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Skinny cats, with short fur and long paws, keep ignoring the Russian “kis-kis.” Their eyes sparkle and flash as they roam in packs in the attics and alleys of Montmartre. They are wild, they are unfriendly, they are beasts, beasts full of stylish mannerisms. At the pet market they look submissive, sit in cages with puppies, goats and crocodiles. At the pet market they behave as if they wouldn’t mind you purchasing them in the least. It’s only later that they show you what’s what.

It’s not entirely clear what the pet market smells resemble most – wool, flowers or animal droppings. It’s the only place where people jostle each other, step on each other’s feet and indulge in staring at our inferior brothers.

RER is the Paris commuter train system. These trains stop at all the metro stations, pierce through the city underground and burst out to freedom in the suburbs, turn into regular trains and skip along the fields, past the ancient ancestral estates and small contemporary towns.

Incredibly fat, discolored with time, carp frolic in the water that surrounds Chateau Chantilly. Tourists toss them bread in the form of long French baguettes. The carp jump out of the water like dolphins, fight, land on each other’s backs, scooping the air with their fins as if they were wings until, at the end, some ancient, heavy and gray chief carp drags the baguette with him under water.

And in the park of Versailles, by contrast, two pathetic looking half-transparent little fish barely stirred in the pool below the fountain.

The Seine in Paris is pink. “Flying like *fanera* (plywood) over Paris,”¹ why do they say that? Can someone explain it to me? To me Seine sounds like our “*seno*” (hay), perhaps that explains the “*fanera*” association. It’s pink at sunset and sunrise. Multicolored at night, for obvious reasons. By day, - we spent a

month and a half in Paris without a single rainy day, *almost*, - by day it is blue, green and light blue, at times white, when a boat passes by.

One feels like eating Notre-Dame up, like a meringue. The photograph of the Rose Window did not work out. We listened to the mass - the organ expands one's consciousness - took communion, like children, pure and wineless. Then fed the pigeons in the square.

Tjerk Wiegersma is an excellent guy. To the very end didn't admit his age, but kept asking us, two student girl adventurers, about ours. And we would ask in return what his name was, laughing and chirping - trying to pronounce it. "Do you have any idea where you are going to stay?" We shrugged our shoulders, "In Paris." "You will end up sleeping unwriterly der a bridge...." He was not far from the truth. Our address book was bursting with phone numbers, but we didn't have a single concrete invitation.

I am standing on a stepladder, at the height of approximately the third floor.

In my hands I hold a hose with a nozzle that releases, according to my whim, streams of water or foam. The pressure is unimaginable, the recoil terrifying. Every shot threatens me with shameful death - fall from the ladder, broken neck, fracture of all the vertebrae and limbs. But I don't lose heart. I'm singing the good-old song "We are neither stokers nor carpenters... no way!"² And continue releasing torrents of water, ripping with a foamy stream through the dirt that has dug itself into the huge orange canvas awning over the store's front window.

Our employer, an East German, does the work of two. He shows us his scars from numerous falls. He warned us from the start - "work not for ladies," "I look for Polish men." But "Russian student girls" sold him on the idea. It's a job - take it or leave it!

Germans, men and women, lift their heads in surprise, for them girls doing this kind of work is nothing short of criminal.

"Where do you come from?" they ask in English, but what they really mean is "who has ever seen such a thing?"

"From Italy," I respond frowning, embarrassed for my native land.

The Germans believe me and leave, puzzled.

I continue singing my song, wobbling from the pressure of the stream and scraping old dirt.

It doesn't matter that within a week our fingers couldn't meet our palms, could barely bend, that our lower backs ached and legs hurt; every day - up at

five in the morning, quitting time - at half past seven, short lunch break - not longer than an hour. All that doesn't matter. What mattered was that every day we were becoming one hundred marks richer and our dream was that much closer to becoming a reality.

I worked together with my friend Nika. More precisely, not together but simultaneously because the foresighted and calculating German took us to separate awnings, depriving us of any interaction and, consequently, raising our productivity.

In a week we had washed everything in Hamburg that could be washed. You know, Germans are such neat-freaks. Their cities shine from cleanness.

The East German was terribly pleased.

"I thought you would run off on the second day," he kept saying.

He could not guess our plans.

A German student named Stefan helped us pack for the trip, supplying us with maps, suggestions and cautionary advice. Our latest Polish friend Slavek tried in vain to appeal to our reason and asked us to come with him to Warsaw instead: "No one invited you to Paris, no one expects you there!" But we just teased him: "Come with us! Don't be afraid!" "That's not the point," said the cautious Pole. "You don't have visas, you don't have invitations, your money will not last in Paris. This is not the Soviet Union, it's Europe!" Stefan was silent, but smiled mysteriously.

We all left together early in the morning: the Pole trotted off to the metro, intending to go back to his Warsaw, and we to the "hai-wei," in order to go "traveling by auto-stop." Stefan could not stand the sight - our signs with the name of the nearest town along the way and raised signaling hands. He showered us with kisses at parting, said that he would wait for us and would worry, said that it is "insane" what we have cooked up; then he vanished hastily, leaving us on the road.

To say that Paris is a city of dreams is to say nothing. Paris is a city of Russian dreams, this would be more precise. Every self-respecting Russian considers it his duty to visit Paris. A riddle, an enigma, devil knows why.... Perhaps, every Russian subconsciously desires to be an aristocrat and thinks that in Paris this can be accomplished much more easily. All of our aristocracy ran off to Paris and then became scattered around the world. Paris is the subconscious of Russia. On the surface - a Soviet person, and deep down - an aristocrat. In that case the French, on the subconscious level, should all turn out to be proletarians. And, of course, we are also drawn by the eternal charm of Napoleon - he reminds us of our love for Stalin - even though the English feel an indescribable

horror because of our love for that tyrant. But we love Napoleon, perhaps because the Decembrists loved him, perhaps because he was a hero and our Kutuzov defeated him. And because we feel sorry for him.

And we also love Joan of Ark.

We are “traveling by auto-stop.” We are proud of ourselves. We have hitch-hiked, in comfort and with pleasant breeze, from Munich to Berlin, from Berlin to Kiel, from Kiel to Hamburg. Acquired experience and lost fear together with vigilance.

Were punished. And rewarded.

Tourists bathe in Paris fountains. On the square of Saint Michel, in sweltering heat, a tourist threw his girlfriend into the fountain and then jumped in after her without taking his clothes off. They splashed and laughed, and our friend Sergey, nicknamed Diadka,³ frowned and cursed at everyone, but especially at the French. “I don’t like being splashed,” he complained. He called them foxes and chameleons, was offended that the French didn’t know how to be friends: friends today, and tomorrow they will cross the street when they see you approaching. Uncle is red-haired and freckled, but handsome. He is an actor, he has the look of a good man. Uncle’s friend, an actor in dark glasses, collected French plastic bags - not for the sake of collecting, he wanted to do business on his return to Moscow. He insisted that we copy, for our own good, the addresses of Paris shelters and charitable feeding organizations. He was convinced they will come in handy.

They knocked down Bastille – what a pity.

The cats have green eyes and a languid gaze.

A French woman can get offended at “Madam” and at “Mademoiselle;” one must examine a woman for a long time in order to determine how to address her correctly. In the RER I could not take my eyes off a young freckled beauty who was fooling around with her lover - she enjoyed the attention of the passengers who looked at them with envy. She tickled his neck and ears with a grass stem, he pretended to be asleep, would close his eyes, lashes trembling; she blew at his eyelids, he would open his eyes, squinting, she would jump at him, entwine him in her arms, fence him off from the other passengers and tastily, loudly smooch him - on the nose, brows, eyes - everywhere. He would fight her off, she would lift her arms defending herself, covering her face with her hands and laugh. And he laughed, occasionally looking at the passengers with pride. The passengers also laughed. We merrily rode to Paris.

We merrily rode “into” Paris from “under” Paris, from the outskirts, where we were given shelter by an emigrant-dramatist with a French wife and an enchanting young daughter. “Under” Paris is still better than under a bridge.

There were always a lot of blacks on our train. Black women squeeze themselves into tight dresses - they have such big butts! - round, fluffy, swaying, like two watermelons, and in front - two cantaloupes; pedigreed black women, with blue eyes, with grandiose afros or gold tone braids, catlike hands and necks. Black men, as such, did not make an impression. I only remember the smell of their bodies.

Sweet breakfast - cocoa with flakes, French roll with butter, - I don't like it, I'm used to sandwiches. American breakfast is more to my taste, more familiar. I climb into the fridge - how can I fortify myself? - sandwiches for the outing - for the whole day. We don't know how long we can stay here before we are asked to leave. Then we can find a place in Paris - that will be better anyway.

