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From the story collection *Old ladies' holiday by the sea*
(Moscow, 1998)

The boy with the matches

We didn't know we were mean. If someone had told us that we were, none of us would have even laughed and agreed: "Yes, I am mean. So what"? On the contrary, we would have argued ardently: "I am good because..." – but we couldn't have said why.

We hated boys. We dreaded the older ones. They would catch up with us in two jumps, and beat us black and blue. As for the younger ones, we tormented them. They were weaker and unable to overpower us.

It was our dream to catch the most dangerous of them all, the ten year old Roman¹, and to whip him with stinging nettles.

"We'll whip him until he starts crying," said Natashka² Glybina. She had a little doll's face with piercing eyes and straight, even baby teeth.

"We can't catch him," I argued. "He is too quick."

"Nobody is going to run after him," replied Natashka. "We are going to lure him in. You'll say they gave you a new little car with doors that open. He'll ask you to show him right away, and you'll bring him to us. And we'll be waiting for him with bundles of stinging nettles. Get it?"

"Yes, I see," I grinned. "Only nettles should be picked with gloves, or they'll burn our fingers."

"Good plan," we agreed, and forgot about Romka.

"A baby rat died behind our house," said Natashka. "I saw him this morning, as he lay under a bush."

"We should bury him," I said. "Let's go make him a grave."

We went behind the house. As we went, Natashka was rubbing her piercing eyes with a fist, but teardrops were still running down her face, motionlessly hanging on her chin. "I can't stand it when animals die!" said Natashka.

I kept silent.

Little Tanya Afonasik came out from the doorway towards us. She carried a book, "Moidodyr".

"Where are you going?" Tanya asked.

We stopped and looked at her.

"A baby rat died behind the house," I said. "We want to bury him."

"May I go with you?" asked little Tanya and handed us the book, "Moidodyr". We paged through the color pictures and read a few lines a syllable at a time.

"Good book," I said.

"Would you like to tear it apart?" asked Tanya.

"OK," we consented.

We hurriedly tore a few pages out and threw the book into the bushes.

Colorful pieces hung on the branches. The wind leafed over the remaining pages.

We turned into the yard behind Natashka's house and she led us between straight rows of birch trees. We were short, and the leaves on the lowest branches, as well as the tallest grasses, were blossoming out right in front of our eyes. I clearly saw scratches on the wall. It was I who had left them with a brick specially for Tanya Afonasik, when we played hide and seek with the big kids. By these scratches she was supposed to run towards me. I deliberately drew them low, so that she would see them, looking down. Taller kids never noticed anything. The scratches were drawn at the level of their elbows.

"Right here," showed Natashka, setting her finger into a deep cross cut with glass on a tree trunk. Thick tree roots came up from the ground, forming a shallow gully. In the gully there lay a baby rat covered with a burdock leaf up to his eyes.

"I made him a blanket for the time being," explained Natashka

"Let's bury him right here," suggested little Tanya and moved the burdock leaf with a twig. "That way we'll know that his grave is right by the marked birch tree."

We looked up. The birch tree trunk stretched upwards endlessly and the leaves were imprinted into the smooth sky light seamy side down. In a gust of wind the leaves turned, showing their darker side.

"Let's bury him under an elderberry bush instead," I said.

The elderberry bush was low. It spread out widely, its upper branches forming a dome. Cupping her hands, Tanya Afonasik held the baby rat. She only came up to my shoulder. She had smooth little elbows and smooth knees. It seemed that her arms could bend not only from the elbows, but in the middle, between the wrists and the elbows as well. And her legs seemed to bend easily below her knees.

"Damn my eyes," said Tanya Afonasik, "if his heart isn't beating."

"I saw it too," said Natashka Glybina, "he moved his little paw."

"We would have to postpone the funeral," I said.

And then all of a sudden red elderberries flinched, waved their little heads on tiny necks, and the bush opened up with a loud cracking noise. In it we saw a smiling face with scrappy bangs right over the eyes. A fresh scratch from a branch was visible on his cheek.

"What are you doing?" asked the face. Blue straps with round buttons were attached to pants.

Natashka Glybina pierced us with her eyes and we exchanged long lasting looks. It's a boy!

He was a year or two younger than me and older than Tanya. He was holding the torn-up book "Moidodyr".

"What are you doing?" he asked again, this time not so friendly.

"We are playing," said little Tanya and broke a branch.

"What are you playing?" he shifted his gaze onto Natashka with fear. Natashka smiled silently and stepped behind him.

"That we don't know yet," said Tanya, peeling the branch, to make it into a whip. "Why did you take our book?"

"It was lying under a tree," replied the boy, taking a step back. But Natashka was standing there.

