

Lev Borisovich USYSKIN  
Two stories

### Belmondo

"But no, stop it, it's all wrong. nothing happened between me and her. and then that party, when she dragged over that Gnedovsky of hers: I understood right away that it was all a setup, and I am out - but no, it had to be arranged so that I would see. such selfassertion, right?.. so, I remember, we got drunk - I did, in any case, and this is what stuck with me: she sits in front of me, caresses me on the back of my head with her hand and twitters some idiotic compliments. well, I became really nauseous then, I stood up, and departed on my unsteady legs. there. and that's love for you.

I get up in the morning - in my mouth - a drought, in my head - nails, I walk out on the street, maybe, I think, I'll recover - and so, I look: the sun, warmth, all those people - well-adj-asted. and there and then it seems to have come to me. Just this. It seems like a simple idea, but it warmed my soul in a flash - no resentment, no nothing, swear to God, like medicine, nothing else. that's how it is."

He reclines in the armchair; his hands, which had been gripping the soft armrests, are now locked on his knees.

"But, wait. then there is still the, how should I put it, the technical side of it all. the skills, the knowhow."

He grinned:

"Ah, you mean. So, I had a. buddy. owner of an auto service, let's say, he was a strange one, yes. I was hustling there, hustling, checking out all the rides, tried this and that. so, he showed me everything, even gave me this tool. just like that, to remember him by, for when I'd feel an itch, or something. I get everything fast you know - everything to do with mechanics and stuff."

"Do you mean that it crossed your mind before?"

"Well yes. I mean, no. you see, all this happened sort of naturally: it was parked by the house for about two days, I got in and took off. that's all. as if it was mine. how can I explain it to you. it's, sort of, like with a woman - here you are, let's say, banging someone for the first time: and she is yours. completely. you do whatever you want. and by what right, I ask?.. no right - just because it happened: but there must have been something before you - she grew, someone fed her, someone raised her, you know. get it?.. it's a simple thought, right?.. By the way, since then I forgot all about Katika. didn't even remember her, it seems, till I started telling you right now. But before - such burning: you might know this feeling, when a

woman doesn't give you what you want - all of a sudden it gushes over you and you start imagining. all sorts of stuff. about rounded shapes, you know.

so I sometimes puzzle, for example, - her pubic hair, I wonder, is it the same color, or, is it black and curly. and stuff- just feel like hanging myself. And this - some sort of emotional outlet, or something. I didn't even have a broad in the early days - it was alright, but later, when the money started rolling in and I started living it up - I remember going to Novgorod, to a hotel, I arranged a two-week long parad-alle for myself. I must have screwed all of Novgorod, how did I ever found the health."

"You mentioned the money."

"Yes, but not right away. When I brought the first one to my buddy from the auto service - he just about fell down. Even I myself was a bit rattled at first and drove around for eighteen kilometers or so, only then did I start figuring what to do next. To top it all off, I remember it was a Volvo - 460, a huge old banger, I never took that kind again. Mostly I took Volkswagens and all kinds of Opels. So there I was, you know, drove it, that first one, into the box??? - thank God it was Sunday, no one saw - I get out, and my knees are shaking. "Here," I say. "Brought you the goods." My buddy only shakes his head: "Come," he says, "with me." Well, what am I to do - I go, holding on to the wall. He brings me into a room. "Sit here, I'll be right back." Then he comes back, again we go somewhere, finally get into another box, a storage room, I look - there's some dude on a chair. how should I put it. with a determined chin. unrussian. chewing something. "Sit down," he says, not too loud, not too sharp - but still very persuasive. I sat down. He looked into my eyes for a while - I even started squinting; then he says: "Look here, my boy. I'll buy this ride from you, do you hear. Only you don't get much. For now. Because you didn't warn us, understand? Next time, if you are gonna work with us, - tell us ahead of time, so that we get the place ready, understood, right? Good. Then, I'll pay you properly, you'll be pleased. And if you can work on order - then you'll make even more, that's no problem." While he was talking, my buddy left once again, then I look - he is back with a bottle and sits down with us. Then, you know, the two of them told me so much interesting stuff about life - my head started spinning. and then they counted out the bucks - never in my life had I ever seen a sum like that in my hands, even in transit. you get a very different feeling towards surrounding reality, when there's money in your pockets. to tell you the truth. I remember I went home then, slept (I was smashed as a berry) and in the morning decided to call in to work - told them to get by without me till the Second Coming. "

"Just like that."

