, Maxim recognized him as a guy who worked on a flight from the airport. The coincidence seemed to him a good sign.

Having settled down next to her at the stern, Maxim said so. She smiled briefly, like a kingfisher darting over the water.

"The city is tiny," she drank espresso from a cardboard cup in one gulp, "everyone knows each other. I mean residents," gray eyes looked at Maxim, "I am now one of them." Unable to restrain himself, he gasped in surprise.

"I have booked a room at your boarding house," she added, "and tomorrow, please visit my new haven. It is empty, but electricity is working, and water is flowing from the tap."

The professor unexpectedly boldly said,

"So, I can ask you for coffee," sparks of sunset played in her bronze hair, "only first I will take you to the restaurant I liked very much."

He also liked the affectionate admiration in her look.

The ferry slowly moved along, stopping at each landing. People embarked and debarked - old men on crutches and a grandmother in a wheelchair, a young couple with a baby in a raincoat, rubber boots, and a fluffy tulle dress, a blind guy with a good-natured dog obediently laying down under the bench. They were the locals, and Maxim felt like one of them, returning home.

He did not want to predict anything, but her hand still has not left his palm. In the glow of the sunset, she seemed almost young, not five years younger than him, but perhaps even a quarter of a century. Her face smoothed, she tucked a lock of hair behind her small ear.

“We met on the river tram,” she said thoughtfully, “also in the city built on the water. It's good that you accepted my invitation,” the wind tore at her scarf, twisting the ends around her neck.

“I was afraid that you would not come,” she added. Maxim answered honestly.

“I could not help but come, but I was also scared that you would change your mind.” She took an empty cup from him: “How could I do so?”

She swiftly sent both cups into the mesh wire urn, “Only I was sure that I had fantasized everything for myself. It has happened before.”

“No fantasies,” firmly replied Maxim, “I am here and ...”

The professor wanted to say that he will not leave anywhere else.

“I’ll say that,” he promised himself, “but first I show her the book. She will translate the poems, it will turn out to be a good article.”

At the end of the canal appeared the walls of a church familiar to Maxim. Now the ferry was almost empty. Behind the perfect dome of white marble, another island stretched out. The expanse of the lagoon fell quiet. The wind died down, and only the seagulls circled over the ferry.

“They call on us because we are happy, “he pulled a book out of his pocket, “as if the Halcyone days had truly come.”

The pages rustled, Maxim said awkwardly,

“I took a brochure from the church,” he waved in that direction, “inside I found a statue of the Madonna with a Russian name. Here are the verses” the movement of his hand for some reason gave off a dull pain in the back, “I thought that you might be interested ...”

The book fell onto the deck. The pain became sharp, tearing, a bell rang in his head.

“This is a stop," Maxim managed to understand, "we are mooring ...”

He did not hear the desperate scream of a woman. His eyes darkened, he swung blindly to the side. His large body tumbled over the side of the ferry. The turquoise water burned him with an unexpected cold. He was still trying to flounder, opening his mouth wide. The icy liquid bubbled as the heavy jacket pulled him down. The pain never left him.

“As if in her poem,” the professor recalled, “only death turns the soul into marble ...”

The canal water glowed with the bright crimson of sunset. The vague outline of the ferry was blurring somewhere above. Maxim surrendered to the will of the current, carrying away the marble of his soul.