It turned out that the first car which picked us up in Hamburg on the highway was going to Paris. At the steering wheel sat a handsome young German of small height, and next to him - a huge German black, young also, in a tank top with muscles bulging out. They asked us where we were going. We answered and they said that they were going there as well. And, in fact, were willing to take us wherever we wanted. They spoke very bad English, worse than ours. Which revealed their modest education. We did not speak any German at all.

Note: it takes about twelve hours of driving to get from Hamburg to Paris, with stops - about fourteen, taking into account the rather considerable speed on the highway and not taking into account border control, which practically doesn't exist in Europe.

We ride, practice our English, understand each other somehow. They don't believe that we are Russian, are convinced we are Czech or Polish. At the roadside gas station they treat us to sausages, or, as they call them - “hot dogs” *goriachie sobaki*. As soon as we drive away from the station, not even half an hour had passed, Nika begs to go to the toilet, like a small child: “Can't wait,” she says. “Oh, I can't.” Our drivers don't understand. Lady wants to the toilet, asking to stop the car. They cannot stop on the highway - only at a gas station, there you have a café and a pay-toilet. Nika is almost crying, biting her lips. The driver says “just a minute, just a minute” and goes past yet another gas station. Nika shouts: “I can't! I want very much! Stop, please!” They reply that they themselves want it “very-very.” We turn from the highway onto a gravel road. And keep going, raising clouds of dust. Finally we drive up a hill - on the other side of the hill - a village, in the distance. They are speaking German to each other, we are trying to

figure out what they are saying, our rucksacks are in the trunk, which is not good. Among the German words we can only make out "aids" this and "aids" that. Well, it's a popular topic. We stop.

The German gets out, opens the door for me, says "go." Nika jumps out of the car first, looks around, searching for bushes. None close by. "Step back," she says. But the black guy approaches her and says "go" as well, meaning "let's go together, I will stand guard." "Nika," I say, "don't go with him, don't leave me." "I know that myself," says Nika, shifting from foot to foot. We have pepper spray, only it's in the bag, in the car, on the seat. Shorty already threw his jacket on the grass and said straight out - "Ai want u." I'm not scared of him, if we fight, we will be an even match. I dread the black guy. He can handle us both on his own. But on the other hand, they are not so stupid as to rape us, since we would report them to the police.... Yes, but that would come later. And what if we won't be able to report? To be on the safe side I say that I "don't want." He smiles unpleasantly and asks "why." "I don't like you, did you get that?" Nika and I join hands, Nika's hands are damp, fingers cold, my knees, I feel, are trembling. But nonetheless, we were ready to fight, fists tight.

At this point the white German jumps up and starts shouting like Tarzan, slaps himself on the thighs and gets into the car, presses hard on the gas, takes off rapidly from the spot. The black guy turns out to be a quiet one, stands next to us, looks at us smiling. The car turns around, stops by the black guy, he jumps in, yells something wild to us as well in parting and blows a kiss through the window. Our rucksacks - in the trunk, purses with wallets and documents - on the back seat, drive off. We stand on a hilltop, in the middle of Germany, in a field, under the scorching sun, totally free to go anywhere we wish. "Oh, Nika," I say. But Nika is squatting in the grass: "Cover me," she asks. All she can think of is peeing....

She gets up, happier than I. Shall we walk to the highway or something?

We walk along a dusty road in the direction of the highway, trying to stay calm. Nika says that she kept all the marks with her, in the pocket of her shorts. My money, on the other hand, was in the purse and in the rucksack. And my documents drove away as well. "I memorized their license plate number," Nika says. We will have to go to the police. But we don't really want to, because then we can kiss Paris good bye. We keep walking. Sweltering heat, sun in its zenith. In the grass, on the side on the road, lies an empty rucksack. "Look, Nika," I exclaim, "is this yours?" We pick it up, shake it off. About five meters from the rucksack we see another object, it looks like a sweater. What do you know! An intact bottle of vodka is in the sweater, just as I wrapped it. We were taking it as a gift for someone. Here is the booze, Nika, and not a bite to eat! We put the sweater with the vodka into the rucksack and keep walking. In about ten meters -

another find, some of Nika's stuff. Then things start turning up more often. Gradually Nika fills her whole rucksack. O, joy! I see my own rucksack as well! It's empty, but all my marks, rolled into a tube and hidden in the lining, are safe and sound! It didn't even cross their German minds to search the rucksacks! They opened the pockets but did not dig in the folds, did not peek under the lining. But they cleared everything out of my purse and my wallet. The wallet is in its place, but it's empty. But that's nothing by comparison with what was returned. Most importantly, they had no need for our documents. It's funny, but they fell for a stack of Soviet rubles. The rubles were scattered around in my purse, non-exchangeable, not needed by anyone in Europe. No, truly, the boys turned out to be quite stupid, not smarter than us. We collected all of our things from the ditch, brushed them off, folded and packed them up, put everything back together, even the field easel and the camera, even our Russian souvenirs. The guys had a bit of fun. And we loaded ourselves down again. It had been easier without rucksacks, no kidding.

"What are we going to do, Nika? Maybe we should go back?" Nika looks at me with such an expression that I feel ashamed. "Oh no, if we said we are going to Paris - then we are going to Paris!" Decision number one: don't get into a car with anyone in it besides the driver. Also: the driver has to be respectable looking and older. Also: keep the pepper spray in constant readiness.

We oriented ourselves according to the map and the road signs - figured out which way to go. They drove us far, the devils. Totally in the opposite direction, to the south-east. Almost to Munich. We drag ourselves along the highway - maybe three kilometers, maybe five - to the gas station. It's pointless to wave one's thumb between gas pumps - the speed is maddening. Our strength is diminished by the events, the rucksacks get heavier. My skin is burning. I tend to burn instantly, turn red, get covered with blisters. And here I am, all day long under the scorching sun, in a tank top. I toss a sweater on my shoulders. And Nika - a rucksack on her back, a field easel strapped on in front: would you look at that, an artist! "Let me," I say, "help you with all that." "No way," she waves me off. "I brought it, I'll drag it." We are walking, sweat dripping from our faces, streaming along our brows. To Paris!

The French don't like to speak English, they understand it all right, but don't like to speak. Strange hostility between the English and the French, subconscious, accumulated over the centuries. I asked an English friend: "Why?" He replied: "But of course, we burned their Joan of Arc."

In London, trains from France arrive to a railway station named "Waterloo," a constant reminder to the French. And in Paris - it's simply "Gare du Nord," that is - Northern Railway Station. We often annoyed the French with

questions in English and were treated more kindly when we asked them in Russian. One lady attempted to reply in Russian, it was very funny, she gave us her card, her name turned out to be Katia Daniloff, a Russian French.

Tjerk Wiegersma took pity on us. "Just a moment," he said. "I will switch cars, then give you a ride through Paris and deliver you to your first address. You are, of course, welcome to stay overnight at my place, but I don't think my girlfriend will be happy about that." "No way, Tjerk! We are so obliged to you already! We would rather stay under a bridge." We were stretching the truth. Our only hope was Diadka. He is one of us, surely he won't put us out. We didn't call him ahead of time on purpose, so that he wouldn't refuse over the phone. But if he finds us at his front door, then surely he will take us in, at least for one night, on the floor.... And then we'll see, we'll think of something.

Diadka had written to Moscow about how well he had settled in: takes care of an old man, the old man is wealthy, lives alone in a spacious apartment almost in the center of Paris, and Diadka is with him. He is paid well, awaiting his "residency permit." His address and telephone number were the first entry in our notebook. It would be awfully handy to stay with him, he won't send us away, for sure. And if worse comes to worst, we can pay him. Still cheaper than a hotel.

Tjerk came back, having switched cars. He has a Ferrari for driving outside the city and a BMW for Paris. We drink coffee with his girlfriend. Tjerk is over fifty and his girlfriend is our age, so that's why he was questioning us. Tjerk is the son of a Dutch painter, says he didn't end up becoming an artist. So he buys and sells paintings. He has his own art galleries in Paris and in a few other places - Belgium, Holland, New York, somewhere else. He loves Russian paintings. Even knows that one can get very cheap handmade carpets and tapestries in the Caucasus.

In the Louvre, the Gioconda is under a bulletproof glass, in a bunker, plus the tourists are constantly crowding around it, it's impossible to get close. The glass glares, you can't see anything besides your own reflection. Oh well, we stood next to it, saw it and were seen. Here also, on the same wall, are other works by the divine Leonardo, hanging without glass, not wanted by anyone. Tourists definitely want to look at Gioconda. Look at her - and run off to the next room.

