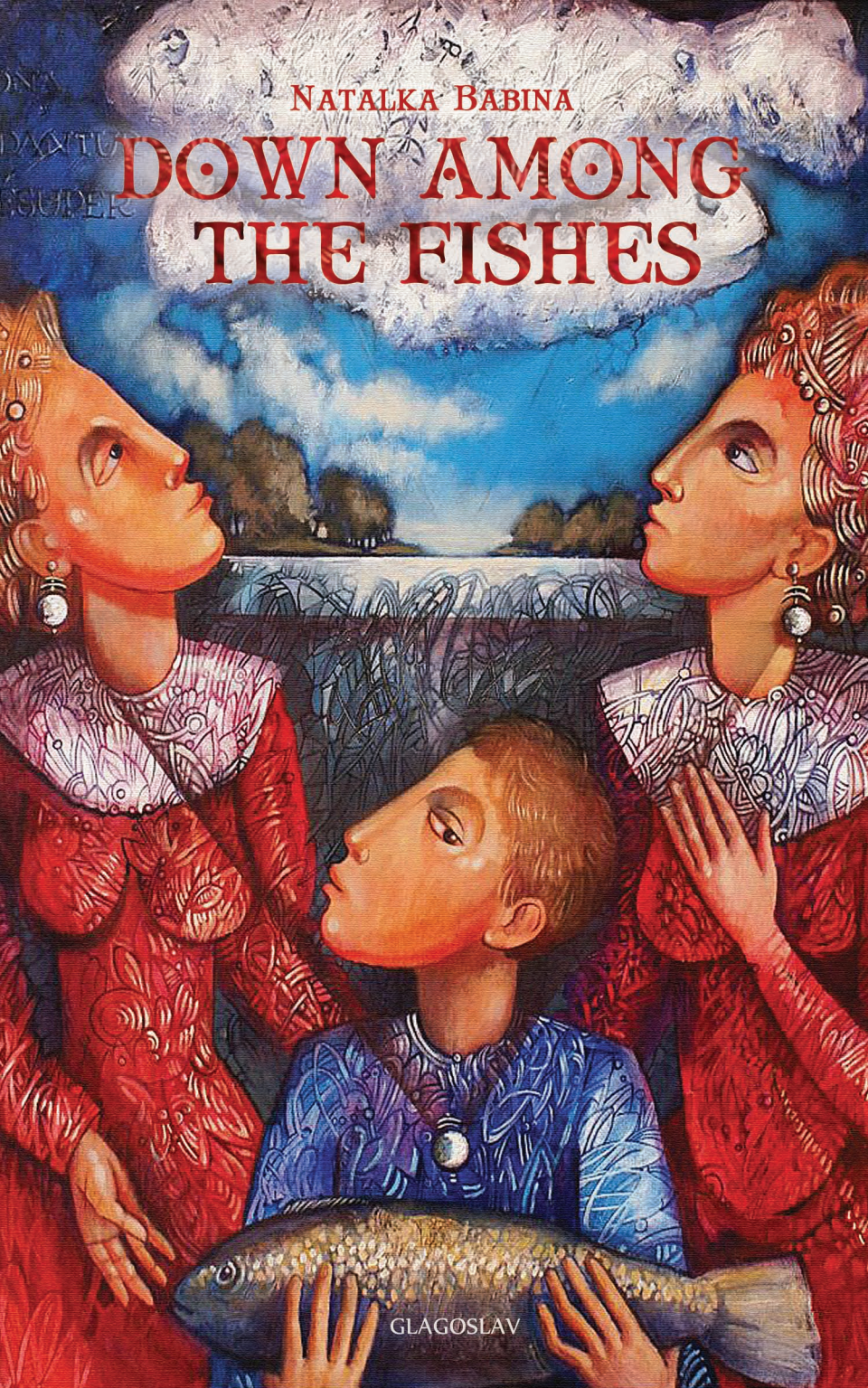


NATALKA BABINA

DOWN AMONG THE FISHES



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DOWN AMONG THE FISHES

by Natalka Babina

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DOWN AMONG THE FISHES

A note on transliteration

Personal names are transliterated from the Belarusian forms, unless they are obviously the kind of officials who would never speak Belarusian, or are clearly Ukrainian, e.g.

