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Five Stories

From the novel *The Fulfillment of Wishes*

1. The Dove

The yard was the only place where I could go on my own. All other independence was forbidden, cut short by grandma's shouts and a serious telling-off: I should have been within the field of vision. If I wasn't, then to my embarrassment and powerless anger there came a yell from the window, calling me back with the same monotonous insistence - back into the visual field, as if I'd stop existing outside of it.

That day in the yard the children were running around after each other in big and small circles. A ways from them, near basement windows protected from a ground-level pavement by bars and a deep hole, was lying a dead dove. It was bluish and grayish - just like the paving-stones. One was not supposed to notice it - like anything else which was shameful. The dove was dead. And everyone passed it by.

The thought that rose in my mind, like a strange protest, a drunkard's sly glance, or some memory of nakedness, was: "Why?" It is here. Here it is. It lies motionless, with its wings broken and twisted, with its little body raised up at its chest, looking like my grandmother's milk-jug, with its eyes, those dark orange circles around them, with its violet beak. Here it is - the grey dove, one of those we throw breadcrumbs to - in that one and only instance where bread is allowed to be thrown and then eaten from the floor. The pirate of the garbage bins, publicly bathing in the pools, the dove, fighting for its bread with the sparrows and crows. Why should I not notice it now?

Or maybe the dead dove was not a dove any more? Maybe it was just a soft part of the pavement, its secret, its seamy side? For this thing was different from the dove; it was a "not-a-dove" thing, so helpless was it. Not with the helplessness of a wounded creature, but with the last helplessness, which is so shameful that one cannot approach and help to conceal it. It was everything laid open, pure, unbearable nakedness: so close to horrible deformity, to idiocy, to old age, to poverty and sadness, to the final defeat. It had the blank look of a traitor who tells everyone's secret.

And I stood in front of this shameful secret and peered into it. And a strange thought finally began to gather from the outskirts of my mind. I wanted to go to it, to take it in my hands, to kiss it, through the sickening feeling (especially because the feeling was so sickening), perhaps to eat it. Or at least to pick it up and bury it in the grey, tainted earth of the yard. After doing something like that I knew nothing would ever be able to change me. Not beautiful dresses, nor shouts and taboos. Nothing would protect me from the Big Sadness that I

felt was flowing from everywhere. I would simply be there and never know any grief. I shall be one of the worst ones, I thought. People will scold me and never say a good word, I shall lie under the fence and sing the songs of the drunken men. But I shall be with the rest of the sad people and nothing will be able to take me away from them. And I shall never know sadness for I shall act justly. I shall take pity on this weak and dead creature. I shall give it peace and dignity. And that shall be freedom.

The dove's eyes were fixed on me with narrowed pupils, peering out from a strange place which was both high and low, greedy and yearning, a place of maddening pity and helplessness. The dove and I, connected through that look, began to flow into each other, and the pavement around us sank away in expectation, as if not knowing whether to swallow me up or fly away. And then suddenly the other children saw me. "Infectious! Dirty!" came from every side. "Run away from her! Run!" and then the sound scattered. The children flew away from me in all directions and I was standing in the still centre of their flight. Now I must do what I wanted, I must take it into my hands. Now. Not saying a word. I must take it, no matter what, to the place in the ground where I wanted to bury it. "Infectious!" they went on yelling. I must take it into my hands and lose my color for ever. I must become dove-grey and transparent, I must become dead... Time passed; and as it passed the more those strange haughty eyes that seemed to be looking at me gradually lost interest. As if my invisible audience had grown tired of waiting.

"Infectious!" the children screamed... The noise got louder; the words reaching my ears resolved, acquired meaning. I was suddenly frightened. And as if waking up I ran, and my running turned into a game of tag, the game that I hated so much. This was the end. Someone beautiful and unbearably desirable had turned his bored eyes away from me. The empty stage was filled with the disappointment of the audience. The hero didn't make it. And the heavens, those disinterested, irretrievable heavens which lay above the yard were saying only one thing: NOTHING HAPPENED.