The modern glass cap of the Louvre, the underground escalator-entry, surprised me. But after looking closely I got to like it. On the outside - historic walls, and underground - our civilization, the museum. Conceptual. Only if it were not quite so sweltering hot - the glass cap gets heated by the sun and the air

conditioning kicks in only downstairs, on the underground floor. Afterwards we splashed for a long time with everyone else, cooling off in the fountains in front of the Louvre. Wanted to come back again. And we did, and not only once.

The Louvre is a hard museum, lengthy.

In front of the Louvre, in the squares, in front of cafés and alleys, under the arches, all over Paris, walk mimes with white faces and bloody smiles. They juggle colorful balls, play pipes, cry and laugh, or simply stand - motionless for a long time, representing sculptures or sleeping beauties. You throw a coin and they stir, awaken.

While riding in the metro we managed to see a puppet show from beginning to end within three stops. An uncomplicated plot about an umbrella handle's love for a saxophone. We gave some money to the actors, perhaps someone will give some to us.

We exit at the station, everyone is running somewhere, covering their faces with handkerchiefs. It turns out someone released poisonous gas. From the underground crosswalk burst out puffs of gray smoke. My eyes water. We start running with everyone else in the opposite direction, get out onto the surface. It's all right, didn't get poisoned, but didn't get to the right station either. All the respectable French have cars. Their metro is almost exclusively for the blacks - there are so many of them - for Arabs, emigrants, students, bums and travelers like us.

God took pity on us. We are walking along the highway, saying good-bye to life, feeling we are not going to make it to the gas station. Ahead of us is a very complicated highway intersection, multi-layered. We stop to catch our breath. Even without us signaling a refrigerator truck slows down at the curve, the driver opens the door, shouts something to us. We run closer. "To Paris!" we shout back. The driver says something cheerful in French. "No-no, we are not French!" we shout. "But to Paris - we must!" The driver nods, he is also young and not very respectable-looking, floppy-eared. We are tired like hell. All right, we get in.

His ears are so very floppy! The driver is a Frenchman with burning eyes. He looks a bit like Gerard Philip, only his ears are twice as big. We attempt to converse. But you know the relationship between the French and the English language. Our driver gets tired, starts whistling some tune. He is hauling something from Albania, says it's a very poor country. He will take us to the border with France, but he's not going to Paris. We estimated on the map - it's half-way, and from there - a direct highway to Paris. It'll probably be easy to

catch a ride. Five hours in the refrigerator truck. We stop, get a snack, relax and rest up a bit.

Eight o'clock in the evening. The driver stops the car, says - here it is, France. Is it possible that we crossed the border? We ask again: "France - here?" He confirms, "Yes, this is Strasbourg." We were told that the European borders are open, but to this extent.... And we feared that our passports would be checked. However, we must catch a car going straight to Paris right away. Even if we get lucky, we'll get there in the dead of night. Otherwise we risk sleeping on the highway.

We hold up our signs. Not a single car stops.

Finally, someone pulls over, explains that the Paris highway is on the other side and we are unlikely to find travel companions here. Points out which way to go. We sigh, cross the bridge, intend to walk through Strasbourg.

Ahead of us a police station, perhaps highway patrol. We walk calmly by. The policemen follow us with their eyes. Then all of a sudden one of them whistles. We turn around, "Is that for us?" He nods, waves us over. We approach, stumbling from exhaustion. The policeman attempts to speak to us in French. No, we shake our heads, we are foreigners. He demands our passports. In a second we understand that this is the border control. And all this time, on the other side of the bridge, we stood facing the French border in the German town Kehl; actually, the bridge over the Rhein was neutral territory, we crossed it and ended up in the paws of the French border control. Oh, shit!

The border guard shows us our passports. "You don't have French visas," he says. As if we didn't know that already. "You," he explains, "are lawbreakers, you must pay a fine, we will enter your data into the computer and you can say good-bye to France forever." We pretend to be dumb as posts, forget English right away. "This - the border?!" we exclaim. "God! We had no idea! We were looking at the Rhein and the bridge, wanted to find out what is out there, on the other side of the bridge. And it turns out, it's France! What do you know!" Since truly we didn't know. It looked like they believed us. Returned our passports, shook a finger at us and let us go. We walked along the bridge back to Germany.

We are back in Kehl. Stand silently. No energy to think. It's getting dark. "Shall we get a drink?" asks Nika. "To hell with the money, let's go to a bar, then to a hotel." I also want something cold and alcoholic, and nothing else. Even lost all desire for Paris.

Border zone, hotel bar. Half empty. Cool. We order two half-liter beers and lemonade. For starters. Food? Nuts and chips, to start with. We sit for a long time quietly, thinking about the day that passed. Then begin to thaw out, talk about Munich, our friends Earl and Christina, remember the students in Kiel, the offended Slavek. Remembering, we start to giggle.

The barman listened to us for a while, then came over and started speaking to us in Russian.

On the fourteenth of July, or is it the eleventh, I don't quite remember, Bastille Day is celebrated in Paris. The entire city parties. It becomes an enormous dance floor, stages are erected for singers and musicians. And, just as in my favorite movie, *Le bal*, all of French history sweeps by in a succession of dances. And not just French, and not just history. Everyone dances and everyone does it differently: youngsters and retirees; blacks - their own "chunga-changa," Latinos - tango and lambada, Americans - break-dance, and we - our "kalinka." The French skip in pairs to melodious street songs played on accordions or special French harmonicas. Then the dance styles get mixed up, the blacks try to dance like the Latinos, they do it really well, the Latinos start break-dancing and everyone else sways like the French, in pairs. It's a French holiday after all. A warm rain begins, perhaps the only one we've had during our journey and very short in duration, a sun shower, with a rainbow. It's as if it flew over for the celebration, to everyone's delight. The dancing does not stop, the appearing puddles are immediately trampled away: it's more fun to dance through puddles. Our legs are splattered with mud up to our knees: we jump, squeal, burst out laughing with everyone else, step on each other's feet. We are filled with so much joy from the music and the warm rain that we feel like rolling around in the puddles.

The barman just about hurls himself into our embraces: hasn't met any compatriots for a few years. It turns out he isn't Russian, but a Soviet Pole. But that's not important, Russian for him is like his native language. We weep on his shoulder, he curses everyone who was mean to us. "Oh, bastards!" he says. We need such support, compassion makes us feel better. Naturally, we listen to the story of his life, having been rewarded with beef steaks and fries. An ordinary story, emigration, employment, purchase of a house. All the barman's difficulties are behind him. Only his wife left him. And he is homesick. But he doesn't want to return. We have another round of beer. The barman suggests we spend the night at his place, and in the morning he will help us cross the border. "Those border guards are my good friends, they come to my bar to have beer - German beer is better. And Germans go to Strasbourg to drink French wine." We didn't approve of the first part of the barman's plan, especially since he kept praising our *krasniye* eyes from time to time. "We are going to stay in a hotel," we say to him. "And in the morning we'll find you, wherever you are." The barman suggested going to the "student house" - it's one third the price- and called a taxi.

Never in my life did I get so drunk from beer. Giggling and wobbling, I communicated in pretty decent English - my tongue came untied - with the administrator, got the keys and with Nika's help unlocked the door.

It was very stuffy in the room, we threw the window open into the night and, almost crawling, dragged ourselves to the shower. Nika insisted on it and was right. A shower helps to relax and we needed to get a good rest. We got back to our room only to find a cloud of mosquitoes - the light attracted them. At a different time, in a different place, I wouldn't have shut my eyes if I heard the *buzzing* of a single mosquito. But here I helplessly and angrily looked at them - drink, vile creatures, choke on it! - and fell through into the parallel world.

Tjerk solemnly drove us along the embankment, along the Champs-Élysées, circled around the Arc de Triomphe, pointed to the Eiffel Tower and in about seven minutes brought us to the house, where, according to our information, Diadka resided with the grandfather. We slowly and unwillingly crawled out of the car. Tjerk apparently guessed something, wrote down his address and telephone numbers, said that we definitely must call him if problems arise and invited us to visit his picture gallery. Then he rolled off unhurriedly.

Eleven o'clock in the evening. It's dark. Even though we are in Paris, it's an unfamiliar city. We ring, the concierge, a woman, opens. Her English is hopeless, so is our French. We show her the address, switch to Russian, the concierge is from Yugoslavia, understands Russian. Slowly, but surely we find out everything - discomfiting news. The other day Diadka's beloved old man passed away, may he rest in peace. Diadka was dismissed from his position and his whereabouts are unknown to her. The apartment is sealed. The only thing that she can do for us is to call the niece of the deceased grandfather. The concierge dials the number, but instead of speaking herself, shoves the receiver into my hands when it's time to speak. What are we to the niece, what does she need us for? But, I reason, maybe we'll find out where Diadka is. I explain for a long time who we are, tell her that we are practically Diadka's and grandfather's relatives, came for the funeral. I speak English, in my nervousness forget words. Finally, the niece, who was probably getting tired of me, said in clear Russian: "Oh, God!" I start yelling and jumping up and down. "We are Russian, just like you!" I shout. "There is no need to shout," the niece answers in a strict voice. "There are as many Russians like you in Paris as stray dogs. All right, come over, write down the address, I live under Paris. Only come immediately, and not at one at night, yes? Well, I talk rough, but haven't yet eaten anyone in my life, no?" She did have a definite accent.

