

THE HEMINGWAY GAME

EVGENY
GRISHKOVETS



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AD VERBUM

Published with the support
of the Institute for Literary Translation, Russia

THE HEMINGWAY GAME

by Evgeny Grishkovets

Translated from the Russian by Steven Volynets

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GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS



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To L.



1

I woke up in the morning and immediately thought that I was sick. Not felt, but thought. The thought was exactly the same one you have when you wake up on the first day of the vacation, one you've been waiting for, for so long. So you wake up and think: "Why am I not having fun, why aren't I glad, where is the long-awaited joy? I must be sick!"

I woke up as if I'd been switched on. I didn't shudder, didn't stretch, didn't make any sound, I just opened my eyes. Actually just one eye, the other was pressed against the pillow. Also, I began to hear. I saw and heard...

I saw the edge of the pillow, the fabric of the pillow case, so close to the open eye. The pillow was barely lit by a bluish light. It was early, it was winter. In fact, it was still quite dark, but through the window fell an ordinary bluish morning light of the city – a mixture of white street lamps and already snowed-in yellow windows of the building across and... that of my own home. For some reason this mixture is always bluish; pleasant in the evening, but in the morning... unbearable.

I heard many sounds. They were the sounds of the city. An immense city. Obviously, I didn't hear the entire city, nor were these the sounds of some "urban pulse" or anything like that. They weren't even the sounds of the rising city – the city had long been awake. I heard how people living in my building were exiting it. They were going to work or pulling their children somewhere: the sound of steps on the stairs, the drone of the elevator, the minute-by-minute repetitive groan and knock of the building's front door. I heard how, as if with hesitation at first, and then in hopeless surrender, cars started outside, in the building courtyard. And serving as the background to all this, somewhere... a bit farther away... was the sound of the street.

I woke up. I did not feel my body, no. My head woke up. I sensed only my head. And I was inside that head. One of my eyes opened, I began to hear, and that didn't make me happy.

I so much wanted to return to dreaming. Not in a sense that I had dreamed something wonderful, but to go back to sleep. I so wanted to

lose heart and call all of them, everybody, to tell them that I was sick, to lie, and cancel everything... everything! But mostly to not get up, to not turn on the bright light, to not wash or shave, to not put on socks, or anything else, to not leave the apartment jingling the keys, to not turn off the light in my hallway before leaving, to not press “1” inside the elevator, to not walk outside, to not take that first cold morning breath, to not get into the rigid, cold car... to not drive to the airport to pick up Max. But Max, my friend Max, couldn't possibly be canceled. And that meant I had to do it ALL!

And now, of all times, Max had bad timing. The kind of bad timing only an old friend of mine can have, the one who lives far, far away, who you look forward to seeing so sincerely, but who arrives or flies in, as always, at the wrong time. And those couple of days, like it or not – you give up to him. Meaning: cancel all business, whatever it may be, and get ready to talk a lot, to laugh, drink and drink some more... and talk. Sleep, of course, won't be happening for a couple of nights. This is all a good thing, just bad timing. Completely! Especially now. Because I've fallen in love. Very much! So much that it hasn't happened to me quite like this before. Never! So yes, Max had bad TIMING!

2

The ride to the airport was long. There was a lot of snow. Not fresh snow, but a kind of slushy, dirty snow. There were lots of cars too. I moved slowly along the Koltsevoye Parkway. Up ahead, little red lights lit up and died down: I too kept squeezing on the brakes. The whole time, traffic in the left lane appeared to be moving faster. To the right, trucks crawled along, dirty from splashes of mud. I listened to the radio.

On the radio, music was frantically replaced with the news. They reported about some plane crash, I made it louder. All the passengers and crew had been killed. It was too early to know what caused the tragedy. The possibility of a terrorist act was not ruled out. I instantly thought of Max. Except I missed the information about the crash site. Ah – Pakistan... Disappointment brushed against me lightly. I immediately cursed myself for that, but did it insincerely, without fire or acumen.

Had this been Max's plane... It would have been horrific. Damn it – it *would* have horrific. But... What "but" – Horrific!

Except that I would have had an actual reason to be unhappy. And I would have been honestly unhappy had this been Max's flight. I could have a week of terrific drinking, of disappearing somewhere or drinking in front of everybody. And everybody would sympathize. But above all, I could call Her, right now! And say that in that plane crash, which by now she would have obviously heard about, my oldest best friend had been killed, and yes, my only friend, to be completely honest. That he is dead and I don't know what to do, and that's why I must see her right away. But Max wasn't dead. His flight was descending upon the city. He disappointed me again.

Max almost always disappointed me. He didn't move with me to Moscow when he should have moved. He stayed behind. And the bastard didn't turn into a drunk. He didn't fall. Instead, he prospered. He was involved in various businesses, and never without success. He upset me terribly when, new to the capital, I roamed and

suffered, when all I needed was one thing – information from my hometown – to know that everything back there was going badly, that everyone was down and drunk, that after I left, life has stopped and everyone was awfully bored, but mainly that everyone was plagued by dreadful poverty. But no! Maxim would call me joyfully and report on his new accomplishments, how well all the friends and strangers were doing, how terrific the new restaurant was – the one recently opened not far from where I used to live – and that this Fall there has been an unearthly amount of mushrooms in the forest. He flew into Moscow pretty often; brought the usual goodies from back home. Wasted money, had fun, and on the third or fourth day would start up on how he wanted to go home. And then he would fly back home. And I hated him.