Belarusian: Babylyova, Henik

Russian: Graychik, Kuleshov

Ukrainian: Ponomariv

Placenames and names of rivers are transliterated from the Belarusian forms, e.g. Chachersk, Lahoyak, Buh, Prypyats. This includes names of places that are now in Poland; in such cases the Polish forms are given in a footnote. Ukrainian placenames are given in the appropriate contemporary form: Lviv.

A whole chapter is devoted to the names of the villages which are at the heart of this story. The real complication is the name of the city that lies closest to them. Its Russian and official Belarusian name is 'Brest'. The author also refers to the city by one of its truly Belarusian forms: Berastse (with stress on the first syllable). It also appears in the form 'Bereste' as it would be written in a document dating from the seventeenth century. On one occasion the author refers to the city as 'Brest-Litovsk' (literally 'Lithuanian Brest'). This brings me to a little bit of history, as Brest has never had anything to do with the country we now know as Lithuania:

What's in a name?

A great deal, as it turns out. Part of this story is played out

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in what is sometimes called the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a federal state comprising the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Do not be misled by the name: the Grand Duchy was a predominantly Slavonic state in which the ancestors of the citizens of the modern Republic of Lithuania were a tiny minority. — *Jim Dingley*

Although inspired in part by facts of real life, the following story and characters in it are fictional and do not depict any actual person or event.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

AKSANA. Old schoolfriend of Ala and Ulia. Now the head teacher at a local school. Married to Syarhey (called Syarozhyk as a schoolboy). Has three children and two grandchildren.

ALA [ANATOLEUNA] BABYLYOVA. The narrator. On official occasions, when Russian is being spoken, the surname will be spelled 'Bobylyova'. There are also occasions when she is addressed solely by her patronymic 'Anatoleuna' — most notably by the governor of the remand prison in Brest. Twin sister of Ulia [Anatoleuna] Barysevich. Daughter of Eva and Anatol [Tolik] Hadun. Granddaughter of Makrynya Hadun. One daughter — deceased.

ANATOL. First name of the governor of the remand prison in Brest.

ANATOL HADUN. Husband of Eva, father of the twins Ala and Ulia. Also called Tolik.

ANATOL HADUN. Leader of the treasure hunters. Married to Handzia. See Tolik.

ANDREY [ILICH] RUDKOVSKY. Local police officer.

ANTANINA DLUSKAYA. Singer of a kind. Girl friend, then new wife of Ala's husband, Anton.

ANTON BABYLYOV. Ala's husband.

DZIMA. See Sasha.

EVA HADUN. Daughter of Makrynya, wife of Anatol Hadun, mother of the twins Ala and Ulia.

FYODAR KOPATS. See Khvedzka.

GOSHA. Drug dealer in Mensk.

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GRAYCHIK, E.A. Judge.

GREY TOPER. Nickname given by the villagers to one of the townies in the dachas.

HANDZIA. Wife of Anatol (Tolik) Hadun.

HARABETS. Leading opposition candidate in the upcoming presidential election. Ulia is his campaign manager in Brest province.

HENIK HADUN 'THE URUGUAYAN'. Husband of Auntie Katsya.

HORST DAVID. American journalist in Mensk.

IVAN [DMITREVICH] KUKAL. Brest-based 'businessman' (racketeer).

KAZIK. Son of Ulia Barysevich.

KHVEDZKA. Employed by Lena Zarnitskaya. In a more formal situation he is referred to as Fyodar Kopats.

KULESHOV, A. T. Public Prosecutor in Brest.

KULYA (THE WORD MEANS 'BULLET'). Nickname for Kuleyeu, a 'businessman' and rival of Kukal.

LENA ZARNITSKAYA. The local vet. Runs a private practice. Old schoolfriend of Ala and Ulia.

LINA. Daughter of Ulia Barysevich.