"We put it under the tree on purpose," I said, and we looked at each other again. The back of his head reached Natashka's chin, and she was looking over his head.

"You stepped on my foot," she said, and we burst out laughing.

The boy started laughing with us, imitating our laughter, so we immediately fell silent. His fearful laugh came to a pathetic end.

“Look how funny you are,” said I.

“Well, we’ll punish you,” added Tanya and waved the peeled branch a few times. We kept silent, so that he could hear the branch cutting through the air.

“And what is your name?” he bashfully turned towards Natashka, preparing to cry.

“That is none of your business,” smiled Natashka, showing her even teeth.

“I’ll give your book back,” he begged and handed the torn pages to Tanya.

“I don’t need a torn book,” replied Tanya and waved her twig again, this time – right by his arm.

“And what is your name?” he said as he turned to me. His lips started jumping up and down, as if he were to start sobbing. Over his head there were two piercing eyes of Natashka with enlarged pupils. In these pupils the leaves were reflected.

“What is...” he started again, and could not finish his question.

He opened his arms as if he was about to hug someone, but he had nobody to hug, and he was looking at us in confusion.

“Katya,” I suddenly said. “My name is Katya.”

Then he took a step towards me and entwined me with his arms, as if catching me. He was crying. He hid his face in my collar, and I felt warm.

Natashka and Tanya exchanged glances and looked at me with contempt. I looked down. Tanya put her round hand on his shoulder and lightly hit him with a branch.

“My name is Mitya,” he whispered imploringly, and looked up at me. And I was about to push him away to show that I was with them again, when all of a sudden Natashka said, “Let him go...”

Tanya lifted her hand off his shoulder and threw her twig away.

The next morning I was sitting on the lower monkey bar, holding onto a higher one with my hands. A rug and a pair of knee-length drawers with tight elastic bands were hung to dry on a bar next to me. Mitya and his mother were walking across the yard. He was holding her hand.

“This is Katya,” he said to his mother with admiration. His mother looked at me and gave him a nod. I unclenched my hands, leaned back and hung on the bar upside down.

In the evening Tanya and Natashka came outside. They were turning a skip rope, and I was jumping. At first they were turning it slowly, and then faster and faster. I could hardly keep pace jumping over it.

“The clock struck four o’clock,” they said in unison, and started counting, “and one, two, three...” but didn’t finish counting to the end. Mitya came up to us. He was dressed the same as the day before in blue pants with wide straps crossed behind his back. His scrappy bangs were evenly brushed. He was holding a flower. A yellow tulip.

“This is for you, Katya,” he said, handing me the flower, but then he felt embarrassed and added, “from my mother.”

I had already stretched my hand towards the flower, when suddenly I felt sneering looks, those of little Tanya and Natashka Glybina. They were smiling to each other, once and forever rejecting me. I felt ashamed of his evenly brushed hair.

“Thank you,” I replied, “I don’t need any flowers.”

In my mind I said “your flowers,” to remain completely loyal to Tanya and Natashka, although I was afraid to say it out loud.

The girls laughed, and Tanya said, “Let me take it...”

Mitya looked at me attentively, as if he wanted to remember me well, and handed the tulip to her. Then he jumped impassively with us over the skip rope all evening long. After that evening he didn't show up for a few days.

"They made water guns on Midsummer day," said Natashka at the end of the week. "They were riding a bicycle, so I couldn't run away from them. They drenched me with water from head to toe. They soaked my dress!"

"Who?" I asked.

"Romka and his brothers."

"Scoundrels," declared little Tanya passionately, and we went to play hide-and-seek.

It was my turn to seek. I turned toward the wall and started counting.

"We'll take our revenge on them," said Tanya to Natashka, when they ran to hide. But I didn't hear what Natashka replied.

"Ten!" I shouted. "I am coming after you! If you didn't hide, it's not my fault..."

I looked around. The yard was empty, and only the branches of a bush were still waving and shaking, because Tanya and Natashka had brushed against them running by. Suddenly I saw Mitya riding in a back seat of a bicycle. An unapproachable grownup boy of about twelve with brown circles under his eyes was giving Mitya a ride. He was slowly pedaling his bike looking about. They were riding in silence.

"Slow down," asked Mitya unexpectedly, making a malicious grimace. "There she is!" The teenager slowed down.

"Katya!" he shouted to me. "Now you'll flash like a rocket!" and threw a burning match onto my dress.

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1. Further in the text "Roman" will be addressed by a nickname "Romka," – a diminutive, derogatory familiar variant of first name.
2. "Natashka" – a nickname for "Natasha."
3. "Mitya" – derivative of "Dmitriy."

Translated by Masha Petrenko