Maxim got married five years ago. I didn't come to his wedding. In general, I avoided going back home. But here was this wedding, Max's wedding to boot, which meant a real wedding. I didn't come. Max got offended. Really offended. I had never once seen his wife. Only photos. He spoke of her very little, called her often. He would just take himself off to some little corner and call his wife. After the wedding, Max did not give up on women and girlfriends... And it was definitely after the wedding that we came up with – actually Max came up with – the Hemingway game. I came up with the whole ideology and terminology. I developed the game's style and strategy. But the principle, the point of the game... that was Max's idea. I played a hundred times better than he – he often got distracted, fell apart, would not complete the game or try to quit. I would carry him, correct him in various ways. I played superbly. But he was the one who came up with it. After he got married.

Five minutes before I left the house, before driving to the airport, I spent about four seconds thinking what to wear: a sweater or a shirt. A sweater would be warmer and more practical. But what if later today I'd end up seeing Her. What if... some reason to call her would come up. There would be words, and something would work out. For that, one has to be dressed in a shirt. Most certainly! No suit and tie – absolutely not. That would look tacky and forced. Jeans, a tweed jacket and a nice shirt. Very nice. My favorite! White. Just a plain white shirt. Nevertheless, my favorite. I put it on... and went out to pick up Max.

I came out to the courtyard, went to my car, opened it. It was still dark, but already there were a few cars outside, though most had already left. I got into the car, started the engine and as soon as I did that, the lights of a car parked nearby came on at the same time. I turned: two bright headlamps were blinding me, so much that I couldn't make out neither the model of the car nor the person or people in it. I warmed the engine for a minute and drove off. The headlights moved after me, I made a turn onto the street; the lights beamed into the back of my neck and in my rear-view mirror. Though there were many cars and lights out on the street, for some time I felt only the brightness of those two lamps. Once on the street, I forgot about them. But something inside me kept scratching against the part responsible for alarm...

A shirt is a necessary item of clothing for the Hemingway game. To play the game right, one has to dress appropriately. The clothes cannot betray any forethought. It all has to appear careless and, at the same time, classy. The chosen clothes must be, in a sense, timeless. This kind of clothing is necessary to blur the signs of one's age and, thus, one's generation. Your clothes must serve to confound anyone regarding your education, line of work, income and social status. That is, your attire should communicate a kind of otherworldliness, a mystery and a hint at a certain serious, unbeknownst experience of life to anyone else who dares to play this weird game. A white shirt is the best thing to go with. And of course, no tie! Also, it wouldn't be bad to wear a wrinkled, but good, authentic jacket. As for the pants, I can't say much about that. There are many options. But the shoes... they have to be first-rate. Classic boots, sort of English, shabby, though well maintained, but without fanaticism. In other words, the shoes should be such that someone might say: "There is something to this, isn't there?"

Max has always had trouble with all this.

And another thing: players of the Hemingway game can never be called by any name other than Ernest. And during the game one should never have on his person any means of mobile communication. It destroys the image.

The first time our game just happened by itself, but gradually various rules took shape, skills developed or, to put it more precisely, a technique emerged.

One can play the game alone, but it's not very interesting. You need a partner – a spectator. Playing as a pair is ideal. By the way, if you are not old enough, don't try to play the Hemingway game.

And so, the two Ernest's set out to play. First, you have to pick some fashionable café or a club that isn't very loud. Whether it's downtown or elsewhere doesn't matter. Even if you have been to this establishment before, you must show up there as if for the first time. You should glance around, ask the bartender or waiter a couple of questions, as in, what's happening in this place? You must appear slightly awkward, but nice and smiling. Under no circumstances are you to slide over faces and figures with that characteristically wandering, seeking gaze... It's needless to say which gaze I am talking about. The eyes of Ernest must always be slightly unseeing, such eyes that every woman should want to fall into their field of vision.

Meanwhile, it is equally necessary to avert the wandering and seeking looks of women. The ladies who came expressly to be picked up, or working girls, are of absolutely no use. Very young women are best avoided as well, because they won't be able to appreciate... They will appreciate nothing. As for those visibly drunk? I wouldn't recommend them either. But there is no need to worry, you can find the right ones anytime, anywhere.

The number of women should never stop you, there can be one or five of them. That's not important. The only thing is, they cannot be with men. A small group of women who decide to get together for drinks after work are very good for the two Ernest's. Girlfriends may have torn themselves away for one night from their kids, from husbands who are well-to-do but quite busy people close to Ernest's age – they are ideal. But the most desirable object is an elegant woman who sits at the table alone, perhaps after a fight with a man or some other trouble.

