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## MARBLE MEAT

Hunger. It comes regardless of.... Whether you have money or not. Whether the wind is howling or it's pouring buckets. You are getting dressed, lazily. I can't get used to stocking up on food. Can't trust myself to make choices, buy the same stuff every day - cabbage, cabbage, cabbage, different varieties of cabbage. I meditate in the mornings. My friends are all sidhas. But I am not one yet. My teacher found me. He materialized from Sweden, a student of Maharishi, resembling Toto from the Emerald City, with a rabbit-like friend who invents natural food additives and lectures to Moscow doctors on the benefits of vegetarianism. "Health and Beauty" and "oxygen" - that's their program. He, the teacher, bowed to me several times, his hands pressed together, muttered an incantation over a banana and a pear, crumbled some bread, and under strict secrecy handed to me my mantra, the one and only. He said that I was ready and could start meditating. I also understood that I was ready, that without my mantra I would be simply.... But I had only a vague understanding of what I was ready for. Barely an inkling.

Sometimes the teacher calls me from his Sweden and asks in an other-worldly ceremonial voice: "Do you meditate?" "Yes, I do." "This is very important for you and me." "Why?" I ask. "Your karma is my karma and my karma is your karma now because.... Do you meditate every morning as I said?"<sup>1</sup>

I meditate every morning, every God-given morning. Sometimes I perceive the other-worldly, but if one is to believe the instruction, it's not the other-worldly after all, but my unsettled mind, or one of the levels of my unsettled consciousness. It's not worth paying attention to such visions, it's not even worth mentioning them, they're nothing special, just flights and voices.... One must reach out for the God in oneself, that's what one needs to do. In the end. But what if I'll take Him for one of my own visions as well? It's true, there is nothing else besides visions. The world, in its essence, is only the vision of a meditating God. All right, but if I can separate myself from my visions, then I'm a vision after all? And if the vision of God exists, mustn't there be an actual someone meditating in order to see this vision?

At such moments I start getting worried, I struggle with passions and feelings. I nervously gnaw on a carrot but yearn for much more.

The incense helps. Sandalwood works best for me with its sweetish smoke. I listen to a cassette with Indian mantras, sit in the lotus position. Feel like stuffing myself to the gills. I must take a break and go to the store.

Hunger. It comes regardless of.... Whether you have money or not. Whether the wind is howling or it's pouring buckets. You are getting dressed, lazily. I can't get used to stocking up on food. Can't trust myself to make choices, buy the same stuff every day - cabbage, cabbage, cabbage, different varieties of cabbage. Today I will buy beans, fix them up with mayonnaise. It's all right that there are eggs in it. It's just a little

"Hello?"

"Manya, are you there?"

"Well?"

A "friend" is calling.

"Tell me, where does happiness lie?"

"In life."

"Do you want me to introduce you to a rich guy?"

"Where from?"

"From a meat packing plant. An American millionaire."

"Oh, come on...."

"He needs a girl, someone serious and decent. He comes to Moscow often - has his own plant and a restaurant. He says he isn't married, which may end up being true. Call him, would you?"

"Let him call first."

"So should I hand him the receiver?"

Japanese bulls do not have slanted eyes, the Japanese mentality does not extend that far. Their eyes, like all cow eyes, have lashes and are languid, moist, as if from tears. Japanese bulls, do they know what love is? They do. They are heavy, the cows are heavy, love in slow motion, swaying folds, tremoring tons, unstabbed carcasses, well-fed, dense. Steam from the nostrils, inhale and exhale - a quiet mooooo.... Loving is allowed, but for how long? A slaughterhouse wedding night, in broad daylight. Or no, the slaughterhouse comes later. Love first.

I saw the head of a cow. The carcass was carved up and sold by weight: meat - still steaming, warm innards, the udder and the entrails. It was sold in front of everyone, in front of the head - the cow looked at herself through her lashed, languid eyes. Frozen, dead. People praised and selected the meat, even argued and quarreled, women grabbing for the best pieces.