LYALKA SENIOR (UNABLE TO WALK) AND HER DAUGHTER LYALKA JUNIOR (MENTALLY RETARDED). Villagers from Dobratyche.

LYAVI. Gypsy racing driver.

LYONIKHA. The village gossip. This familiar village way of referring to her tells us that she is the wife of Lyonya (who in more formal circumstances would be called Leanid). Only local people would call her this. Outsiders, e.g. the police officer, would call her 'Auntie Masha' or 'Auntie Manya'.

MAKRYNYA [LUKASHAUNA] HADUN. Grandmother of Ala and Ulia.

MARIA VAYTSYASHONAK. Ala's rescuer.

MIKHAS YARASH. Pen name of the local poet. Grandson of Yarashykha. Also referred to very familiarly in the text as ‘Yarashyshyn Mishyk’ — Yarashykha’s grandson Mikey.

NGWAASI. Leader of a group of refugees trying to cross the frontier to get into Poland and head further westwards.

POCHTIVY. Spetsnaz officer.

PONOMARIV. Head of the Historical Documents Department of the Lviv Archives.

PYATRO KLIMUK. Belarusian astronaut.

SANALEYEU. Electronics expert, sent from the Harabets campaign HQ in Brest to debug the house in Dobratyche.

SASHA AND DZIMA. Former KBB (state security) officers, sent by the Harabets campaign to protect Ulia.

SHUSHKO. Spetsnaz officer.

STEPAN FYODOROVICH. KBB (state security) officer.

SYARHEY. Husband of Aksana. Called Syarozhyk as a schoolboy.

TARAS SLYOZKA. Ukrainian. From Lviv.

TARASENKA. President of Belarus.

TOLIK. First mentioned by the narrator as Tolik-the-alcoholic, then as ‘My Tolik’. Works for Agrovitalika Plus. Married to Handzia. Leader of the treasure hunters. Also referred to in a formal situation as Anatol Hadun.

ULIA [ANATOLEUNA] BARYSEVICH. Twin sister of Ala [Anatoleuna] Babylyova. Daughter of Eva and Anatol [Tolik] Hadun. Granddaughter of Makrynya Hadun. Her husband is Yurka, an architect. Two children — Kazik, Lina.

VALERYK. Son of Henik the Uruguayan. Home on a visit from the United States, where he now lives.

VALIK. Works for Agrovitalika plus. One of the treasure hunters. Married to Volya.

VITAL CHAROTA. An incomer to the area. Director of the private

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agricultural company called 'Agrovitalika Plus'. His son is a drug addict.

VERA MIKALAYEUNA. See Yarashykha.

VOLYA. Valik's wife.

YARASHYKHA. Village way of referring to the wife of a man called Yarash (a familiar form of Yaraslau). Grandmother of the poet who calls himself Mikhas Yarash. (By outsiders she is referred to formally as Vera Mikalaeuna).

YURKA. Husband of Ulia Barysevich.

ZOSKA. Granddaughter of Henik the Uruguayan.

THE BUSINESS WITH THE DEVIL

There was a time when the Devil used to torment me terribly. He would track me down almost every day. I did have a few ways of driving him off, but he's a really persistent object (there's no way you can refer to the Devil as a person). Time and time again he would come and jump out at me whenever and wherever I least expected it. Bald, disgusting. Yuck... I was permanently stressed out. After all it was my immortal soul at stake, nothing more or less. Just imagine the horror of it — expecting to see a vision of hell under a saucepan lid, behind a mirror or beneath the surface of your bathwater. Anyone who's ever had any dealings with the Devil will know what I'm talking about. Fear completely sapped all my strength. Yet all the same, and to my own astonishment, I managed to sort him out once and for all. I found a way of doing it. I can recommend it to anyone. Or, to be more precise, to any woman. As I recall, it happened one evening, after a heavy, sultry day. I dragged myself home from the city all sweaty and totally knackered. I pulled off my dress. My tights were stuck firmly to the soles of my feet, and I literally had to rip them off. The smell of exhaustion mixed with — yes, I couldn't ignore it — an overweight woman's body odour. Pulling off the blood-soaked bit of old bed sheet that I had been using in place of a sanitary towel, I headed for the bathroom to get under the shower. And here, in the dark corridor, the devil suddenly jumped out at me from round a corner. He had been relying on the element of surprise, but it was the very unexpectedness of it that led to his undoing. The shock of it caused me to lash out at him with the bloody rag (and at that time the blood was simply pouring out