The encounter happens by itself. But before it does, you must attract attention. For example, order some very complicated drink and be denied by the waiter who doesn't know how to make it. Ask for someone from the management without being rude or capricious, be kind and helpful instead. Then go up to the bar and enlighten the bartender on how to mix that very concoction. It would also be nice to somehow make the bartender and manager laugh while you yourself preserve that look of sadness. Meanwhile, your partner should watch

everything that's happening with a smile. One Ernest must always look at the other Ernest with tenderness, although it's important not to overdo it and give the wrong impression.

So now you meet. Then you sit down next to the woman or women... After some time, you must take control. Though I should warn you, the Hemingway game isn't cheap. You have to order drinks. You have to be witty, but cute. For example, the two Ernest's could stage a kind of blazing, but friendly swordplay with each other.

But most importantly, you must always admire the women you meet. This admiration has to be open and pure, without pressure or a bent toward seduction. Yet, it has to contain sweetness. Genuine sweetness!

You must look a woman directly in the eyes without averting your gaze, you have to offer brave compliments, be sincerely interested in everything, everything... and at the same time, not be fussy, but slightly sad, as though wounded... wounded by life.

You have to create an atmosphere of safety, dependability and unvarnished truth. If you suddenly experience desire or temptation... You have to fight it... without concealing that fight. It means that the whole evening or part of the night must move along a certain thin edge, so that it wouldn't even occur to either party to propose exchanging phone numbers. (Max has always had the biggest problem with this.) Meaning that the better things are going, the clearer it must become that you would never meet again. Never! Yet at the same time, the faintest sound of hope must hang in the air. And at that very moment, when this thin edge is about to be breached... you must part ways! Under no circumstances are you to personally take the woman or women home. Because you will know where she or they live. And then the sound of hope will ring either fake or unduly strong. (Which is all to say that you can't vouch for Max).

You should call the taxi or hail one, help her or them inside, glance for the last time very closely into those eyes... And fall back. Best of all, if it's a rainy night or if it's snowing. Two unmoving silhouettes of two Ernest's must be clearly visible from the back of the car. You must remain still, follow it with your eyes. For a long time!

Parting right there in the establishment or walking out, or staying at the table looking sad as (she) they leave... Let's just say we have tried this. It's not a very good idea.

Night, snow or rain. Or better yet, both rain and snow.

And she who raced off in a taxi should continue to experience a sense of unrealized possibility and think: “Turns out things like this can happen! Turns out there are indeed men like this.” She has to ride home on the back seat of a taxi and... smile.

And after all this, the two Ernest’s should not say “Yes!” Should not shake hands victoriously. Instead, they should slowly and ruefully go home, thinking: “Turns out there are indeed women like this...”

It doesn’t always work out this way. Playing like this isn’t easy. But when it does work out, believe me, it’s very pleasurable... Damn pleasurable! And never regrettable.

I switched to the right lane to turn from the Koltsevoye Parkway toward the airport. A sign with an arrow and a picture of a small white plane against a blue background flashed by; a sign pointing the way to the airport. My heart jumped spontaneously with joy and, just like that, dropped back down. “No, no, – I told it – we aren’t flying anywhere...” The heart was rejoiced by the little white plane and the road to the airport, but it was misled... I wasn’t flying away. Though perhaps I should be, doesn’t matter where. It’s a shame that She is here, in Moscow. Otherwise, I would at once fly to Her. I would fly to Her from Moscow. I’d call her and say: “I just flew in from Moscow. I flew to You...” Whenever someone flies somewhere from Moscow, for some reason it arouses respect and understanding, that the person came for some good reason. But when somebody flies into Moscow from someplace else – then... Well then, good for you, there will be more tomorrow, others just like you.

As expected, Max’s plane got delayed. Not for long, but still delayed. With Max, things obviously couldn’t go without delays. I went to look for some coffee.

How is it that there are so many people at the airport in the morning? Amazing. After all, flying isn’t cheap, and yet so many people fly. There is so much junk for sale at the airport kiosks and little shops. And it’s so much more expensive than in regular places. But if it’s for sale, that means people buy it. They buy everything!

I drank nasty instant coffee from a plastic cup, listening to the booming announcements about arrivals, departures and so on. And all the while I kept thinking a single thought: “I love Her so much! So much!”

It was still summer when I saw Her for the first time. A big group of all types of people gathered for a party. It wasn't a picnic, but a housewarming in a suburban home. The owner's various relatives came from everywhere, a bunch of his friends, children of those friends and their relatives. Everybody knew each other very well, but I knew no one except for the host and his wife. I built that house. I'm an architect. Well, perhaps it sounds a bit embellished – architect!!! But more about architecture later. In short, I built that house. It's what I do.

The house ended up being large, with columns. I didn't like it very much, but friends and relatives were thrilled. Everyone had spread out across still undeveloped territory, as well as the house itself. Shish kebabs were about to be served. I was getting ready to bow out and vanish, since I had already given out my business cards to all the owner's friends who wanted me to build them the same house right away... same, but slightly different. She was with a man, who also took my business card. This man was about 50, tall and very tanned. Attractive, but with an overly groomed beard of complicated shape. He knew everyone in the crowd. She knew no one. Every minute, he would introduce her to this person or that. I saw her, introduced myself, said something. So did she. I didn't even memorize her name, didn't register her hairstyle or anything like that.