Cats have green eyes and a languid gaze, la-la-la! We were not meant to sleep under a bridge, hardy-har-har! We were not meant to entertain a French clochard, timcz-timcz-trili-mana-mana!⁴ Hop!

The concierge walked us to the metro, blessed us for the road. Forty minutes later we arrived at the right station.

We stand by the metro exit, try to figure out which way to go. From the opposite direction walks a young priest in a habit. He stops, winks at us - we are separated by the gates - raises his robe above his knees, jumps over the gate, like over a vaulting horse - feet first, lands, smoothes himself out, joins his hands like for prayer, bows to us, winks once again and runs to catch the approaching train. What do you know, an ordained turn-style jumper.

In ten minutes we were home. A hot supper was waiting for us along with a new benefactress, Madam Dobrovolskaya.

The French wash their food down with water and serve coffee with a glass of water as well. They explain that if coffee is taken with water, then every consequent sip feels like new, just as aromatic and strong. We tried - it didn't work for us. But wine, on the other hand, they drink like water. That didn't work for us either, but for a different reason. But we did try "Escargots a la Bourguignonne" - grape snails in green sauce. They are served with special tweezers and a fork with two long tines. Gotcha! It's best not to look at the first snail, send it off into your mouth with eyes closed. We saw frogs, only they were frozen. We would have bought them, but didn't know how to prepare them. And the dessert, what dessert! What all is there, the French will try anything to seduce poor plumping young women. Imagine flakes of fresh February snow, or no, flakes of dense soap foam, gleaming with all colors of the rainbow. The flakes float in light-yellow, sticky solution, or paste, so thick that the spoon stands upright in the foam. The body moans, worn out from pleasure, gets coated from within with sweet saccharine treacle, the head gets clouded with dreams of a heavenly paradise. But later one mercilessly desires Coca-Cola with ice. It's best not to think of bloody beefsteak after dessert. Raw mushrooms, multicolored, plastic-looking bell peppers in salads with corn and croutons with paprika, something resembling pelmeni with fragrant green herbs, broccoli and ravioli, anchovy and artichokes, not just steak! - lobsters and crabs with avocado, shrimp and spiny lobsters - I don't like mussels - raw oysters, they hiss, you feel like a predatory fish, but they say these vile sea creatures help enlarge the breasts! Occasionally, out of boredom or financial considerations, we get a hot-dog or go, shyly, into a McDonald's to crunch on beloved fries and think of our Americanized motherland. Hot sandwiches with sizzling cheese and melted greens are also good, they are served with a fork and a knife. Or we order

cappuccino with chocolate somewhere, sit at a café table in the fresh air, let the feet rest from the incessant roaming. And fruit, fruit, fruit, endless, exotic, never seen before! And none of this is very expensive, except the lobsters and the bloody beefsteaks, and for those we have Alan to thank.

“Nika, to complain about fate is thought to be *mauvais ton*,” I declare after waking up in the student hostel of the border town Kehl. There’s no reply from Nika. She shows up ten minutes later. It turns out, she went on a reconnaissance outing into town and down to the Rhein while I was snoozing away. I examine my arms and shoulders - not a bite. One of two things is possible - either they weren’t mosquitoes, or they don’t bite here.

We have breakfast. At half past ten, as was agreed, we come to our barman. He is visibly nervous, says it’s best not to talk to the border guards at all, but get a taxi with a French license plate. They stop German cars sometimes, check them, but with French license plates - not likely. We catch a taxi, get in, the barman is with us, says, if asked, he will explain that we are his guests, he only wants to show us Strasbourg and take us back. We cross the ill-fated bridge, the car in front of us is stopped, papers are checked, but are only waved on, as if saying, move on, don’t stop the traffic. Ten minutes - and we are in another country. The barman is happy, proud of himself, a German would never have helped, but the Poles - they are adventurers, more so than we.

We celebrate our victory in a small restaurant at the request of our proud barman. At the next table sits yesterday’s border guard, the one who returned us to Germany. With a bite stuck in her throat, Nika manages to say that I shouldn’t turn around. The barman can’t see the border guard either: “Is he in uniform?” he asks Nika. “No.” “Well, then it’s all right! That means he has the day off. When a French border guard is off duty, he isn’t interested in anything except downtime.” “He recognized me,” says Nika. “Well then, blow him a kiss,” advises the barman. We leave the restaurant unobstructed.

The barman doesn’t want to part with us, loads himself down with our rucksacks, hums something revolutionary, but his age is showing, in half an hour he tires out. That’s it, he says, I can’t go any further. Having been pointed in the wrong direction, we wasted another hour searching for the highway. But god, send him health and long years of life. Bye, dearest!

Alan Cocteau, a relative of that other Cocteau, was listed without an entry number in my address book. I had his card with a note in his handwriting: if by chance I am ever in Paris - I am welcome to visit his home. A pre-perstroyka card, I remember smirking at the “by chance” part. He is perhaps the most important person I want to see in Paris. But to ask him to take us in for the night -

no way! We wanted to pay a light, casual visit, without complaints and problems. That is why we waited two weeks to call Alan, did so after getting settled in the *skvat*. Even though it wasn't all that comfortable, at least there were no time constraints - we could stay for good if we chose. Also, we studied the Parisian fashion and adjusted our style slightly, exchanging the sportswear of travelers for light easy dresses.

Alan is a young Sorbonne professor, a philologist who came to Moscow for a conference. We spent an unforgettable evening with him. Alan dear, come greet your guests!

"You see, Gurov," said the melancholy Flor, "the girls came over to Paris for a vacation. They will wander around, soak it all in and go back. Could you have imagined something like this happening in the past? And our *whole life* was spent fighting the system.... Not a single Frenchman can understand what it means for a Soviet person to visit Paris! Won't understand, no matter how hard you try to explain."

Flor sings his songs in the voice of Visotsky, what can you do about that!

Til-Maria, Putov, Flor, Hvost-- where are you now, products of four waves of Russian emigration? Traveling with double passports? May Gurov rest in peace. And where is Seryozha-Lunohod? The *skvat* is no longer there, maybe it never even existed. "Girls," the constantly drunk Flor would say, his stomach sticking out in front of him as if he were five months pregnant. "Do you understand that you'll *never* again find us here, all together? Do you understand, that next time you'll be greeted by a totally different Paris, of a completely different color? Never again will there be *such* a *skvat*. It won't be here at all. And nothing will be the same." Yes, Flor dear, we are not throwing coins into the Seine and the fountains in vain. Someday we'll come back to Paris, having booked a hotel in advance, with visas and tickets, as one is supposed to. We will eat lunch and dinner in modest, but stylish Paris restaurants. We will be able to afford it. But *never*, truly never, shall we race along by "auto-stop," accepting help from kind people who are willing to offer a hand because of our enthusiasm and recklessness, and more simply - our youth. The Paris of our youth and yours will dissolve. Yes, Florushka, yes.

After two weeks of roaming from Madam Dobrovolskaya to the dramatist with the French wife and back, we finally found our home: the *skvat*. Here we didn't burden anyone. We were allotted a badly hammered-together shed, with two cots which we could lock with a key. It was set up in the corner of a storage facility which was "seized" and made livable by Russian painters. There was one toilet for everyone, and there was no hot water, but they had a stolen telephone line and everyone could make calls for free, even to Moscow.

The Eiffel Tower looks like a toy, small and clumsy. It seemed to us that we were looking at a copy or a model on a diminished scale and that the French hid, buried somewhere the real, grand tower. The retro-tower and the creaking elevator bring on melancholy. But not our kind of melancholy - the French kind, light, with erotic sighs and languor. We stand at the top and exchange glances with Sacre-Coeur. Our feet ache unbearably, but of course the tower has nothing to do with that.

We got Alan's answering machine - he's turned up. Reached him on the second try. It didn't take long to explain who we were. He laughed - that light soft laugh! - and invited us to get together in the morning and spend the whole day with him.