of me), hitting him across his bald pate so hard that dark red stains spattered all over the white wallpaper. I hit him again and again, and again. The first blow had been a kind of reflex action, but by now I was thumping him faster and faster, driven by all the loathing that had piled up inside me: 'Fuck off and die, you bastard, you piece of filth'. And he did. He squealed and disappeared. And never came back.

To this day I still don't know — does menstrual blood have the power to ward off devils, or was he ashamed that a mere mortal had frightened him?

Either way I don't really care, so long as he doesn't come around me any more. And doesn't stop me digging holes in time. For my part I never bought hygienic pads after that. It was, after all, a matter of considerable importance to me. A sanitary towel would not have been of as much help to me in driving the devil away as a blood-drenched torn piece of old sheet had been.

So physiology does bring some benefits after all, even to people like me.

And the smell of blood is something I can still sense in the air from time to time — even if I don't know where it's coming from.

A SACK CAME ROLLING...

In spite of everything that had happened here, I did actually come back. But not for long. I'm going to leave soon and never return.

It's beautiful here. Really lovely. Misty steel-grey sheets of fine rain divide the air over my head and all around me into tiers — close up they're greenish-grey, further away they look greyish green. The rain runs down my face and the oilskins I'm wearing. In a way they are just like each other. Oilskins lose their shine when they're old, and an old face no longer lets the soul shine through. I'm standing right on the frontier. Or, to be exact, where the frontier used to be. On my right, on the other bank of the Buh*, I can hear people shouting in Polish — in spite of the rain someone is swimming in the river. To my left there are people speaking Russian; these are the townies who have dachas**, at least those whose crummy shacks haven't yet been bought up by Tolik the alcoholic. They're always on guard, keeping watch over their fruit and vegetable patches, even in a downpour.

So here I am, standing on a narrow strip of water meadow right by the old frontier in my oilskins and wellies, one scar on my stomach, another — just for the sake of variety — on my back; the bones in my fingers have healed but the calluses haven't worn away yet. The rain is just teeming down, making the grass

* *River Buh*: better known in its Polish form 'Bug'. The river is sometimes called the 'Western Bug'.

** *Dacha*: a cottage in the countryside with a bit of land, owned or rented by someone who lives in a town, somewhere where they can grow their own fruit and vegetables. The 'cottage' can vary from a large purpose-built mansion to something that is little more than a shed.

bend under the weight of water. A little lizard swims calmly past my foot in a stream the rain has made; it's bright green with a yellow pattern on its back. This is a top-grade lizard. When I was a child, we got really excited whenever we caught one like this — much better than the common-or-garden plain grey ones. I'm amazed at just how much the feet of the lizard— when it spreads them out — are like the tiny hands of a young child. Meadow. Water. Ripples on the surface of the enormous puddles of rain water. Calm lizard with a child's hands. Poland on one side, Russia on the other. And from this narrow strip of land between them I hear a whisper, although I have no idea where it's coming from precisely:

*A sack comes rolling down the hill,
In it is food, take what you will,
There's rye and wheat,
And soft white rolls to eat...**

I get a sense of being rebuked by these words, or mocked, or even of being thanked in a patronizing kind of way... This is the earth talking to me, the thick black waterlogged mud of the river, in a voice you can't hear, you can't pinpoint where it comes from, it's indistinct, but you feel its power. And the earth speaks Ukrainian.

A sack did come rolling down the hill, straight into my arms.
The price of the sack was a human life.

You hold out your arms to catch the sack, but what you catch is Death.

And then here you stand, under the pouring rain, and the water runs down your faded face, your khaki-coloured oilskins and your green wellies.