2. My Grandma's Taxi Driver Story

Leaving for the south, we forgot our plane-ticket at home. "Tanya," said my grandpa, "take a cab and come to the airport." Now asking someone who doesn't even take the Metro and whirls around just one tiny Moscow district to take a cab was like asking her to take Berlin. Having rushed out into the street with the ticket in her shaking hand, my grandma did the first thing she could think of: i.e. she pushed herself into the first cab she saw peacefully slumbering in front of Armenia Wines. Seizing it in a giant embrace, she fumbled for the handle. Then, squeezing half of herself in through the car window, she asked tremulously, urgently: "C-can you take me to the airport?"

The driver, who never in his wildest dreams had expected a turn of events like this, looked at my grandma and, as if hypnotized by the power of all that trembling and shivering of hers, quietly nodded. He had the doomed air of a man caught by fate or natural catastrophe in the middle of some entirely innocent occupation. Grandma tumbled in like globe-lightning and slammed the door so as not to fall out. And having slammed the door, she just drifted

way, having no idea where to. The car drove and grandma looked out of the window, soon over totally unknown streets. Highways and brand new buildings began to flash before her eyes. (Maybe they were known to my ma and grandpa, but certainly not to her.) And so on and so on till the edge of perception, till its very limit, until finally an enormous glass-and-concrete building presented itself to her astonished gaze. It looked like one huge solid window, in front of which there stood rows of multicoloured cars. Bee-like cabs were coming and going. Travelers grappling with boxes and bags were running pell-mell for fear of being late; and the sky was already filled with the buzzing white triangles of planes flying up like angels. This was the shining “end of the world” – the one mom and I never managed to leave from on the way to Belgrade.

“Airport,” said the driver. And so it was that at the entrance to this enormous monster, she – in nothing but a house-dress, her hair tousled, wearing slippers instead of shoes – was met by my impeccably dressed grandpa. The day behind him was spreading measurably over the vast paved fields and the rows of cars and the white lines of the planes, not to mention the rows of fizzy-water-vending machines. Simply and calmly he took the ticket, announced that he’d be home later, and then disappeared back into the bowels of the building. Grandma felt relieved - then panicked. How would she get home? She didn’t know. She hadn’t enough strength left to “take a cab” for a second time. So she rushed back to ‘her’ driver who had barely had time to come back to his senses, and grabbing him before he had them under complete control, she said: “Where are you off to now?” The driver sighed and looked at her: “Really I have to get back. I had a date back there”. More pleased than she could say, not wasting her time on any excuses, my grandma poured herself back into ‘her’ car and proceeded back to Armenia Wines, like Noah in his ark.

Still: “Can you imagine how frightened he must have been when I pushed myself in while he was waiting for his date? He must have thought I was crazy!” – she laughed. But who knows what truths or consequences this twist of fate brought to the driver? Was he forever stood up by the date who failed to find him? Or was he reassured of her utter constancy by the fact that she herself waited? Who knows? Or perhaps this story had an altogether finer and more complex ending. Perhaps the driver, having had this first-hand experience of the dream-like darkness and unpredictability of the world, became, God forbid, some sort of philosopher. Provided, that is - of course - that he had no sense of humor. . .

3. Mother and the Sea

I haven’t been carried in anyone’s arms for a long time. Our generation, reared on Dr. Spock, has raised the banner of emancipation, the emancipation of parents from children. If you cry – go to your room. If you cry for more than thirty minutes - then maybe we’ll come and see you. To carry a child in one’s arms is not recommended - one should carry it like a papoose, strapped to one’s belly.

But now we are together in the sea. Not in the countryside with grandma, not in the kindergarten, but with mother: together... There is water all around us,

emerald water, bright, curling with little white crests on top of the waves, and we walk on stones... No, you walk; I perch in your arms. I can feel how painful it is for you, and having seized your neck I sit without moving. Not one thing exists out there anymore, there is only sea and sky and your body and me, and your body warms me through the water. I seem so light, weightless, and I seem to hold in my arms something not fully real, which walks and swings under me – its legs walk instead of mine, and its feet are in pain because of the stones, and I can feel that pain, which is suffered for my sake, absolutely and irrevocably. The one who carries me has a silver necklace of Andersen's Mermaid, seated on a rock. I have the same silver necklace, only with a little crown. I'm the mermaid's daughter, little germ, little crown.