I left before the shish kebab. But the next morning I thought of Her, and later that afternoon thought: "I wonder, what is She doing right now?" And later in the evening: "Who is he to Her, the fellow with the stupid beard, what is it like for Her to be with him, I mean, he is boring, he must be." I thought about Her all summer and the beginning of fall.

But then, a month later, we happened to meet again, and since then I would wake up in the morning – if I'd been able to fall asleep at all – and think that I was sick. And for the whole month now I have lived as if it has all been a single endless day. The day wouldn't end. Because I kept thinking the same thought: "I can't believe how much I love Her!"

Finally, Max landed. It was announced by a loud female voice. So I headed to the arrival area. There were already people standing there, some with flowers, others holding signs, the rest with nothing. One sign read, in English, "Max Ludvigson". I thought if Max saw it, he would immediately walk up and say that it was him. But Mr. Ludvigson came before my Max. This mister turned out to be tall,

with a prominent nose and wearing a green coat. He gave off a waft of tremendous foreign dullness. Then women and men in large fur hats came spilling from the doors. That's the flight, I figured. Max was the last to appear.

He was completely unbuttoned, hat and scarf in hand. Coat, jacket and shirt open midway down, were all unbuttoned. His hair was sticking out every which way, his face wasn't fresh, with a stupid little beard and mustache that I've never seen on him before. He laughed as soon as he saw me. Laughed from joy. My God, how could I live without Max!

We hugged tightly. He kept laughing. He gave off a strong alcoholic fume. Max obviously drank on the plane. He is afraid to fly.

We couldn't find my car for a long time. For the life of me, I couldn't remember where I parked it. Clearly, I left it somewhere at the airport. Otherwise, how would I end up at the airport in the first place? But I couldn't remember. I was too much in love... We wandered along rows of cars, Max lagging the whole time, buttoning up as we walked and constantly saying something...

I had met her again a month ago. It was a party to celebrate the opening of a large beauty salon. It was built by some colleagues I knew. I went there to check out yet another typical salon with a set of typically fashionable fixtures. I went to make sure that nothing interesting came of it, congratulate my colleagues on their success and to badmouth them to my other colleagues. Also, these events are always full of beautiful women, everyone is bored and, therefore, possibilities abound.

I am an architect. Meaning that I am not a state-level architect who creates "frozen music" or captures an epoch. I have no influence on the changing face of the city. I have built a dozen suburban houses. I am not the least ashamed of four of them and quite proud of one. My vision had somehow coincided with the client's desires, so it worked out. The house was featured in many architecture journals. Others were okay too, but compromised and therefore uninteresting.

Nevertheless, I ended up mastering and refurbishing a number of storefronts in different buildings. I have designed and built a whole range of shops, cafés (two cafés) and even a fitness center. I don't like doing this. The most unpleasant thing about this work is understanding – or rather, the precise knowledge – that whatever it is

I am working on, a shop or a café – will soon not be there. Meaning that after a short while, at the very place where I am now building a café, one of my colleagues will be planning some barber shop or an eyewear store. This is guaranteed! By now, I have seen how they demolish what I had built just a few years earlier. Not that I worry about it, it's just unpleasant.

And yet when Max and I were looking for my car, architecture was the last thing on my mind. What does it matter, this stupid architecture, if I couldn't even remember how and where I parked?

I don't own a Ferrari or a Porsche. For some reason, everybody thinks that architects are a big deal. Sure, there are stars, though you wouldn't know which cosmos they inhabit. I am not personally acquainted with them and have only seen them in journals. Except I don't believe that these people are building anything anymore, they just point their fingers in various directions. They can get away with it, no one will say to them: "Don't point fingers, its rude!" But that's not me. I know well which new building materials enter the market, where to get them cheaper. I am excellent at using profanities, because construction workers love that and refuse to comprehend any other words. I believe I can communicate with anybody. And I believe that I am a good man.

I used to be married... back in my hometown. By the time I moved to Moscow, I was unmarried. I almost said that I married unsuccessfully. It's just that whenever people divorce, they say that the marriage was not a success. Suppose they lived together for many happy years, but then something changed, so they parted ways. What does that have to do with success? So I won't say anything bad about my own marriage. There was much good about it, we split up more or less okay, and not without civility... from both sides. I don't want to... can't talk about this, not any more.

How can I bear it! My God! Why did I fall so in love?!

"You're looking kind of green, did you fall in love or something?" Max trotted obediently behind me, "Can you even hear me?"

"I don't like your beard!"

"It's an excellent beard, three weeks and done!"

"Shave it off right now... Damn it, where is it!?"

We finally found the car.

"Do you ever wash it?" Max opened the door with deliberate squeamishness.

“Do you ever brush your teeth?”

He covered his mouth childishly.