Right now I'm going to wipe the water off my face, take a last look at the tiers the rain has made in the air, and then go

* A counting rhyme for children. Various things can be put in the bag.

home, sit down in the one cosy corner that's left where I can write, and put everything down on paper, just as it happened. And when that's done, I'm going to leave this place and never come back.

And there's something else: not everything in this story is fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or real events is by no means always purely coincidental. If this means that so-called official personages will come and pay me a visit, then I'll simply deny everything. For the benefit of these plainclothes art experts, I can add that the events of the story take place in 2012.

HOLES IN TIME

What I like most of all is digging holes in time. When I'm digging them I now and again hear the earth whispering to me. But not very often.

Stradche, Lyubche and Dobratyche

Everything in my life went arse up right from the very start — literally. Against the advice of her mother — so, my grandmother — my mother went off to have me in the outpatient clinic of the hospital that had just been opened in the neighbouring village. Granny Makrynya — that's what they called my mother's mother — didn't see any need for it and so tried to dissuade her in her usual manner: with a big stick in her hands. She did not, however, dare to hit her pregnant daughter. So off my mother went to the clinic. After all, she was a teacher, young, educated, with a firm belief in the necessity of progress, drug and hygiene. The paramedic who was assigned to deliver her baby was also a believer. Maybe his faith wasn't strong enough, or he just didn't have enough experience, or he put his faith in vodka as well as progress, but as soon as the baby was born — my sister Ulia (or, as they say around here, Vlyana) — and without waiting for anything else to happen, he started to stitch up my mother's lacerated vagina, concentrating on trying to make the stitches even.

“No, no, no, we have to stitch it up,” this in response to my mother's agonised protests, “otherwise we'll have your uterus dangling between your knees. Not a pretty sight!”

And so on he stitched. My mother, of course, was screaming — not surprisingly, if your skin and muscles are being

sewn up without anaesthetic in an open wound, and if, to top it all, the needle being used is a really thick one ...

She was in such agony that any other feeling was completely blotted out; it came therefore as a complete surprise, to both her and the paramedic, when I suddenly broke through the fresh stitches and burst out into the world.

"What the fuck!?! There's something else coming out!"— according to my mother, these were the exact words used by this latter-day Asclepius as he stood there rooted to the spot, flabbergasted, with a surgical needle in his hand.

In the teacher training college that my mother had gone to in order to get an education, they had no courses on how to give birth, and so she, barely conscious and in terrible pain, was unable to dispel his astonishment. In any case she didn't have any idea of what was happening either. She had exhausted all her strength during the birth, and when the pain had let up a bit, she had tried to get her breath back at least. So the paramedic simply stared goggle-eyed at what the medics call the birth canal — and which in normal language we try to avoid giving a name to. The entrance to the canal was framed by pubic hairs that weren't exactly what you would call nicely shaved, full of pain and shimmering blood, and gaping wider and wider like a pulsating star.

Fortunately for me, it was right at this moment that the nurse came back into the ward. Thanks to her, I didn't end up being dropped on the floor: she grabbed me from the arms of the gob-smacked labourer in the vineyard of public health care and managed to prevent him from starting to stitch my mother up again until the placenta had come out. Only an hour later everyone in Dobratyche already knew that *Makrynya's girl Eva* had given birth to twin girls. That's us, me and my sister.

After the nurse had washed and swaddled me and Ulia, they all — that is, the nurse, my mother and the paramedic (who still had an utterly gormless expression on his face) — noticed how alike we were. Peas in a pod. Mum always used to say that

we stopped crying once we had been born, and just lay there looking at the world with identical dark eyes. The paramedic said we were OK, but neither my mother nor the nurse took any notice of him. I now think that we weren't crying because we had no idea what the sequel was going to be. We didn't know that people are not born for their own benefit. At best they are born so that someone else benefits from it.

Although my sister and I looked alike it was easy to tell us apart once we had begun to walk — I walked with a limp. Mum was in despair when she saw this and rushed me off to a woman doctor in Brest. She said that the limp was the result of an injury sustained during birth, because the baby came out feet first, and it should soon pass. It still hasn't passed, although you don't really notice it now.

