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Excerpts from the novel *Memoirs of Mikbail Michman*

Chapter 6. They Have All Gone

I remember, when I was a child, being friends with a certain girl from the nearby dacha. Between our—as it would be said a half-a-century later—*plots*, there were no boundaries of any sort; as I walked away from my house, the garden gradually grew wilder, becoming a fragment of the forest, and then this forest clarified, transforming back into a garden, then resolved into gravel and the yard of my girlfriend. Until once, when I came to see her, and found instead only a locked door. It was nothing serious—the family went for a swim in the lake, or took off to Petersburg for errands and entertainment. But unexpectedly, I grew melancholy. And I heard some sort of a melodic voice, saying:

THEY HAVE ALL GONE.

It would have been more natural if these words were uttered by a sleepy housemaid or some sort of a forgotten *firse*. But then, the presence of a human being would have diluted the bitterness of this phrase. This utterance, indeed, rang out in complete silence.

And now, no matter whom I am remembering—the laughing girls on the Atlantic beach, the cavalier captain at a photo salon in Paris, or the grizzled Siberian in an ornately decorated pagan sleigh, behind it all, as a backdrop, as if in Hollywood credits, develops:

THEY HAVE ALL GONE.

They have gone—to the lands where either there is no coca-cola, or, according to a different interpretation, it showers down from the mountaintops in an effervescent stream. Where the hunter never misses, and the game feels no pain, because the ends can afford not to meet.

The girl, my poor neighbor, has had the time to get married to a White Army soldier, to travel with him to the Black sea, where, in a sudden bout of patriotism, she refused to board the ship, got hitched to a commissar, returned to Moscow (as if these two antagonists of the Civil war were two oncoming trains), gave birth to a boy and a girl, saw her husband off to a labor camp, waited until he returned from there hooked on morphine, became—a bad actress, a good accountant, a mediocre ticket clerk. Her husband did his duty at war in Magadan and came back whole—while all her girlfriends lost their husbands in World War II, or at the very least the husbands lost an arm here, a leg there—so she was envied. Her first husband became a French bureaucrat, loyal to the Soviets. Her second husband became a dissident. Her children grew up and became I can't remember what, but they definitely became something.

And also, they have all gone.

Is it worthwhile to grieve over this? Enough light is contained between the morning and the evening dawn. Our days, as it is known, are numbered, by someone other than us. Eternal life would deprive each living day of meaning; its weight comes only from the few

bits of lead—the knowledge that it is one small part of the whole. Eternity is stalking us from beyond the grave.

But if there is regret, a small ongoing bitterness, it means that it is also needed by someone—just like Volodya Mayakovskiy growled, not without pathos. My god, he was so afraid of roaches! Why hasn't anyone mentioned this? Of course, the roaches of which he was personally afraid, *have all gone* just fine, without the help of ddt, cyanide and raid, simply following the call of the evening dawn.

New generations have appeared in their place, indistinguishable from the first. Please note that I'm not only talking about roaches here.

Is there anyone else in this giant city, other than me, who is observing the rebirth of the roles, the dispositions, and the conflicts?.. The feeling of déjà vu follows me with such persistence, its disappearance or the least abatement would deserve a separate name: "As if for the first time." And even then this term will collect dust indeterminately. As if I won't recognize in the New Russian slob the poorly forgotten early Soviet one, and in the black gold—the shining gold of the Party? The attributes change, it is true. A delicate mobile gets lost in the crease of a hairy hand, on which in repulsive purple-blue glows the name "Luba", over a crooked heart, pierced by an arrow. How does it happen that a masterpiece struggles upwards and to the top, where it miraculously reaches eternity—only to find vulgarity already waiting for it there, sprawled all over, victorious?..

This is how one begins to believe in the devil in spite of themselves—and he appears before you know it.