"Of course.. So what?.. I saw them all clear as day, and that ??? - neatfreak, our boss. those smiles. and understood that I would never set foot there. what's the big deal?.."

"But still you called."

"Uh-huh. Of course, I called - I couldn't not do it, just couldn't, you know, deny myself the pleasure. imagine, this Nikolai-four eyes picks up the phone - he wore huge glasses, flat, like a diver. you know, dumber than dumb. And so he picks up, you know, the phone, and I say: "Hello, Nikolai."

He replies, "Hello. Where are you? What's up?" And I to him: "How's work - are the clients being insured?.." He doesn't get it: "Yes, there is someone who's been here since morning. Why?.." I: "Then keep up the good work, go insure yourself up your. What about the boss, is he in? No, no need. just tell him, to go to. or no, you know what, in my drawer there is a tie (we were all given neckties, so that we would all have identical ones at work, get it?) yes, the company one, that one - and so tell he boss to tie it in a bow on his member. It's my gift. No, I'm alright - it's all of you who've lost your marbles. yes. no. I won't come. good luck to you all with the difficult task of insuring the means of transportation. farewell, colleagues!" I don't know - they probably scratched their heads for half a day afterwards: perhaps someone even got a stroke from mental exertion - I didn't check."

He gets up, stretches, goes to the window, looks down quietly for some time, at the street flooded with cars.

"Listen, and why Belmondo?"

"What?.. Belmondo?. That's from school. my nickname. in fifth grade a friend once forgot his keys at home, his parents were at work, and we, the whole gang, were about to go to his place to play cards after school. but he lived, you know, on the third floor, and I crawled in through his sliding window from the second floor balcony. when I think of it now - I'm scared to death, but then - nothing. only pricked myself on the cacti, they were on the windowsill." He gets into the armchair again, crosses his hands on his chest.

"Tell me about some amusing incidents, failures."

"Oh, there were tons. Well, let's see - once I took a Ford Explorer on the Moskovski. I shouldn't have, of course, should have put two and two together - but was too. no, not greedy - I simply liked it, that's all. like a child, it's just like that. So, I had my own garage by then in a reliable place - a sort of a cover. I drove that Ford in there and went to my place to eat breakfast. I sit, drink coffee then all of a sudden - bang: a call on my cell. That friend of mine from the auto service is calling: "Where's the Ford Explorer, the deep blue one?" I keep silent. "You know what, get it quickly to my place - only, for God's sake, be careful, get it, right?.."

Now that I think about it, my buddy must have gotten something out of it, and the rest went to the victims.???"

He grinned.

"Should I tell you more, what?" His bushy eyebrows went up inquisitively.

"I still can't understand. So there you are. in somebody's car. you have your considerations, and then - our GAI stops foreign cars twice every kilometer." ".no, I'm not afraid. honestly!.. you see - there are two sorts of feelings - that first time, I sort of rolled up into a ball, into an indivisible rock - not just my feet pressed the pedals, but somehow all of me, understand?.. And I had this faith, sort of, a conviction - that as long as I am like a rock, indivisible and firm, nothing could be done to me. a sweet feeling, you know. but it wears you out. At first that's how I drove - and then a different feeling came. the other way around: you sit there

and dissolve, and you are gone. GAI stops you, you get out - but it's not you, it's somebody else. I believe it's called the Stanislavsky system, right?..

not quite?. fine. and so, you start spinning a yarn, you forgot the documents at home and stuff. you know - I never gave more than a hundred bucks. the most important thing is not to overpay right away, or else they suspect trouble."

"You must have superstitions."

"Never without. Let's say, if I exit the house and a dog starts barking at me - I don't work that day. but, you know, it's all nonsense - everything that's mine I have on me, I figure, in me, with me: my successes and failures - every single one."

He gets up, walks a few steps across the room, turns on the TV and turns it off right away, the light blue glowing clock face barely appears on the screen:

"Why do I tell you all this: first of all, that plane ticket of yours in your pocket for 2 AM - for some reason I think that when you get back, everything will be different here . and secondly, pardon me - but you have such a mug: I just can't help unloading all this on you. can't help it. with such a mug you should work in the Big House, what?. it's a joke, of course. but seriously - I am amused: I can't even remember when a guy would ask me questions - it's only the passing girls - but that doesn't count. you give them a pile of lies - and they melt, as if that's what they wanted. All right, and now - let's go for a smoke, it's not allowed here, OK?..