The sea. It sways, it raises and it lets go; it is uneven as a living will. Having learnt to be with it, you will be able to be anywhere. You will be able to roll under, or rush forward, sometimes playing as with a lion. But never cut across. Always go underneath, the salty water seeping slowly into your body's complex of cavities, planes, pipes and partitions. Dive and a little portion of the sea will stay in your ear, pushing out all the sounds, forming a layer between you and the world, so that you can't hear voices any more, only see moving lips. Or dive with your eyes open, seizing the air as if in handfuls and keeping it inside so that the sea won't fill you, looking up through the thick, bottle-like transparency, distinguishing the play of lights above your head, which float like enormous snakes. And beneath? You'll see maybe, if you are not too far away from the shore, white, polished stones; and if you are too far, the very same transparency deepening to the bottom. And once you return, the world is restored, but only in bits. The sky flashes out like a freshly minted coin, revealing the world as a place of irresistible but fragmented clarity. The faces, the nearly naked figures, the pebbles, the houses, the trees and the sky, all the world's sobriety, that brightness existing only in the air, that transparent blue film - all these are far away, hallucinatory, unreal. Coming up through your nose the sea burns the throat; it conquers the body like an enemy. But it sways the same body more softly and tenderly than the air ever does. It caresses it as if it were part of itself, something carried within it, giving that unbelievable soft freedom from the earth's pull of gravity.

"Your little girl is a southerner, she needs the sea. Otherwise she'd be sick all the time", the doctors said after I coughed all winter. My exiled Serbian grandfather took me there first, to the Polaroid photographs of my memory. We get into an air-pocket while we're flying. Whoops! and the plane goes down. But I'm not afraid. I'm playing with a ball in the passageway between the seats. A dusty bus takes us to the station. My grandfather, with whom I stay alone for the first time, doesn't seem to know where we're going. He has to remember the house where some decades ago, just after he emigrated from Serbia, he lived with my ten-year-old father. For some reason I think that my father was a fat unpleasant boy, that everything will be just as clumsy and slow-moving, and that my grandfather will not find the house - and I want to go home. The narrow dusty street, the houses along its sides. Each house is separate, each unlike its neighbour. A rusty gate. My grandfather stops. He knocks. A short fat woman in a black dress comes out and they talk. I don't like it here. Let's go somewhere else. But we stay. We rent a room. Here everything is shared, except for the room. But I like it downstairs. There is a

buffet and nice little shelves with cups and a music-box with a ballet-dancer on the top.

The beach... The bodies, the sea which seems turbid in comparison with river water... It looks like bottle-glass unlike the clear water of ponds and lakes... My grand-pa comes out of it drying himself with a towel. He is covered with drops, and his grey, thick, short-cut hair is burning in the sun like the quills of a hedgehog... Suddenly he begins to talk to a stranger... He laughs, he seems to be at ease... I suddenly remember that he is a Southerner too.

Mother arrives... She comes to replace my grandpa, and walks out of the taxi the same way she always does... Here is how I look: One plait is higher than the other, my hands are covered in white patches from the sunburn; I have one long sock, one ankle-sock; and a T-shirt under a sleeveless dress... My final transformation into a gypsy girl has been completed with unbelievable speed. "Radonij Djukonovitch," says my mother formally, "what's wrong with the child?" "My dear," says my grandpa, "that's what she wanted". Mom laughs.

The following year we go to a big sanatorium, and the year after that to the country's best, where the sea is clean and we are surrounded by ancient pine trees. This time, though, when we arrive, no-one expects us. They tell us there are no rooms and we have to go somewhere else, out under the sun with our heavy bags. I'm hot; the white buildings rise like enormous sheets of paper, and the dark windows of the rooms seem swallowed up behind the blue rows of the balconies. If this is a song, then it's a sad one... The fountains big and small are playing, but they smell of chlorine. Holidaymakers slap past us in single-thonged *vietnamki* flip-flops, carrying rubber mattresses and towels... Shivering children with wet hair and bathing suits hunch and skitter their way back from their escape into the dive-bombed sea... Both groups seem vaguely hostile as we walk against their pressure, with the resort's dislike of newcomers, who only serve to remind those who've settled in that their time is short, and that they still carry on their shoe soles the dust of the fretful and dull places they left behind them.