“I am afraid to fly! Super afraid! Sanya, I could really use some coffee, a roll and a shower.” Max folded his eyebrows into a triangle, the way only he can do.

My name is Sasha.

Maxim – he is not fat, more like... stout. He doesn't get fatter, he gains weight. Meaning, he is becoming more and more the way he is supposed to be. If Max ever lost weight, no one would tell him that he was in excellent shape – they would ask if he was sick. It's hard to imagine him skinny. Max is of the breed of people who don't change. Max can be instantly recognized on school and even kindergarten photos. But this beard... this was too obscene!

We were already heading back to the city, when Max asked,

“So, the beard is no good?”

“It's inhuman! I can't imagine anything worse!”

“I thought a beard like this would be good on an Ernest.”

“What Ernest!? You look more like a... Siberian torero.” Again I looked straight at his beard. “It was abominable... what a nightmare!”

“Oh come on, it's just that I didn't shave for three weeks, then got up in front of the mirror thinking, figured I sort of look like one of those old-time merchants or a pirate.”

“A pirate, a merchant. A Siberian gold miner, a murderer – as long as he is cute and mysterious. But this... this is some ghastly operetta character, and a drunk one at that.”

“I only had a little bit.”

“I don't even want to be seen with you at a gas station, not until you shave that off.”

“I wanted to make you laugh.”

Max turned the mirror toward his face and began examining the beard with his chin cocked.

“So I shouldn't wear a beard?”

“Oh, do what you want! But don't you see what I see? You're looking in the mirror! Are you pleased with that? I mean... take a good look, your face is a cross between a sea captain and a musketeer. And you know what a cross between sea captain and musketeer is – a fool! A pretentious fool, actually.”

“Sanya, it grows in patches for some reason, I just wanted to try it... that’s all. Once we get to wherever we’re going, I’ll shave it off. Don’t worry so much.”

“So let it grow in patches, it grows the way it grows. Otherwise, shave the whole thing clean, so there wouldn’t be anything. But these mustaches, goatees, various sideburns are just strange. They’re simply awful. Think about it, a person has a face, and thank God for that! A nose or mouth, whatever it may be, it’s there and that’s that. But then some so-and-so grows a mustache and fusses over it, and when he looks in the mirror – he is pleased. Understand? Pleased. If he weren’t pleased, he would shave it off and change its shape. But no! He likes this exact one, and therefore he likes himself. Seriously likes himself, no willy-nilly. The more self-important and serious this so-and-so is, the better groomed his mustache and beard. But these sea captain little beards... As in, I am so intelligent, but romantic and free. All these perverted goatees... Imagine, they dye them, Max, actually dye them. Fucking Conquistadores!” As I spoke, I was becoming more incensed and drove faster. “And what about those comb over people. They grow their long sweaty feathers on one side and start brushing them across the bald spot. It’s sick! Sick! And because of this, their bald spot looks like some grotesque boil with a little powder on top. I can’t stand it! Just trim it short and forget it... Worst thing about it, they actually look at themselves in the mirror! And stay pleased. It’s incomprehensible!”

“If I said I’ll shave it, then I’ll shave it. I am not arguing. You don’t think I get it? Beard, no beard – same shit. I just wanted to have a little fun. But I guess jokes like this don’t pass in Moscow.”

Max was smiling, he wasn’t upset, but for some reason I was really wired.

That’s when my phone rang. Here we go. A workday giving its first signal. Except for the past month, each phone ring made my heart flutter with hope... What if it’s Her? What a shame that She knows my number. Meaning, not that she knows it, but that she has it... Or had it. Either way, I had given it to her. Why did I do that? As soon as I gave her my number, right away I started to wait for her to call. It’s awful! And that’s on top of the fact that I also wanted to call Her. The fiery digits of her number burned inside my brain...

When I met her again, there, at the opening of a beauty shop... she saw me first. I was talking with someone and then looked sideways

and saw her smile. She was already looking at me and smiling. And then... we simply said hello, recalled the time we met back in the summer. Meaning, we simply said something to each other about that time. Then somebody distracted me and she stepped away to talk to someone else. That entire time I'd use any excuse to come up to Her or the people She was speaking with. I searched the place carefully, but didn't find the man who was with her back in the summer. If he wasn't there, I had to find out who she came with. She couldn't have been alone.

I still clearly remember how casually, even sensibly, as in not without good reason, I asked for her phone number. Right away she gave me her business card, stretched it out, then, saying she was sorry, pulled out a pen and wrote her cellphone number on the other side. I did the same... And, from that very moment, was waiting for her to call.

That night she was alone. Then somebody called her, she said: "Yes, yes, I am on my way out." It happened that I helped her find her coat, helped to put it on and walked her to the exit. She looked back for a moment, made a kind of half turn, smiled and gently rolled her hand. The result was an almost imperceptible gesture of farewell. She walked out. With fine, fine little skips, she ran up to the car parked outside. A man came out, not the one from last summer. He'd been sitting behind the wheel and came out to open the front door for her. She got in, he shut the door, went back to the driver seat, and there, inside, it looked as though they briefly kissed. And left. The man was dressed in something dark, perhaps even black. A jacket or a short raincoat. It was a nice car, though not the kind that comes with a driver. A man driving a car like this had to be its owner. Of course, who else?