He died five or six months later - a loaded down military "URAL" driving in a column on the slope of Pulkovsky hill somehow incomprehensibly ended up in the oncoming lane, turned into a chunk of shapeless metal his brand new Skoda-Felicia, purchased a month earlier legally at a car dealership. Led by a wiry warrant officer, the soldiers dragged him out of the car, trying not to listen to the moaning and not to look at the blood. The officer squatted and attempted to look into his face - but only saw pink foam, coming in spurts from his mouth. "This is already the death throes, it's hopeless," he said to the soldiers surrounding him, but he was wrong - the wounded was still breathing, each one of his exhalations, generously carrying away one by one the grains of his life, simultaneously filled his body with unbelievable, intolerable pain. The death throes came later, in about twenty minutes, and in another quarter of an hour came the ambulance - the body was placed on a stretcher, covered and loaded into the van. A few minutes later the order sounded, and the aimlessly loitering soldiers started bustling, hurrying to take their places in automobiles that didn't belong to them.

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## First Love

"...in the train she offered me tea, made inquiries about my life - what and how, ancestors, this and that. she nodded, like she cared - I told her about my mother, as is, was spinning yarns about stuff. nothing of interest. I told her - I'm off to apply to a technical school. still it felt good that she took an interest. how should I put it - it wasn't so lonely or something. then, when we arrived, she said: "Where are you headed now?" And I have no place to go, so I say to her, well, I've no idea - my aunt is at work, I have tons of time, will hang out, get some beer. "Well" she says, "come with me, I'll feed you breakfast." So, I went."

"You went to her place, Agapov?"

"Well, yes. we got there, you know, she seated me on the sofa, put on some music - all's good. then she comes back - she had changed, hair streaming - she's attractive, can't tell that she's about to hit forty. "March to the bathroom," she says, "now it's your turn." she gave me a robe, soft, also attractive - with blue stripes. "Matches the color of your eyes, Peter dear." I go to the bathroom - I look, and there's all kinds of stuff - tons of it. all kind of jars, tubes - there, I say to myself, that's how the broads live. ok, I washed, smoothed my feathers - I look, and she is already fussing in the kitchen: "It's too late for breakfast, let's have lunch, Peter dear, all right?"

"Was it just the two of you?.."

"And her daughter too, Regina, back from school. she's in fourth grade."

"All right. then, Agapov, keep going, I am listening."

"So. we ate, it's time to, you know, to go - but I don't feel going, really don't feel like it... we sit in the room, talk. music playing. and that's how it was till dinner."

"Bondarenko didn't suggest that you leave?.."

"No, of course. what's it to her.?"

"Good, continue."

"So, we started our dinner. she gets a bottle of Rasputin from the cupboard and puts it on the table. and from the fridge all sorts of treats - mushrooms, pickles, something else. we drank to our meeting, then - so that I would get into the technical school, everything's good, really good - now all of a sudden I feel all warm, light - and I told her the whole truth: about my dad, and his buddies, and that there is no technical school really. and she is nodding again, like she was on the train, and looks at me with feeling... like I remember only mom looked at me, when I was about five or six, when I got sick. So, you know, I loosened my tongue, and she, I kid you not, just keeps pouring stuff into my glass. but for herself only a little, so. I mean, I got plastered. it didn't take much."

"Have you had similar experiences, Agapov?.."

"No, that was the first time."

"Good, then what happened?.."

"Then what happened?.. I don't remember too well - remember only that she took me out to puke. and then I stand under the shower naked. the water is warm, pleasant. then she made me drink warm milk with some medicine. I kept turning my head away, didn't want to for some reason. that's it, then - morning."

"Morning?.."

"Well, yes, I wake up - it's morning, I lie in bed, naked, she's next to me, also all undressed. I couldn't believe my eyes - until then I'd never been this close to a naked broad. so. I lie there, you know, overcome, and she seems - asleep. then I sort of accidentally, or something, touch her hand - she opens her eyes and looks at me. silently. and I don't pull my hand back. <.> and then suddenly this sharp pain - and I come, didn't even have time to figure it out. then I felt so nasty - I think to myself, everything is not right, I can't even do this, and she then takes my face into her hands, looks into my eyes, again - with feeling: "Did it hurt, my baby?.. My Pete, my baby, don't be upset. everything will work out, just rest for a while." And she strokes me, like a baby really. And so, we ended up lounging about on that bunk for three days or so - I didn't even have a chance to call my aunt. My aunt - so what: the less I remind her of myself, the better. she is a simple one."