We finally go to the administration, to a man called Ram. Ram remembers that he has indeed "been contacted" and promises to accommodate us, but only after lunch. So leaving our luggage – and my luggage is no less than mom's (the dresses, long and short, the sundresses, shorts, overalls, skirts – "Lena!" they say. It's obscene! She has as many things as yourself!) – we set off for the restaurant... I don't feel good. My grandma would never allow "a child" to get tired or to eat in a restaurant, or not to be welcomed by whoever is supposed to expect it... Everything is so fragile with mom, just as it is with my Serbian grandpa. We are not expected and I feel both shame and anger - a shame and anger which are doubled (at least) when the waitress in the restaurant announces there are no tables.

"Wait!" mom says when I want to leave. Let's leave, let's hide, let's run away. But no, we have to stand there under the mocking eyes of the staff. I can read them: "Well, well, even with a child! No shame!"... And that special beauty of my mother, with her blue jeans and tight T-shirt, make her even more

vulnerable... Had she been simpler, had she asked for less, she wouldn't have been looked down on by these self-assured women... But then two places come free as two dark-haired handsome men invite us to sit with them. The waitress is instantly exiled from her central place in the universe. Now she is only a waitress, and the sort of person doomed never to be asked by a good-looking man to his table. From an all-powerful queen she's been transformed into a plump middle-aged blonde with a pad and a pencil in her hands. The men are Yugoslav, as is my father is, and on leave. We chat and laugh. We eat. But then to our disappointment they get up from the table, they really must be going... So we finish lunch alone and then call for the waitress. She comes, she stops, and she tells us that everything has already been paid for. We protest, but she laughs and says she won't take any more money... For some reason she's pleased with the little adventure she's been part of and isn't angry any more... We are now officially accepted. We are no longer newcomers, but holidaymakers.

The shore was awash with bodies of all different shapes and sizes. Pitsunda, done up by the infamous Zurab Tsereteli in a frighteningly monumental style, was filled with vacationers of every rank and position in the Soviet hierarchy. There were rich Georgian bosses and famous writers and high-level bureaucrats and "heroes of socialist labor". It was a place for the élite; an outsider had no chance of getting in – the system had "to know his face". I don't know how the system knew my mother's face, but I guess that she belonged to that not insignificant category of people who knew how to make use of their connections with those whose faces were familiar.

Each of the resort's buildings was a tall tower-block with a Georgian name, Iveria, the Golden Sheepskin and so on; and the park of pine trees between them was filled with Tsereteli's works. These were largely anonymous figures of unknown purpose, decorated with rough pieces of glass. They reminded me of glazed bathroom- and toilet-tiles and aroused the same blankness and boredom. They were the perfect expression of the utter powerlessness of adults and the colourlessness of their lives, covered with rough painted glass, but not filled with anything at all. Except for the beach, the restaurants, the buffet dinners, the dancers and sittings in a small Abkhasian courtyard café, the adults had nothing to do.

You could see a lot in that Abkhasian courtyard: i.e. how they made Turkish coffee. On top of a high table with iron sides brown sand was scattered, and there were little buckets with long handles half sunk in the sand, like one's feet on the beach... The buckets contained a dark liquid and the coffee-cook would move them with a nice crushing sound, digging into the sand, so that the sand spilled out in front of each one of them in a wave. And because they had to move the buckets very fast, the music of the sand and the sand-waves rolling in all directions was my delight... They were silver ships dancing in the desert.

Then the coffee was taken round the tables... People drank it slowly during conversation either as a sign of their attention or to underline whatever they were saying... "You see?" they'd say and then they'd nod their heads and slowly move their hands towards the cups (which were their allies). Then

they'd tip them towards their lips as a sign of agreement or contentment with what was being (or had been) said. Having finished the cup they'd then turn it upside down over a saucer, so that they later could flip it back and read the coffee grounds. They'd see faces and mountain ranges and roads and crosses and horses, and they would talk of the signs they'd read. While they drank their coffee, I used to entertain myself by combing and arranging someone's hair – the brown hair of my mother or the black hair of her Georgian friend's daughter.