What a woman!

I had Her business card. I brought it up to my eyes. It had Her name!

I was so afraid it would have the name of some modeling agency, or to find out that she was a designer. It would also have been terrifying to glean something about diet food or something to do with the law. She couldn't have been a journalist. That much was obvious.

No! She worked at a travel agency. Large and impressive. She was in charge of flights. I was delighted. Airplanes – how wonderful! I kissed the business card.

Now it was possible to quickly find out who invited her to this event... to get more information...

By the time I was on my way home, I knew enough about her. She was friends with one of the owners of the beauty salon, as well as a buddy of mine who worked on the place, he also knew her a little. They said that she was very nice, unmarried, that she had an eight or nine year-old daughter. They also said that she was very, very kind.

An eight or nine year-old daughter. Imagine that. To me she seemed both youthful and mature at the same time. It was something I felt, that she was older than me. Although that probably wasn't the case. My son is ten. But she seemed older than me. Because she was so beautiful. To me very beautiful women seem... older. And she was magnificent...

I called her in three days. How I survived those days isn't all too clear. One must not call sooner than that. Even that was too soon. But I couldn't stand to wait any longer.

3

Max and I headed toward the city. It was already light out. A whitish kind of day. A cloudy winter day, matted and low-contrast. The first phone call of the day did not come from Her. It was Pascal, my amusing French friend. An architect from Paris. A very energetic and enterprising forty-year-old fellow. His father had at one time been a consul to Russia. Pascal's Russian was excellent. His accent wasn't as much an accent as it was his own charmingly erroneous, but expressive version of the Russian language. A sort of dialect that only he was versed in. Talking to him was very funny. He very much wanted to accomplish something in Moscow, arrived a couple of months before with that very goal, and got busy... So busy, in fact, that it became impossible to stop him. He really liked Moscow. But there was a bit of business he still couldn't negotiate. I promised to help, though how exactly – neither he nor I could figure out.

He called to remind me about a meeting.

"Sasha, hello, did I wake you?" He always asked this, even when called in the evening.

"No! Don't be silly!"

"We agreed to meet today. Do you still want to meet, yes?"

"Already on my way."

"Oh! But where?" Asked Pascal.

"Pascal, please don't test me. I remember when and where we're meeting."

"Good, see you soon, bye!"

He hung up.

"Want me to introduce you to a fancy French architect?" I asked Max.

"Sure! But what about the beard?"

"He is French, he won't notice! Let's go, I have to meet with him. Not for too long. They'll have a coffee and a roll there."

"Excellent! I won't get in the way, will I? I can run off to see my relatives and we can meet up somewhere afterwards. In the meantime, I'd rather change clothes and take a shower."

“Max! What do you mean, run off? I am not your personal driver!”

“That’s not what I meant. I’ll take a taxi.”

“Max, enough. Enough with that. Of course I’ll take you. But you could’ve told me about this ahead of time, no? This is a workday for me, you know. Work! Where do you want me to take you?”

“What is this? What’s the matter with you? If you were too busy to pick me up, then you shouldn’t have. No problem. Let me out, I’ll get a car.”

“Max!!! Where to?”

“I get it!” Max turned away. “Where are you meeting this French guy? Just go there. We’ll figure out the rest later.”

For a while, we rode in silence.

“Max, I’m sorry!”

Max didn’t answer.

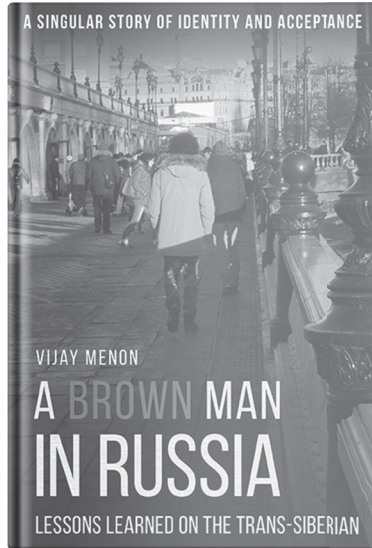
“Max, I’m telling you, I’m sorry.”

“Fine.”

He nodded, not facing me.

Without switching on the turning signal, I crossed over the right lane and nearly flew onto the sidewalk before stopping. As soon as I jumped out of the car and shut the door, I screamed. Screamed very loudly. A number of people turned. The scream was abrupt. It was the scream at the long end of some release. Then I groaned, leaned forward and... began to cry.