It was late spring when we were born, a spring of a self-confident kind that you don't get any more in our parts. There were occasional gusts of cold wind; on the sandy hills the pussy willows drooped even more with catkins in full bloom, the railway embankment was speckled white with the flowering spurge that had come with the gravel strewn under the tracks. Tiny white five-petalled flowers of chickweed trembled on beds of brown moss in forest clearings. Yellow marsh marigolds flourished on the silt left behind when the river changed its course. These are the earth's soft colours. There were hardly any people around. That was the spring when they replaced the wooden posts on the frontier with concrete ones that lasted for about thirty years. They were constantly replacing the barbed wire.

My mum Eva and my dad — whose name, by the way, wasn't Adam, but Anatol (or Tolik, as my mum called him) — won't appear in this story, so I had better say a few words about them now, just out of filial respect. Both of them died when Ulia and I were nine. I don't even remember what they looked like (I've got a bad memory for faces), especially when I try to imagine them close up; I don't think I can recall what they were actually like as people. But I can remember that the focal

point of my mum's life — second only to her fear of hunger, something that everyone in our parts had a phobia about — was her fear of anything associated with machinery. She was afraid of cars, of roads, of electricity, of domestic appliances and even of the drugs that brought progress and hygiene, things that it was her job — as a teacher at a primary school — to promote. I vaguely remember how, whenever dad was held up at work or anywhere else for more than ten minutes, her face would change (although I still cannot remember anything about her facial features) and she would start howling and weeping, and so gradually reduce my sister and me to a state of tearful hysteria. Tolik, our daddy, was the one we have to thank for the fact that we can both speak Russian without an accent. Right from the time we were born he deliberately spoke only Russian to us, so that we would learn it. He had had to learn the language on his own, because his parents, of course, didn't know a word. He made his way in the world so well that the factory where he worked gave him a flat in Brest, and a year later he reached the top of the queue to get a car. There weren't any car dealerships back then, where you could just walk in and buy a car. You had to join the queue and, when your turn came, off you had to go to Tolyatti, the town where the Volga Car Plant was, to collect it — just over 2,000 kilometres away from where we were.

Mum, despite her fear of cars, wanted a Zhiguli* so much that she scrimped and saved every copeck; she made dresses and coats for herself and the two of us, stitched on extra strips of cloth to the sleeves and hems as we grew, and fed us just enough to make sure we didn't die of hunger. The sea-blue Zhiguli that they had bought at the factory and in which they were driving back, overturned and ended up on its roof in a ditch near Pinsk when their journey was almost over. They were already in their coffins when they were brought back home.

* Soviet-manufactured car of the 1970s, sold in the UK under the Lada label.



NATALKA BABINA

Natalka Babina's articles and literary musings have been appearing regularly in *Nasha Niva*, one of the leading independent newspapers in Belarus, since 1994. In 2006 she became a journalist on the staff of the paper, and continues her collaboration with other publications in Belarus and Ukraine. She was

awarded the Cherkasova Prize of the Belarusian Association of Journalists in 2010. Babina's literary output has been translated and critically acclaimed internationally. Her novel *Down among the Fishes* is another literary gem in the best tradition of the finest wordsmiths of Belarus — a suspense novel with elements of magical realism, shortlisted for the European "Angelus" Award 2011.



Two twin sisters, natives of Dobratyche, a small Belarusian village on the Buh river close to the border with Poland, set out to examine the events that led to granny Makrynya's unexpected death. Their trek quickly turns into a murder investigation. As the twins uncover new facts of the crime, more questions need to be answered. But will they? A rural intrigue continues to hold the villagers firm in its grasp until the very resolution.

Today mostly associated with the personality of President Lukashenka, Belarus remains terra incognita for the rest of the world. Babina's surprisingly fresh portrait of today's Belarus celebrates the country's diverse demographics be it business, education, culture or just the way people go about their daily errands. Quiet and shy, Belarus turns out to be the land of grandeur, vastness of spirit and passionate hearts and minds.

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