And the bull who loved her? Or is it all different with cows?

They tied her up, twisted her up, took away her calf. The bull is in the stall - his sides tremoring. Calm down, cool off. He is strong, but *not strong enough*.

Sweep it all away, sweep it off, scatter, squash it. So that the hoofs should slide, smear it. Horns like a lyre, the masculine curve of the neck, muscular, the final mooooooo... what's this? Born so that someone might eat you. While you're still young and full of strength. Drink up, young bull.

A whole bucket of sweet-sour wine. To drown the yearning and the contempt. I could use some water.... Not allowed - this is as good as water. A dream. A few more days - get drunk, unable to rise. The bull stretches out its muzzle, the alcoholic vapors are nauseating, but the wine is almost like water, drinkable. And the bull drinks. Drinks like a cow, drinks the only way he knows how - his muzzle in the bucket.

So where did you say we should meet?

By the theater, at the entrance, at the box office. I am George. And I am Manya. I have a Zhiguli, strange as it may seem. It sounds like you are a rich man. Relatively. The restaurant, by the theater, have you ever been there? It's mine, but we won't go there. We'll go someplace where no one knows us. You, Manya, are quite a jokester. I don't know Moscow very well. I left Odessa for America when I was thirteen. Friends say I have an accent. It's true, I do, only not an American accent. I was married, but we separated, decided to prolong our youth, our son grew up, has his own business. You have lovely eyes. I don't like whores from restaurants. They have long legs, you say? That's true, but they have a different look in their eyes. My wife and I are friends, that's all. I'm telling the truth. Hello-hello! There, by the restaurant, I see my friends, let's not go there. Where shall we go? You know I feel like having something to eat. I didn't get around to it before the phone call, decided to take a chance on a restaurant. Yes, definitely, it's tastier. I'm fascinated, you're a person of interesting circumstances. I'll tell you everything about myself. Yes, please do.

I made money in real estate sales. You know, intuition and determination, ability to make contacts. Our people are resilient and enterprising. You don't like the New Russians? They simply don't know how to behave, if only they would have gotten a feel for how business is done in Europe or America.... They need schooling, schooling in good manners. And meticulousness. And of course, an entrepreneurial streak, in a good sense. One can't get rich without it. Do you know this joke? A Jew worked as a guard at a car plant all his life and his neighbor, also a Jew, - as an auto-worker. Every evening he would drive through the gates of the plant, and the guard, his friend, would watch vigilantly, so that he would not, by accident, drive off with something, like say, an expensive car part. Eventually the worker prospered, built a three-story house with an underground garage, a weekend house in the country, just to have one, and vacationed every year abroad with his family. The guard lived as he always did, in a one-room apartment. And so, one day, the guard asked his neighbor how he

managed to get rich on just a salary since he never took anything from the plant. "What do you mean - never took anything?" the worker became offended. "Every day I took one car." I needed approximately twenty-five years to get on my feet. Some manage to do it faster. Others never make it, only their children. Emigration is a test of endurance. Help yourself to some fish. Have you been a vegetarian for a long time? Almost two years. Moderate vegetarianism, you allow yourself fish and milk, I understand. I, you know, can't eat meat either. Really? Honest to God. I have to go to tastings. I set high standards, my meat comes from America, I have long-term partners, and the clientele is already established. I understand taste, give them what their hearts desire - I know and control all the components. The line forms at five in the morning, they buy up my sausage, take it to every corner of Russia in containers. The capacity isn't big enough, I need to expand. I come to Russia three or four times a year. Yes, I supervise everything. There is, of course, a representative. A joint venture - I help him in America, he helps me here. Salad? Yes, of course.