A Brown Man in Russia
Lessons Learned on the Trans-Siberian
by Vijay Menon

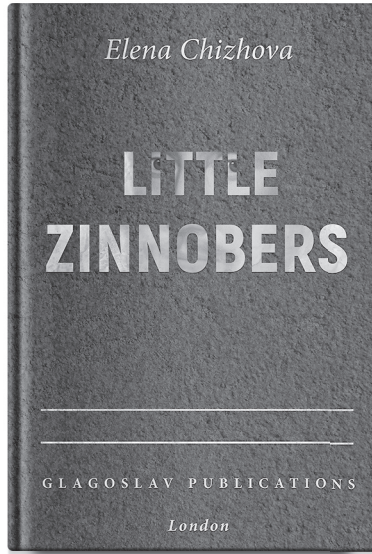


A Brown Man in Russia describes the fantastical travels of a young, colored American traveler as he backpacks across Russia in the middle of winter via the Trans-Siberian. The book is a hybrid between the curmudgeonly travelogues of Paul Theroux and the philosophical works of Robert Pirsig. Styled in the vein of Hofstadter, the author lays out a series of absurd, but true stories followed by a deeper rumination on what they mean and why they matter. Each chapter presents a vivid anecdote from the perspective of the fumbling traveler and concludes with a deeper lesson to be gleaned. For those who recognize the discordant nature of our world in a time ripe for demagoguery and for those who want to make it better, the book is an all too welcome antidote. It explores the current global climate of despair over differences and outputs a very different message – one of hope and shared understanding. At times surreal, at times inappropriate, at times hilarious, and at times deeply human, A Brown Man in Russia is a reminder to those who feel marginalized, hopeless, or endlessly divided that harmony is achievable even in the most unlikely of places.

Buy it > www.glagoslav.com

Little Zinnobers

by Elena Chizhova



Is it possible to cultivate fundamental human values if you live in a totalitarian state? A teacher who instigates the school theatre sets out to prove that it is. But while the pupils rehearse Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies under her ever-vigilant eye, Soviet life makes its brutal adjustments. This can be called a book about love, the tough kind of love that gets you through life, and death.

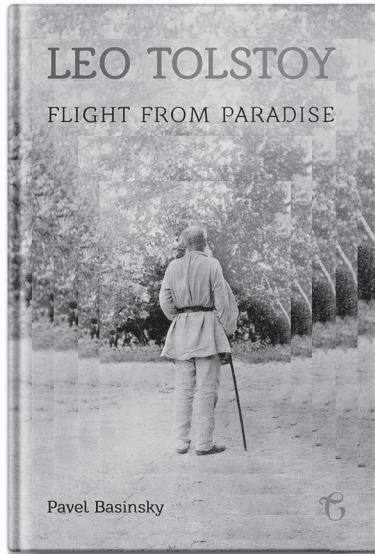
Zinnobers is especially fascinating for British readers as we see Shakespeare's famous sonnets and plays are touchingly brought to life by the Russian children and their gifted teacher, the novel's heroine. The teacher applies some of the playwright's satire to the socio-political situation of the USSR, using her English lessons to teach her students life's broader lessons, too.

Echoes of the Soviet Union can be felt in our own society today: the people find themselves increasingly at odds with the politicians' hypocrisy, 'big brother' is watching us through thousands of CCTVs, and political correctness determines what we can and cannot say...

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Leo Tolstoy – Flight from Paradise

by Pavel Basinsky



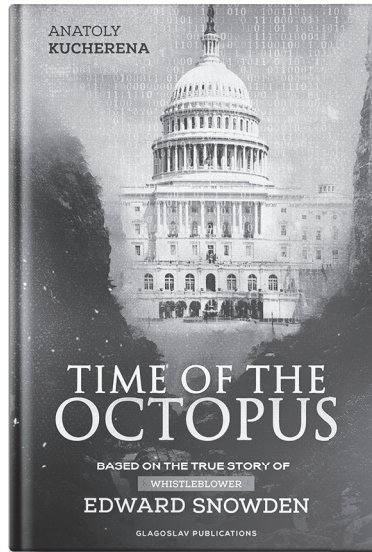
Over a hundred years ago, something truly outrageous occurred at Yasnaya Polyana. Count Leo Tolstoy, a famous author aged eighty-two at the time, took off, destination unknown. Since then, the circumstances surrounding the writer's whereabouts during his final days and his eventual death have given rise to many myths and legends. In this book, popular Russian writer and reporter Pavel Basinsky delves into the archives and presents his interpretation of the situation prior to Leo Tolstoy's mysterious disappearance. Basinsky follows Leo Tolstoy throughout his life, right up to his final moments. Reconstructing the story from historical documents, he creates a visionary account of the events that led to the Tolstoys' family drama.

Flight from Paradise will be of particular interest to international researchers studying Leo Tolstoy's life and works, and is highly recommended to a broader audience worldwide.

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TIME OF THE OCTOPUS

by Anatoly Kucherena



A frightening, prophetic vision of our world...

In Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport, fugitive US intelligence officer Joshua Kold is held in limbo, unable to leave the airport's transit area. He is on the run, after blowing the lid off the terrifying reach of covert American global surveillance operations. Will the Russian authorities grant him asylum, or will they hand him over the clutches of the global octopus eager for revenge for his betrayal?