She has arrived only recently and hasn't yet become part of our lives. So as a sign of welcome I start combing her hair. There she sits and her yet-to-be-tanned face becomes all of a sudden tired. "She combs so wonderfully" – she's talking about me – "I'm falling asleep" So I go on combing and she falls deeper and deeper into a trance... Tress after tress, uneven at first and then becoming more and more like silk. The head comes alive, gets lighter and lighter; and the silk streams all over her body. This is the way I comb the dark curls of Manana.

And the resort is full of noise. From the point of view of the sea, once you emerge from below the waves, it might look like an arrangement of multicoloured dots, little white poles, grey stripes, green rhombs and squares. But then in the evenings it's empty - everyone moves to the bars where they try to reserve tables up on the balconies. The most popular bar is not in our highrise. It's in a highrise far away, the Golden Sheepskin, where there is tired wine and sweets to buy, where women dress up and dance with their partners. This is where my jealousy comes into full play. "My mother," I say in the most gloomy manner, "dances only with me." In order to distract me, someone asks me to dance. First I agree with reluctance, and then I dance merrily. I now have a grown-up life too. A grown-up partner is dancing with me. Although I understand the trick, I can't resist it. But the trick goes even further: It is my partner not my mom's who gets to spend the rest of the evening with her, saved from my jealousy.

From time to time I get sleepy. "Why didn't you leave when I said to?" my mom asks. I sulk and have no answer, because then I don't want to sleep any more. My mom is cunning: She dances without me and I sit tired on the chair. Why not go? The nice women at the next table – who haven't been asked to dance – start watching me and talking to me. I know what I should do: I should pretend to be utterly happy so they won't think badly of mom. But I'm angry with her. And I don't pretend, I even start dropping hints of how miserable my life is. The women cluck with pleasure and look at my mother caustically. My mom's friend eyes me with contempt.

"Traitor!" says my mom when we finally get home. I weep.

4. Death at the Lighthouse

The day is cold. I go up to the fourteenth floor of our building, where I see a small corpulent man in black working-man's trousers and a white T-shirt. "I

work at the lighthouse.” “The lighthouse?” “Yes, wanna see?” “But where . . .?” “Here in this building,” he answers.

Lighthouse? But the lighthouse is something grey and tall where the guard goes with his lantern along the headland stretching out into the sea. The lighthouse is something that stands up like a scepter in front of the whole land; it lights the passageway of ships on the horizon where travelers sail and the hard work of seamen is done. Such a lighthouse can't be in our building, so this must be an invisible one, or else the man is lying. The phrase “majak-maniac,” starts turning over and over in my mind.

My grandma's imagination has more than once painted horrible scenes of my murder at the hands of a maniac, and his cunning ways of getting hold of me. The sharp divide of a definite “no” should pass between this man's question and me. I can even hear someone's voice whispering urgently in my ear: “NO!” I look at him and the same haunting feeling which filled me in front of the dead dove comes back. “Why not,” I say. “But I have to change.” “I'll wait for you.”

Slowly I go into my room. I put on my dress, and when I come back he's still waiting for me on the fourteenth floor. We go up one more floor. A staircase is in front of us, we climb it; there is a door, we open it. There is a plane, a path, a sky. “Where to?” “Straight on,” says my companion. I walk calmly and slowly to the edge of the flat roof of the building, stiff as a tooth.

Sea, sea, pure wide sea, which has been crashing its waves onto the shore from times unknown, from depths unseen, so as to become a small and humble strip of foam at the grey rocks of the beach. The beach, its grey rocks and pebbles, porous, rough, coming down to the sea's edge to give way to the sea and become its secret rocky bed. Air, air, the grey air of the day: not bright, neither light nor darkness, just a glance thrown unnoticed, so as to let things remain as they are, in their own quantities.

Once on a day like this, *in the last sanatorium we stayed in, the Adler, the sea threw up a dead dolphin onto the shore... We ran to it to see a dolphin for the first time... It had a great polished head, covered in bubbles, which slowly curled into its tail. It lay on the shore like a sleeping embryo. Will he push me down there?*

“So where is the lighthouse?” I ask, bringing the game to an end. “Here,” he says simply.