Semiramida Ivanovna, fingers bejeweled - we gave her "greetings" from an old Moscow admirer - found fault with my low cut dress. "You think, darling, here you are - in Paris? And you may do as you please? But here we have Arabs, everywhere! They will pester you, you will call the police and the policeman will say that you yourself provoked them and will fine you for creating a public disturbance. Take it off this instant!" Semiramida has an antiques gallery not far from the Louvre. She boasted about it and invited us. We marveled out of politeness. Some important-looking French people came in. Semiramida, introducing us, noted that we traveled by "auto-stop." The French, also out of politeness I believe, raised their brows and clapped: "Bravo!" We curtsied. When the French left, Semiramida explained that they like extravagant behavior. "You must go to Tati, forget your preconceived notions," she went on. "You will find that not only blacks shop there these days. I go there pretty often myself. If you rummage long enough, you can find some pretty decent things." We went, rummaged. Semiramida invited us to a café for a cup of coffee, but in five minutes ran off to conduct her Parisian affairs.

To hell with Semiramida, for the visit with Alan I put on the dress up to the task of "creating a public disturbance." In the morning I could toss a sweater over my shoulders, then take it off in the evening, put on high heels, and there you have it - a feminine evening look with a permissible low cut. We wrapped up our evening shoes, put them into our purses, they barely fit. It was like packing a change of shoes for school. We found Alan's house without difficulty, easily and effortlessly kissed while greeting, like old acquaintances.

It was unbelievable - we crawled all the way to the highway, the wind blowing garbage all over Strasbourg, extracting it from the bins, orchestrating small repugnant whirlwinds. In Germany, in the neighboring Kehl, there were no whirlwinds and there was no garbage. Perhaps the bins were constructed differently. In a different country *everything* is different, even the nature of the wind is different. In Germany the grass was the same height everywhere, even on the meadows, but not in France. Here the color itself was different. Dust appeared out of nowhere, we swallowed tons of it. We did not stock up on water and were dying of thirst. And to top it all off - my monthly started. My stomach ached unbearably. In the previous century a woman, as a rule, did not appear in public in such a condition, just sat in her room, citing migraine. But we keep going, like loaded female camels or like soldiers on a hike - thank god without a gas mask. The highway is littered with half- empty bottles - don't drink or you'll turn into a goat. The water is sickeningly warm, left behind by the highway folk for those who would follow. But we could endure no longer - we drank and didn't get poisoned.

The Musee d'Orsay is our favorite museum, happy, light, short. It can be compared to a sudden surprised gasp or diffused breath, descending like rain and crystallizing into colorful frost on the canvases of the impressionists - lilacs, fireworks, a spray from the fountain, fog, milky way and nearsighted mist. Love and passion, dizziness and nausea, like the smell of a lily.

Alan's daughter, a three-months-old tot - the mother was somewhere out of town - grabbed on to Nika's breast with a deadly clutch and latched on through the dress. She was clinging on with both hands - impossible to tear her away. Nika screamed - it hurts! - even though the baby's teeth had not come through yet. The nanny, a slender young queen with a manicure and a mini-skirt, carried her out of sight. Alan showed us the house - spacious, light, with almost no furniture. In the bedroom - a mattress on the floor. And not all that many books for a professor.

We drive around in his car, past the expensive stores, past the expensive restaurants. Alan is taking us to his friend's antique musical instrument store, which is in the expensive part of town as well. We enter - the employees bow to us. The owner is fat, bald, rich. He opens the safe, lets us touch a violin of the Stradivarius school. Nika's fingers are thin, musical - the Russian young ladies can sing, can dance, can play the piano - voila! "Ave Maria," tenderness spreading along the keyboard - fingers skimming along - and the music spilling through the store. The grand piano is venerable, precise, tested - if only we had this kind in music school - and Alan joins in on an antique cello - a duet! - the

owner is ecstatic, salesmen are stunned, customers are craning their necks - sounds great! - music pouring, cello singing, piano cooing an accompaniment, supplementing the cello with modulations. Unbelievable! Alan forgot to bow, jumped up, kissed Nika's hand - admiration and astonishment - everyone's eyes shining.

Alan's friend leaves his store, the four of us have lunch together. After lunch - the park. Alan is overcome with sadness amidst the trees - oh, yes! we shouldn't forget that he's a Frenchman. In a recitative, quietly, he starts speaking to us about love. In this park he once embraced his girlfriend, on this bench he kissed when he was eighteen - and all of a sudden he is past forty. He bolts, runs up the hill - we can't keep up, we're out of breath, his fat friend is lagging behind. Alan, the handsome Frenchman, is in excellent shape - he stops, slender and weightless in his elegance, and waits for us, the stragglers, a mocking smile on his lips. I recognize France in you, feel its eternal themes and an attraction which agitates, enchants and draws me in. Pupils dilated - it's cool in the park - shadows everywhere - patches of light. Paris without love is not Paris. Nika, I notice, looks astonished - why be surprised? - it's natural. The rushing torrent seized him, sucked him in, Orpheus touched the strings and the harp responded. Alan started humming, almost inaudibly - lips hot - happiness, disappearance, eros - not passion - closeness and fog. I dissolve in a kiss.

We exit the park, walk and kiss, all of Paris consists of lovers. That's how it is here, it's acceptable, slightly embarrassing, but twice as pleasant - in full view of everyone. Alan the seducer, the eternal Frenchman, Don Juan, captured my heart easily and effortlessly - rushed through the park, paused amidst the trees and smiled, that's all.

The Pompidou is a poisonous bowel, the transparent tubes of the elevator digest its visitors. In front of the tubes shining-blue Africans dance and bang on their drums.

The constantly half-drunk Flor thinks that he and I are having a romance. I cut the nails on his fingers, offered to cut them on his toes as well, but Flor became embarrassed. What got me was the dirt under his nails. The two things I can't stand are nail biting and dirty nails at mealtime. Why are our men always drunk or half drunk? I hate and despise that. As for drunken talent, even when there really is talent, it nauseates me. I lack appeal? I have no appeal? For a drunken guy - I have none. As if anticipating a scene from Tarantino, the now deceased Gurov just about whacked his finger off during an argument, out of boredom, out of drunkenness. We dragged him by his arms, tore the shiny hatchet out of his hands. Hvost sings well and drinks well -all shriveled up.

Besides the Russians, there are two Poles in the skvat, Yurek and Vanda, brother and sister, a black family and the family of a Spanish anarchist who got himself expelled from Spain. The anarchist wanted to learn Russian, so our guys took a label from a can of ham, glued it to a bottle of vodka and taught the anarchist the new name of the drink - "Smoked Ham." On the second floor lived an actual French painter. He was not friendly with the Russians with whom he barely communicated. After work Lunohod would show up and bring the rejected pieces of fish from the restaurant. Gurov, strong, supple, tall, with shaved head and a soul-patch, in yellow shorts and yellow boots, his nude torso covered at times with an Uzbek robe, would go to the Arab stands to beg for beer on credit. There he ate and drank vodka with beer, constantly, from morning till night, and legendary visitors from Russia would come and get this local attraction drunk.

In Paris you must constantly look under your feet. On the sidewalks, right in the middle, anywhere, you might end up stepping on *it*. *It* lies innocently in neat heaps, drying, small and large, canine and human. Not feline for sure, since cats never fail to bury *it*.

Tjerk invited us to his gallery. Contemporary Western art is unbearable - first it squeezes you into a dot, depriving you of will, freedom, breath, then turns you inside out, exploding, tearing you to bits. Moaning and disorientation. Tjerk is popular, it turns out. On the street people bow to him, we barely walk a block to the café and receive half a dozen nods. Tjerk lives on the Ile de la Cite - the most prestigious district of Paris. Earlier, in Moscow, we found out from French students that Paris roughly divides into two parts - left side of the Seine, the South part of the city, with the Sorbonne and the Latin Quarter - for the smart; and the right, North side, with Montmartre, cats and railway stations - for the fools. With the exception of the Louvre, the Opera and the Palais Royal, of course. It's true, from the metro station Pigalle up, to the north, the streets of Paris literally swarm with Arabs and blacks, there are many cheep stores and, evidently, apartments. The Ile de la Cite seems to be neutral territory - not for the smart, not for the stupid, but simply for the rich. Tjerk is leaving for Belgium; he offers to give us a ride, show us Belgium, then drop us off in Hamburg - we are so lucky! But we haven't had enough of Paris yet. No thanks, Tjerk.

Cemetery Pere Lachaise - a sad topic. We decided not to go - won't go and that's that! Our sweet, dear, tragically departed, forgive us everything - the shot relatives, the confiscated homes, the wrecked lives, the barbarism - there is no other word for it. We won't go, we've had enough of tears. They swell at the

sight of the skvatters - wrinkled, abandoned, melancholy, with their doomed talk of freedom.