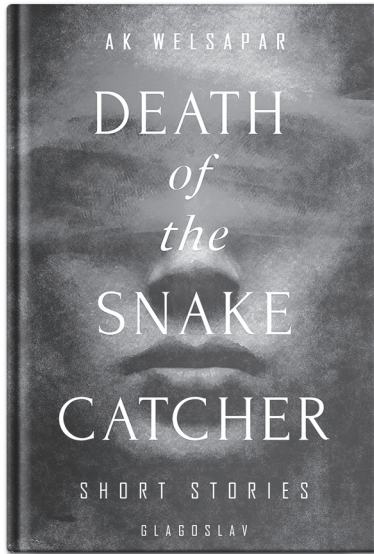
As this gripping psychological and political thriller unfolds, a Moscow lawyer takes Kold to a secret bunker and grills him intently on just why he did it. Upon Kold's answers hang not only his own fate, but much, much more as the true extent of this chilling 1984 world unfolds.

Anatoly Kucherena is the famous Russian lawyer who took on the case of the American whistleblower Edward Snowden whose revelations about US intelligence operations sent shockwaves around the world in 2013. Time of the Octopus is a fiction, but it is based on Kucherena's own interviews with Snowden at Sheremetyevo, and provides the basis for Oliver Stone's major Hollywood movie 'Snowden' starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt, one of the movie events of 2016...

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Death of the Snake Catcher

by Ak Welsapar



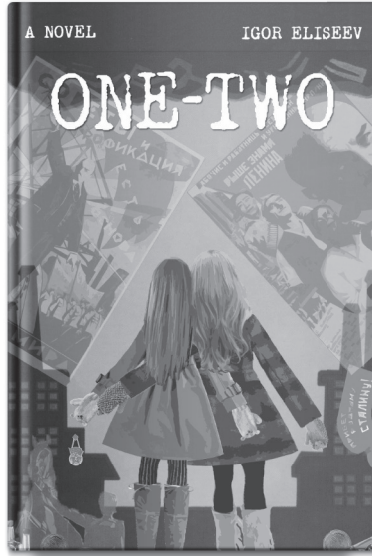
This book features people from one of the most closed countries of today's world, where the passage of time resembles the passage of a caravan through the waterless desert. This world has been recreated by a true-born son of that mysterious country, a Turkmen who, at the will of fate, has now been living for a quarter of a century in snowy Scandinavia. Is that not why two different worlds come together in *Ryazan horseradish and Tula gingerbread*, to come apart in *Love in Lilac*, in which a student from the non-free world falls in love with a girl from the West?

In the story *Death of the Snake Catcher*, an old snake catcher meets one on one with a giant cobra in the heart of the desert. In the dialogue between them the author unveils the age-old interdependence of Man and untamed nature, where the fear and mistrust of the strong and the hopes and apprehensions of the weak change places but co-exist as ever. *Egyptian night of fear*, in which a boy goes to an Eastern bazaar and falls into the clutches of depraved forces, is created in the writer's characteristic style of magical realism, while the novella *Altynai* celebrates first love, radiant and sad, pure as virgin snow.

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One-Two

by Igor Eliseev



Two conjoined babies are born at the crossroads of two social worldviews. Girls are named Faith and Hope. After spending their childhood in a foster home and obtaining primary education, they understand that they are different from other people in many respects. The problems of their growing up are exacerbated with permanent humiliations from society.

Finally, fortune favors them, slightly opening a door to happiness – separation surgery that theoretically can be performed in the capital. And sisters start their way, full of difficulties and obstacles. Will they be able to overcome a wall of public cynicism together with internal conflicts among themselves? Will they find a justification for their existence and accept it? Searching for the answers to these and many other questions constitutes the essence of this novel...

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The Hemingway Game is the first novel from Russian playwright and performer of his own plays, Evgeny Grishkovets. *The Hemingway Game* is an urban romance which depicts the life of a shirt over the course of one day (worn in the morning and taken off late at night); revealing a lot about the main character, who subsequently moved to Moscow some time ago. He, just like all of us, wakes up in the morning, goes to work, meets his friends and has his daily routine; that is until love changes everything. Written in a similar style to the Grishkovets plays, this short novel depicts the same type of unity of time, place and action, as well as psychological subtlety.



Evgeny Grishkovets, born in Kemerovo in 1967, is a popular Russian writer, playwright, musician and actor. Grishkovets graduated from Kemerovo State University, where he studied philology and embarked upon his military service during his time at university. In 1990, Grishkovets founded the independent theatre *Lozha*, which means “theatre box”. In 1998, Grishkovets staged his first solo performance, *How I Ate a Dog*, for which he was awarded the Golden Mask theatrical award. In 1999, he received the Anti-Booker award for his plays *Notes of the Russian Traveler* and *Winter*, and the following year won the Triumph Prize. He has also played supporting roles in a number of renowned Russian films, such as *The Stroll*, *Not by Bread Alone*, and has released several albums.

Grishkovets rose from a provincial film director to a cult figure, recognized for his talent amongst the juries of the most prestigious theatrical awards around. He is often called “a one-man theatre”, as he stages and performs his own witty soliloquy plays himself. Grishkovets currently lives in Kaliningrad with his family, and frequently tours Russia and Europe.

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