At the very edge of the building there is a room made of glass... I go in. Inside it there is an enormous lamp like a big glass-covered table with a light inside; and on the window sills there are maps and binoculars and telescopes. It's a simple study-like space. And I realize that our whole building is a lighthouse, and that all of us, living in this enormous white hive at the edge of the resort, we are all of us the lighthouse, the fixed foundation for this lonely office of a man whose only job is to switch the light on and off. Like the eye of some creature.

“Do you want binoculars?” And once again a strong wave of feeling fills me. So that’s what it is. They’re letting me look from the edge. Now I shall see the other side of this wearisome, repetitive place. I shall see the truth. What will it look like? Shall I see the seamen’s heroic labor? (For some reason a political slogan had become imprinted in my brain) Or shall I see something forbidden, like Turkey, which stretches out beyond the sea? Or shall I see once again people in fine clothes? Binoculars in hand I know I shall see something special which can never be seen with the naked eye – the future. So I go to the edge and begin to focus them. Here is the coastline. Here are the fountains, and the huge black iron sculpture of Medea, standing on the shore. And suddenly, at the very end, where the air meets the shore and the waves, I can see a little figure, gesturing. My mom.

She turns her head, she talks to a friend. Her hair is pinned up into a fashionable chignon. Her eyes are hidden behind butterfly-like dark glasses. She is talking to a friend - no one else is around. The grey day has exiled the sun-tanned bodies from the beaches, giving them a chance to wear more clothes and see more of each other in the smoke-filled bars. But *she* is far away from all that, not even truly involved in the conversation. In fact I see her as being absolutely alone on the shore of that empty and silent sea, sitting on those dim grey stones. I watch her from far away, from above, from where she doesn’t know I can see her. And I hold her in the focused mirrors of my binoculars. Little mother, little mother.

Not beautiful... Looking mostly like an animal, a tortoise on a beach maybe, among the stones. And I watch for a long time the movement of her lips, the turnings of her head, the quiet moves - not sharp at all, but rather meditative... I watch this grey-and-white movie for a long, long time.

Is that all? Will nothing else happen? No. Neither death, nor breakthroughs, nor seamen nor monsters nor giants, nor multiply-peopled life nor the sea’s beauty, nothing: only this. I do not want to go out there into that dead grey-and-white space, containing neither adventures nor miracles, merely existing like some amateur snapshot. Should I really go down into that dead place of the stony beach which lies there as inert as the cast-iron Medea? Where she sits, right in the middle, exposed like a dove, like the helpless insides of stones. She is, yes, one of the stones come to life. But I still do not want to go into that confined world. My entire body aches and something within me wants to be taken up and freed. There is a great wave of air between me and my mother, and it is rushing through all the pines and the buildings and the sculptures and the pebbles ... I am becoming gigantic and I stand and look at her, and she could never reach me, being so small, being so excluded, thrown away from the rest of the world. My gaze is all powerful. Do I really want to go down to that tiny, that uncomfortably narrow place? Should I really start all over again?

I go to her.

5. Name

With every step I seem to diminish physically as I plunge bit by bit into the visual sea, the sea of time that swamps the melancholy film I was watching. I make my way to the ground floor where I can see children playing, newcomers checking their reservations at the concierge's desk, and old residents arriving to pick up their keys, where everything is plastic... I come down through all that dim light and arrive where the visual field becomes pale and grey, and the grey sea is splashing...

I come toward her. Does she know? Does she know that we barely exist? Will she start acting as if everything is normal? She turns and slowly extends her arm as if in a dream, as if arriving from the waves, and in a deep voice that sounds as if we have been parted for a long time, and a great distance was between us - as if the whole world were burning and we were all alone here among the snow and ashes of a hidden flame - "Ksenia", she says, and the name sounds like a song or a long story told to the end, where someone longing and loving is waiting. "My Ksenia" - as if she knows what has happened and she thanks and accepts and forgives me. Just the sound of that name... the name that she calls me... the unmistakable and rare sound of love...

Translated from the Russian by the author