"Why do your songs always have a sad ending?" asks Alan. We shrug our shoulders - we never noticed. We sing two or three songs for Alan, with guitar accompaniment: "The horses walk...", "Shine, shine, my star...", "Black raven," "Oh, but not the evening...", "A pair of bay horses...", "I go out on the road alone...", "White rose, wild rose...", "And in the end I shall say..." Devil take it, it's true! If they don't die in the song, then they are about to die.

"No," we laugh, "it's a coincidence, we have happy songs too, here, for example: "There lived with his granny a little gray goat..." But in translation it also ends up being a sad song. Well, then this one: "A fir tree was born in the forest..." But it was, truth to say, well... chopped down. If you think about it, it really is a frightening, sadistic song with necrophile tendencies. The fir tree is cut down, bluish-green, half-dead, then it's decorated and exposed for public scrutiny. And, to top it all off, everyone is forced to be merry! But what can we do, since we all die in the end! We live and live, and all of a sudden - someone dies, incomprehensible, unbelievable, *unfair!* We live and live, and all of a sudden it will be said about us - the end, it's over! How can we not sing about *that*? How can we not cry? We sang the instructive, philosophical song "If you don't have an aunty..." Then sat quietly. Alan took the guitar. He, it turns out, is not just a cello expert. He started singing a cozy song, quietly, in a recitative - moor-moor-moor. Then he translated it, said that it was about how good it feels for a guy to be with his girl, how good it feels to be together, how pleasant it is to look into each other's eyes, hug, kiss and etc. "Yes!" we exclaim. "But they will die as well in the end!"

Alan is acquainted with Marina Vlady, but hasn't even heard about Visotsky.

Alan does not believe in God - he's lying, I bet.

"I think Moscow is a great city," concludes Alan thoughtfully. "Yeah, great, great for sure," we reply.

Gurov asked Nika to marry him in a church on Rue Daru. He brought a rug and a TV to the skvat from the dump. "Don't go, Nika," I say. "I won't." The emigrants tried hard to convince us to stay, no kidding! Wanted to increase their ranks. "Stay," they insisted. "Here, in freedom! We'll help you with lodging, money, education, residency permit - we'll do everything!" Honestly, Nika and I did think about it for a few days. Walked around Paris and couldn't imagine it as a second motherland, it just didn't seem possible. Call us shiftless if you wish. "You stay and I'll go back," says Nika. I can't do it this way, without support. If

not for Nika, I wouldn't have hitchhiked in a million years. "If you stay, I'll stay," I say. "No, I'm going back," replies Nika. We even asked the advice of a priest. Flor brought us to the Russian Orthodox Institute of Divinity, introduced us to Father Georgy. Father Georgy, with a white Tolstovian beard, as one would expect, offers honey to his guests, a cup of tea and with it - many jars with different kinds of honey. You sit and taste them all evening long. We unloaded our problem, in one breath. Father Georgy decided that Paris to us and we to Paris are of no use. "Go back home," he said, "soon I will go to visit my *skit* - I will give you a ride to the German border." A yellow leaf broke loose from a branch - the first harbinger of the upcoming separation.

Gurov owns a ragged Mercedes. Anyone who so wishes leaves an autograph, an inscription or colorful blots of paint on it. Inside the car there is only one seat - for the driver, the rest of the space is cleared for shuffling lots of passengers. It's big enough to dance or transport more than ten people. Flor recommends against getting into Gurov's car. "I bring it to your attention, young ladies," he warns us, "that Gurov always runs red lights, on principle." Gurov told us that he came to Paris on foot from London. Sold the artworks that he brought for an exhibition, breached his contract, ran off and, of course, lived in Paris without a passport. But he was promised something at the embassy. Getting ahead of myself I will say that Gurov received his residency permit in the end and went back to Piter two years later. He also visited his mother in the town of his childhood and *there* was hit by a car. Finito. An enormous question mark.

Til-Maria brought an uncooked chicken to the skvat, we made chicken-noodle soup for everyone. A tremendous success! The skvatters, like hungry dogs, their tails between their legs, circled around the table, sniffing the air and swallowing their saliva. When they found the circling unbearable, they sat down at the table, fiddling with the empty plates. There weren't enough dishes for everyone - in the spirit of fraternity we divided the plates to be shared by two or three people. A few gulped from the pot, passing the spoons and taking a break from vodka. A long, sacred pause hung in the air, only the clinking of spoons disturbed the silence. Every skvatter savored the noodles with concentration, incapable of concealing his pleasure. Nothing but a peasant family: a long wooden table and the brood - a pastoral idyll. A pretty picture, touching. The buckwheat andham hock dish didn't work out, we burned it, not even Nunik wanted to eat it.

Nunik is a russified French kitten, the only beast at the skvat who responds to "kis-kis." He is black, with white socks. They taught him to sit and shake paws, but guests never noticed him and were always about to sit down on him. That's why Nunik whimpers and his eyes matter.

Alan confessed his passion for motorcycles. A motorcycle is a second body for him; he grew up riding and knows every bump along the narrow Parisian alleyways. He rides a motorcycle to the University, speeding along in a three piece suit, tie flapping, a real professor.

We stroll through nighttime Paris - just finished dining at a restaurant.

"Could you take us for a ride?" asks Nika. It sounds like a crazy idea.

"Nika," I remind her, "Alan is tired, and tomorrow morning he is leaving for Spain to read his lectures." I sigh - that's the life - he can travel all over the world....

But Alan is overjoyed. He runs into the garage and rolls out his pride and joy - a shining sporty motorcycle. "Well, who goes first?" Nika jumps on the back of the seat, Alan twists the throttle and takes off. They leave behind only a light cloud. I stand in front of the garage, solitary Frenchmen examine me as they pass by, appraising me. I turn away, as if saying - keep going, keep going. Time goes slowly while waiting. It seems like an eternity has passed. Nika is out of breath, as if she were the motorcycle: "Wow!" she says. "Awesome!" Alan is not getting off the motorcycle. He's waiting for me. "Aren't you tired?" I ask. "Njet!" he replies in Russian and laughs.

What Russian doesn't like a fast ride?⁵ I don't!

Idamnitcan'tstandfastdrivingthebitchnikolaivasilievich!!! Alan goes crazy. He flies over ravines on his motorcycle - you know, Paris is hilly in places - he aims at walls, then turns abruptly in the last moment, leaning with the motorcycle so that his knees practically skim the asphalt. He navigates between passenger cars, doing figure eights, then flies into narrow alleys and straightens out in the last moment. Bouncing on the seat, clutching onto Alan with a dead grip - to hell with subordination - I'm convinced that at the next turn I'll tear away and fly off on my butt. He slows down at a stoplight - turns his head, winks at me - so, how is it? I gasp for air, attempt to smile, the helmet slides down on my eyes, but I don't even think of adjusting it - too scared to let go of the driver. My nose is dripping like a stressed out faucet, but I don't dare wipe it. Alan throws his head back and laughs, then twists the throttle again - and there I am, like in cartoons, with ears flapping and eyes at the back of my head. Wind, wind you are so mighty!...⁶ Time stops. It's at moments like these that one becomes incapable of resistance: Parisian landmarks are flashing fatefully by, Alan is intoxicated by the speed, and I am not there - I flew off, left myself behind, far from this madness, and remained suspended above this outrage, patiently observing from above, an onlooker. But even wiry Alan tires out.

We get back. Alan jumps off the seat, Nika runs towards us. I sit, mutely staring at the handlebars, clutching the seat from inertia. "Are you sick?" Nika asks. "No," I reply without stirring. The bloodied winking of Paris

advertisements is still in my eyes. The motorcycle is stuck between my legs, I have no strength to get off. Nika and Alan, one on each side, drag me down by my arms and legs, as if assisting with birthing.

Madam Dobrovolskaya was like a second mother to us. Maternity was in her blood - she had five children. But she divorced her husband. He was an engineer, one of the well-paid professions in France. She complained that after the divorce she had to sharply limit her expenses, perhaps the only thing that distresses her. She was telling us that a lover in France is an ordinary thing, to have a lover is almost customary and not to have one is almost indecent. There were debates in the government about a law that would equalize the rights of legitimate and illegitimate children. She was from an ancient noble family, her parents emigrated after the revolution, leaving behind and losing all their capital. In her childhood Madam Dobrovolskaya had to carry water in buckets and tend a stove, she kept dreaming of having enough to eat and experienced terrible discrimination from her French peers. You see, her last name, so pleasant sounding and simple for the Russian ear, seemed terrible to the French. They mispronounced it and teased Madam Dobrovolskaya.

Diadka turned up by himself: he called Madam Dobrovolskaya when we happened to be there. But we had everything under control at that point - the invitation from the dramatist and the friendship with the current hostess, which was strengthening by the day. As a consequence, Diadka was delighted to see us.