"Then."

"And so I stayed there. "It's like one kid," she says, "or two - the same thing: I'll feed them both, won't kill me."

"So what did you do all those days, Agapov?"

"Nothing. watched TV. or else - roamed the streets. sometimes I went to the firm where Svetlana worked, they called me in to help out - to load things and stuff. But not very often. And I watched her girl: has she finished her homework and stuff."

"Did you like that kind of life?.."

"Who wouldn't like it?.. I was warm and full, no headaches. she even provided cash for pocket expenses."

"Good, now tell me, Agapov, when did this Shpigar show up?.."

"Ah - Valentin Savelich. Well, that was like later. in a year, probably. he came sometime to visit, brought martini. Svetlana introduced us, you know, and he is - full of it. so we sit, gab. about Tunisia. he was telling how he vacationed in Tunisia - he was ok. a cheerful sort of guy. Then when he left - Svetlana tells me that he is said to be a very rich man - owns a store and stuff. I can tell myself he's rich - the poor don't vacation in Tunisia. Then he kept

coming over. and then they got me a job in his store. the one that's by the Vasilievsky, by the metro."

"Whose idea was that?.."

"Not mine, for sure. Svetlana told me, in passing - but I think it was his idea - to get me out of the place. I didn't get it then."

"And how was the job?"

"No big deal, no sweat. I even liked it at first. met the guys, started hanging out with them - discotecks and stuff."

"And when did you find out?"

"When?.. That was in the spring, in May. I was going fishing with the guys - we had something like four days, the holidays. right. So we get all the stuff - tents, fishing gear, took vodka, I remember - the sea. we were off, you know. At first all was well - fire, nature. But then. like my grandma used to say: "God knocked on the window pane" - I got myself a nail through the foot after a binge. big time: tons of blood - could barely stop it. so, I decided to go back home - the guys took me to the station, packed me up into the train and I was off. I come back, you know, hobble somehow - and there you have it: I catch them, so to speak, in their birthday suits... so.

well - I go to-the kitchen, smoke - fingers shake, then all of a sudden I started bawling - would you believe it: when I caught my dad, and then he smacked me with a spade on the back - that was no big deal, but here - I was in tears. like a baby. yes. so, through tears I hear - the door shuts, that means he left. a bit later Svetlana appears - in the same robe as that first day. she sat down opposite of me, started smoking. "Listen," she says, "Peter dear, you are all grown - you must understand." She got up, put her hand on my shoulder: ".you have everything ahead of you, Peter dear. And I am thirty six already - getting older. and Valia is forty." And so - I moved in with my aunt that same day. that's that."

"And you didn't show up at Bondarenko's after that?"

"Why, no. I did come. but rarely. still, stayed overnight a couple of times."

"I understand. Now tell me about Shpigar's apartment. How did you come up with."

"What's the point, mister investigator. You wrote it down yesterday. There's nothing to add. I swear."

"Listen to the question carefully, Agapov: how did you come up with this?.. Do you understand? I am not asking you how you did it."

"I understand. Well, what can I say. at work, naturally, everyone was clued in - about this stuff. couldn't keep it from the guys. everyone just had to offer an opinion on the matter. as if someone asked them. and I am sick of it. and so, you know, Andrucha invites me one day for beer."

"Sonchugashev?"

"Yep, Andrucha Sonchugashev. and over the beer he says that, if I am up to spiting the boss - and even making a profit to boot. that he has, apparently, his cousin's lockpick, good for any door. well. I knew Valentin Savelievich's apartment inside out: visited it about eight times, with Svetlana, and with the guys - when we arranged the furniture. but, you know, mister investigator, it's like something went blank. now I wouldn't do it for anything - and not because I got caught, it's just - let it all go to hell. the store, and Svetlana with Valentin Savelievich - God give them about thirty kids. and now, I figure, it would do me good to go to the army - mom probably is drowning in notices. what is there to say. and now I have to sort all this out. will, they, perhaps, give - a suspended sentence, what do you think?"

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*Translated from the Russian by Anna Barker*