Once, while still in Constantinople, I had to share a room at a dumpy hotel with Borechka Poplavsky. I awoke for some reason in the middle of the night. The sky was peppered with stars, so generously in fact that the silhouette of a mosque appeared black over polka-dot. For about three minutes, I stood by the window and absorbed the coolness, so precious in this vestibule of hell. The marine breeze reminded me of Russia, or rather, Latvia. My nerves were spent—tears began to flow from my eyes. I held back the moan, to try to not wake Borya. When I turned around, his bed was made and empty.

I got dressed quickly—my intuition took me to the roof of our shelter. It was a flat rectangular space, along the front side of which ran the back of the molding, which decorated the building's façade. Even in the night's darkness, one could see how dirty this back of the molding was. It was as if the roof was sprinkled with little bits of dry rubbish, which rustled under every step. The wind carried the smells of rot and seaweed from the port.

I didn't notice Boris right away—who was sitting on the roof, blankly staring in front of himself. I walked over to him—he lifted his face, which registered no surprise.

—Mishel? Do you also have trouble sleeping?

—Yes, for some reason. . .

Boris grew silent for a minute, looking past me, or to be more precise, looking past my knee. He was sober, and as far as I could tell, not under the influence of any drug.

—Do you see? —he asked. And then responded, to himself, quietly: —Why would he. He is well. And can't see it.

I turned around, ready not to see anything. And immediately picked out, at about ten paces away, a large animal, which looked like a giant rabbit, or a cat. It was about the size of a large dog, but its posture was a rabbit's or a cat's.

—Jesus, Boris, who is this?

—The devil, —replied Poplavskiy, gaily. —You have nothing to fear, Mishel', this is my devil.

Yes, I did say “gaily”. And would like to add—with a note of pride, as if he was talking about a muse, even if a peculiar one. The devil didn't strike me as being scarier or more foreign than Constantinople. As if sensing that we were talking about him, the devil sat up and moved an ear.

Above us hung the phenomenally starry sky. Russia was sinking into the putrid bloody water, like Atlantis. The devil appeared to be napping. Boris opened his jacket and took out some matches and a badly rolled smoke. He lit up.

In general, we had practically nothing to talk about.

From Chapter 9

New York. Loneliness... the giant mechanism for separating a person from people. Loneliness: in the crowd, underground, on the highway. A person is something to go around, or something to veer from.

One time, we were sitting at McDonalds with Kurt Vonnegut. I got us a table, he came over with a tray, I began to eat, and he, for some reason, was staring at his hamburger.

—Listen, Kurt, —I asked him in English, —do you think that the world resembles a hamburger?

He jumped with surprise.

—How did you know, Mihel'?

—You are simply as predictable as this hamburger. An old German typewriter.

Kurt laughed out loud, like an idiot, and gave me a buddy punch in the shoulder.

—I am going to add you into my next novel. An old Russian Jew, who looks at a page, but sees the next one, which is why he is bored of living.

—And who else will be in this novel?

—There will also be a rat, which lives at a McDonalds—a clairvoyant bat foretold her that she will find her death in a cheeseburger, and the rat keeps planning to emigrate to the garbage dump, but keeps postponing her departure. She keeps thinking, let me eat well just one more time. . .

I reflexively put my cheeseburger aside; Kurt giggled gleefully, like a student.

—And who else?

—Who else? —he instantly grew serious. —There will also be a housewife, who has been unloved by her husband, an insurance salesman, and she is trying not to notice this. And God himself is trying to help her.

—Will he be able to?

—I don't know, Mihel'. I need to write. —He glanced at his watch. —Well, at this point, not today. I like to write early in the morning, when the dusk is cold. When the red sun is reflecting in the skyscrapers—it is so beautiful, Mihel'. There is a ceiling-high window in my studio, it is really fantastic. I am standing by the window with a glass in my hand. I am standing there as long as I want to, without anyone hurrying me. Then I walk over to the old typewriter. Unfortunately, an American one. A German typewriter walks over to the American one, and together they begin to create something.

- And what is the result of this collaboration?
- Certifiable crap, as one would expect.

Translated from Russian by Mariya Gusev

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