Madam Dobrovolskaya is translating Tsvetayeva. But she speaks with a very strong accent.

Nika picked up a handsome Arab on the street, not far from Tati. We sat in a café, drank special Middle Eastern coffee, as always with water, and listened to the story of his emigration from Algiers, attempting to memorize the names of his thirteen brothers and sisters. Finally, we parted from him, having accepted an invitation and a note with his address. Arabs are so clingy. "What the hell do you need him for?" I asked. "I'll sketch him," Nika replied with dignity.

An Italian student was selling his shitty paintings on the embankment, we stopped to talk. The Italian had bloodshot eyes and yellow teeth - he either drinks too much, or screws too much - he talked and waved his arms, gesticulating temperamentally. He invited us for an outing to his dormitory, promised to make spaghetti. We didn't go: didn't like his eyes and his menu.

The entire skvat went on a day trip out of town to visit a Frenchman interested in Russia. The Frenchman ended up being an annoying bore, but he

had a beautiful house and garden. We attempted to climb trees. Pregnant Flor lost to me in spear throwing, so he climbed under the table and crowed there like a rooster ten times. Hvost, as always, was singing his lovely songs. The Polish painter Vanda made a signature salad. Gurov was melancholy. Nika and I climbed into the tub, seizing the moment, and the skvatters went searching for us.

The only thing that we yearned for in Paris was hot water. We complained to Alan and he invited us to his place for a bath after yet another outing to a restaurant. We accepted the invitation with gratitude.

We stand over the toilet, can't take our eyes off it: the water is turquoise, with a lovely subtle scent, it adds aroma to the premises and enhances the mood of the user. Shampoos, lotions, sponges, soaps, foams, creams - we had to try everything. We splashed in the tub for a long time, taking turns, soaking and enjoying ourselves. Alan got lonely.

I come out with wet hair, but fully dressed. He is pacing, in circles. "It's late," he says. "Perhaps you could stay here overnight?" All right, I say. "I have only two beds," he says straight out. "No problem," I say. "Nika and I can sleep together." "Are you two - lesbians?" he laughs. "Perhaps one of you could sleep with me...." "Which one do you want?" I interrupt, "it's up to you." Alan, despite being a Frenchman, gives a whistle and laughs again - a marvelous light laugh. I make a special effort to amuse him so that he would laugh more often. He comes closer, touches my wet hair: "You, if possible...." "I can't," I say. "Nika!" I shout. "How do you say 'menstruatia' in English?" "I don't know," Nika replies, "menstruation, probably." Alan understands everything without translation. He likes being with us. "Nothing will happen," he says, "we will just lay side by side." We lay down. Nika turns off the light in her room, we in ours. It's cozy. I lay in a tank top and panties, Alan - only in his underwear. He is wearing these white, boxy cotton things that look like shorts, with green polka dots. Nika told me afterwards that such pants were the hit of the season. "Who is this Yeltsin of yours?" Alan asks. "Our future president," I reply. We gave Alan a photo of Yeltsin not long ago, the one we got from some activists on Gorky Street before our departure. We had about twenty of them, to give as presents. "Why do you want Yeltsin instead of Gorbachev? Isn't Gorbachev a democrat?" "He is," I agree. "And Yeltsin?" "He is too," I say. "Then why are they not together?" "Because there is only one seat," I reply. "We love Gorbachev. I once was present at a government function with Gorbachev, spoke to Shevardnadze.... He seems to be a smart man." "Uh-huh." "But we don't know Yeltzin." "You will, in time," I say, yawn and roll over.

I lay still. Can't sleep.

Alan isn't asleep either.

I roll over, he is looking at me. Eyes sparkling in the dark. Pretty clever! I turn away. He presses himself against me, puts his arms around me, moves his finger along my profile, lingers on the lips, then bites my ear. Hey! I don't like that! He laughs, the naughty boy. I roll over once again, raise my arm, but do not smack him, only touch his shoulders, his back.... His skin is soft, like a boy's. He also wants to touch me. We take off my tank top. I like it when my breasts are kissed, he does it mar-ve-lo-us-ly. It's impossible to learn to kiss like that, it's like a talent - either you have it or you don't. It's something otherworldly - intuition is needed, intuition only. You know, it's hard to think, that is, to think is hard... nooooo, you know, I feel like biting, but restrain myself... we are guests, after all... but a scream is tearing itself out of me... very softly... the sound of rustling sheets.... Nika might hear.... She told me afterwards that she did hear everything. My panties slip down somehow, my legs get entangled in them. Alan has a condom ready - atta boy! My monthly also disappears somehow, retreats, tomorrow will start with full force, but today it's not time yet. This is what I came to realize - a woman can intuitively regulate her cycles, can even cause pregnancy at will. A very complicated, miraculous mechanism. And how well my Don Juan kisses! His member is thin. Long, but tender, French, one must handle it carefully, delicately, I say to myself. I just remembered something... don't know if I should tell it or not.... All right, I will. I had a little dog in childhood - Belchik. Once I was swinging in the hammock in the garden. The hammock was hanging low, my foot was hanging down, touching the grass. Belchik ran to me, lay down under my foot, stomach up, and spread his paws. I often scratched his stomach, rubbed it with my foot, but this time, all of a sudden, he pushed his pee-pee closer. From it emerged a long red tube, with a clear drop on the tip. He jumped up, seized my foot with his front paws, squeezed it tight, inserted the tube between my toes, swayed a few times and finished up. I couldn't even recover myself. And he ran over to my hand, licked it in a burst of gratitude, so happy, sticking his tongue out and smiling. Managed to bang up his mistress! I grabbed his muzzle, ruffled his ears, naughty dog. Then he followed me at my heels, wanted more. I can't do anything with myself: naked men remind me of Belchik. Especially Alan with his tube. I feel like pitying and patting him, like scratching his stomach and taking his tension away - bringing pleasure. And, of course, it feels good, to be with men I mean - not with Belchik! Alan stops, asks: "Why are you giggling?" "No-no, nothing...." We start kissing again. We get his condom on, Alan touches me gently and comes - he waited long enough. He finishes off beautifully, with a moan. I like it when men come like this, when they don't hold back, give themselves to the woman. Alan catches his breath, his gaze is not extinguished, meaning - this is just the

beginning! He takes off the condom, stretches it out and ties it in a knot, then twirls it on his finger and lets go. The condom flies to the ceiling, spinning in an ellipse, bounces off the wall and skips along the floor, sperms gasping. It must be tight in there, they bump into each other, shoving, like the carp in Chantilly, wiggling their tails, still active, but soon to fall asleep, quiet down, sobbing, dangerous and hardy, like predators. "It's a joke," Alan says, "a bad joke, I admit." "Why? I like it!" I laugh. Well, and then... then... everything continues without a condom....

He, it turns out, is as sensitive as a cat. I couldn't fall asleep that night. I doze off for a while, open my eyes - he is still staring. And in the morning he went off to Spain, without getting a wink of sleep. The three of us eat breakfast together. Alan suggests that we stay at his place till his return, hands us the keys. "When will you be back?" we ask. "In about ten days." "No, that's too long for us. Our German visas are expiring, return tickets might get wasted, time is running out. No, we must go back." O God, it's so sad! We go out to the street, say good-bye, write down addresses and phone numbers, Alan kisses me on the nose - just about breaks it. And runs to the garage, the idiot, to his scooter, no, motorcycle, to fly off to Spain. Bye!

Cats... cats... was I saying something about cats? Yes... in Paris they are somehow not quite the same....

We wandered around Paris aimlessly. Italians shouted: "Hey, bambino!" A drunk clochard was wallowing on the road and peeing, a stream flowing from under him, gaining momentum. It's good that things worked out for us and we didn't have to stay under a bridge. We thought that the French clochards were something like our dissidents, protesting intellectuals. Perhaps, they do exist. But we didn't encounter them. On the contrary, the clochards we bumped into were degraded, aggressive and frightening, revolting to approach on account of the smell coming from them - a wild stench. We observed them from a distance, like a flock of dangerous animals.

We remembered the lottery and the amusement rides in the park in front of the Louvre. We didn't feel like going for a ride this time, but then, after parting from Tjerk, we had a first rate spin. Tjerk said good-bye to us before he left for Belgium, he insisted that we take money from him. "I wanted to give you a parting gift, but didn't know what to get. You must buy something for yourselves from me, something you will like." Of course, Tjerk! We liked the *carousel*. We saddled up the horses and took off ever so slowly, swaying. In the park, a clown was selling balloons. He waved to us, as if to say - bye-bye! We went around once, got back to where the clown was standing, he was glad to see

us, greeted us, blew us kisses, jumped up and down - balloons fluttering. But we moved past him once again. The clown made a sad expression in parting. And so it went, ten times in a row, till the carousel stopped. We got off the carousel - the clown was nowhere to be found, he had disappeared. Flew off with his balloons.

We descended on the shooting gallery, felt like target practicing. Missed the prize. Decided to risk it in the lottery: you pull a string and get either a stuffed toy or a booby-prize. The toys in the tent were huge - violet cows, pink hippos, red parrots, yellow elephants, orange tigers - and it seemed like it would be easy to figure out which string is which. Finally I pulled, felt there was something there. I kept tugging, it felt like something heavy. Oh God, a regular outrage emerged - a small poisonous-green doggy - a nosy pooch with fat ankles, ears sticking up. So, what do you think? And that was our entire winning. We blew all of Tjerk's money. Mother warned us not to gamble for nothing! Well, you, fat creature - you are going to be Mister Tjerk from now on! But why Mister and not Monsieur? And why Tjerk? The devil knows, it suited him better that way. We bought him a tie in the shape of the Eiffel Tower so that he would look more like a Frenchman.

In the evening we wandered into Rue Montorgueuil and started feeling uneasy. The men we encountered there seemed preoccupied, they stood in groups, breathing heavily. We took a closer look: wow, it's a street of hire! Ladies of every shade and style stroll around; some are young and shy, like angel-girls, very thin, in little dresses or shorts. Others look like old grannies, corpulent. One of them roamed around almost in her underwear, her gauze dress was completely transparent. What a rich source for the plots and prototypes of Fellini. A tall mulatto beauty in a red dress rushed by us, hurrying somewhere, was running late. Her perfume hit me, I wished I could become a man - definitely would have trotted after her. The mulatto was tall, slender, her dress joined at the seams with tabs. If you looked from the side, she seemed nude and unbelievably thin. In a moment she vanished, evaporated behind the door of a strip-bar. She's expensive, I bet.

We sit by the Canal St-Martin, not far from the skvat. A man on a kid's trike rides by us: a tall kid, long-legged, in his mouth a wild flower, on his head a sun bonnet, keeps turning the pedals, knees sticking out - a regular grasshopper! "What do you think, Nika," I ask, "would he make it to Spain this way?" "No way!" "Well, what do you think," I ask, "shall we go with father Georgy?" "Yes," Nika replies. "It's time. We either have to stay for good or else pack up and go." "When is father Georgy leaving?" "Soon."

We shot a whole roll of film in the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, former stone quarries where Russian prisoners worked at the time of Napoleon. The

stone quarries were turned into lovely grottos, a lake was created, turrets and bridges added on - a small, but incredibly lovely park. We walked around and waited for Father Georgy - the park was next to the Russian Orthodox Institute of Divinity.

The skvatters pouted and did not speak to us, but later thawed out. They first took us for strike breakers, then figured it all out. Gurov gave us one last ride in his Mercedes and dropped us off at Father Georgy's car. Father Georgy was tempting us with the Reims Cathedral, trying to diminish our sadness.

We left so fast we barely had time to recover our senses. We saw the Reims Cathedral, took photos, stayed overnight at a skit by Marmelon. We rode along a road built by the Roman legionnaires - I imagined how they marched and marched in rows - armor sparkling in the sun. At the beginning of the century this was the front line of World War One. The skit was set up by the cemetery of Russian soldiers who perished in that war. The brand new wooden church built by the Finns smelled like honey. There was a hive next to it and the bees, probably, took the church to be yet another large hive.

We were baptized at dawn.

We got to Hamburg without any problems. Stefan ran out to greet us, grabbed our rucksacks and we spent a long time telling him about Paris. We made train reservations for the last possible day, made it to the railway station in Berlin. On the platform stood a family surrounded by suitcases, they spoke German, but swore in Russian.

We got back to Moscow, honest to god, on August 19, 1991. Moscow was dirty, shabby, unnaturally starved, frowning. We were approaching Russia like cosmonauts, feeling the spatial alterations: denser atmosphere, increasing pressure, especially on the brains. We were gathering strength, understanding that we won't get a cosmonauts' welcome, that we must endure the gravitational overload and descend to Earth with dignity, moving our weighed-down bodies on our own.

Shortly after the successfully completed adaptation period, we came across "Muleta-skvat," a small avant-garde magazine of the vivristically ambitious Tolstiy (not to be confused with Tolstoy). Among the "post-modern" texts about Tolstiy, I found the following poem:

A Night In Paris

Skvat
 A bottle
 Tolstiy and
 his wife Ludmilka
 Vanda
 Hvost
 and a Spanish uncle
 Yurek
 And two whores
 Store
 Arab
 Appetizers
 Journalist (bottle) Russian
 Nausea
 Taxi
 Currency
 Oddly enough you feel bad in the morning.

(O. Florenskaya - to Tolstiy)

"Here, Nika," I say to her. "This must be about us. The dates coincide."
 Nika looks closely, reads it.

"Don't you think 'whores' is a bit too harsh," she hesitates. "We aren't
 whores, we are just bitches!"

"Perhaps, you are right..." I say. "Do you know what I regret?"

"What?"

"That we didn't go to the theater."

"Yes...", says Nika. "Somehow we didn't feel up to it."

"Slavek was offended that we didn't stop in Warsaw: sent me a postcard
 with a black angel."

"To hell with him. Too bad we didn't 'run the marathon.'"

"Running the marathon" is the French term for bar hopping: in the course
 of one night you must visit forty bars, have a drink in each one and remain on
 your feet in the morning.

"Yes... for some reason or other we didn't go, not once.... *Such* good girls,
 how revolting."

"Li-isten! Maybe we should have tried it with those Germans? What if we
 would have liked it?"

"Sure! You, probably, would have liked it with the black guy, you've always liked mulattos anyway.... But what was I supposed to do with my shorty?"

"Though short, he did have sex appeal... you are not fair."

"To hell with them, they were kind of mucky.... Li-isten!"

"Well?"

"Maybe we should have stayed?"

"Stop whimpering!" I immediately remembered Nunik. "You think anyone needs us there?"

"And here?"

"Our parents!"

"Really, that's about it.... Mashka Volodina painted her nails black in Paris! And Grisha Manukov emigrated. And Katika Stadnitskaia.... Everyone left!"

An awkward pause followed, the conductor screwed up, the rhythm broke down, a B-flat appeared out of nowhere, altering the harmony:

"What do you think you are playing? A funeral march? Switch back to the major this instant," I demanded.

The minor tone kept crawling out and squirming about.

"Major!"

"Minor!"

"Major!" I say. "It's impossible to go on like this!"

"So, you wanted a major scale! I'll give you a major scale!"

We stand in the scorching sun. No one is picking us up, the bastards. We drank all the reeking water. "Maybe we should stand with our signs in the middle of the road and block them?" I suggest. "Be patient... someone is bound to take pity on us." A flying red dot approaches - no, this one won't stop - yzzzzzzh! - just flew by - what speed! "Nika!" I shout. "He stopped!" "Where, I can't see?" "There, look!" The sun is in our eyes. The red dot is almost a kilometer away from us. "He must have stopped for a different reason!" "No! He's backing up!" She is right, slower than forward, but still quite fast, a red Ferrari was zipping back towards us. "What language shall we speak?" asked the magnificent red-haired man. "English." "Oh, well, if we must," he sighed, they sure don't like English in France. Looking at my red arms, face and neck, he offered a jar of cream, "Very good cream for burns." I practically bathed myself in it, poured the liquid cream out on my palm and slathered it all over, from my head to my waist - the pain immediately quieted. "Hey! This is a ve-e-ery expensive cream!" laughed Tjerk and took the jar away. He saved me from blisters. It happens, a stranger immediately becomes a friend. We hardly asked

each other any questions, just talked about what was new with us, what had changed, plans for the future, as if meeting after a long separation. We stopped at a rest area, sat in a café, ate ice cream, rested, became saturated with calm and confidence emanating from our Tjerk.

Space dissolved, the invisible gates opened up - the city let us in at sunset: the red Ferrari, the orange disk of the sun and the pink colored Seine.

1994

Notes

¹ A Russian saying.

² A popular Soviet era song.

³ Russian for "uncle."

⁴ A line from a comic routine by the popular Soviet clown Polunin. The words have no meaning in Russian. They are used here as an ecstatic exclamation.

⁵ Reference to Gogol's Dead Souls. The question is from the novel and Fomina's response is addressed to Gogol himself whose name was Nikolai Vasilievich.

⁶ Quote from Pushkin's folk-tale in verse "The Sleeping Princess and the Seven Bogatyr."

⁷ A Moscow avant-garde magazine. Fomina met the editor Tolstiy at the skvat in Paris.