The bull settles down, gets used to it slowly, adjusts to the circumstances. His brain fogs up - it feels good. His muzzle in the bucket, he gets all he asks for. And not a drop of water. White wine, crystal-clear. Drink, little bull. The legs bounce and wobble; thankfully, the stall is not all that big. The bull feels strange. Foggy air. Steam from the nostrils - either inhaling, or exhaling, and a short bewildered mooooo....

This is a good restaurant. It doesn't matter that it's expensive. There are some expensive ones that are bad, but this one is good. The meat comes here from Japan, it's specially prepared. The beef is soaked in wine during the life, so to speak, of its owner. It's saturated, blended with life's juices. The Japanese are perverts? Well, if the Chinese eat the brains of a living monkey, then why shouldn't the Japanese.... They don't feed the bull, only get him drunk. How long does this go on? I don't know, several days, weeks. And then he is slaughtered. But not right away, first they beat him with mallets for a long time. You know, living steaks. The meat is mingled with fat and blood, and there appears a pattern on the cut, like in marble - thin white streaks and fibers of different shades. It's even called "marble meat." Pretty. And all saturated with wine. Would you like to try some? It's all right if you are a vegetarian. Only once, since you never had it before. Of course it's okay, just this once. It's terribly expensive, but I would like you to try some. I guarantee you never had better-tasting beef.... Nothing that could even come close.

Tell me about yourself. You don't want to? There is nothing to tell? You prefer to listen? Yes, of course, I travel a great deal. Where have I been? Well, practically everywhere. I've had a dream since childhood - a house by the sea - I have one now, built it, only not by the sea, by the ocean; yacht - got one, went out

into the open ocean, capsized once, I was drowning, an Italian Mafioso rescued me. Naturally, he rescued me and refused my attempt to reward him. Then I played in his casino for small stakes - won ten thousand dollars. His last name, the Italian's, is Capone, just imagine!? My wife works as a designer for *Valentino*, an independent woman, a true American. Well, how do you like the meat? Stunning, isn't it? Heavenly taste. Is it hard to conduct business in Moscow? Not for me. I love to work, love to hustle. I love people. Of course, I have very little free time, get up at six, don't sleep more than five hours a night. I am known in certain circles. I have my man in the government. Get covered from all sides. Actually, I got lucky, old friends, old connections - nothing can replace them. Mafia? Of course. For instance, they have their own areas of control where no strangers are allowed. City garbage removal, for example. Very lucrative business, and it's easy to launder money. One must have a roof, and without it you don't have a chance.

The bull was no longer a bull. He ceased being a bull. He vaguely remembered something about his childhood: a cow's udder and the taste of milk. Crooked mugs everywhere. An empty bucket started rolling and is still rolling, spinning in a curve, circling along an ellipse. Am I a bull or not? The bulk gets in the way, the body wants to sag, the legs - to break. It's more steady on three legs than on four. The bull understood it, felt it himself. If the muzzle is pressed against the wall, then the forehead is cooled by the stone. The horns tracing the word "mooooo...."

No, I'm real. Tough, no, not tough, just an ordinary guy. Would you like to see my brochures, advertisements.... Here are the plants where I buy my meat. Pig carcasses, split according to the laws of dialectics, resemble the bodies of dishonored women. Necrophilia, attractively-alluring. Adrenaline - minimal. Of course, they are smart and understand. My business partners use the latest sparing methods. They kill with electric current. Death comes instantaneously and unexpectedly. Oh, stop it. God himself bid people to find nourishment. Yes, they are born to be eaten. Such is their karma. You seem to have an interest in the East? No, I am an earthy man. I love sweets. You love them too? These are select cuts, out of which - have a look, and these are my products - I make sausages, ham.... Yes, this is the packaging, for selling sliced sausage, and in sticks. A small staff - seventeen people. I think that's a lot. But all good people, stick with me because the salary is above average. No stealing, just the usual petty theft. Actually, the former accountant tried to cheat me. I brought her to the storage facility, showed her the accounts, "What's this," I say to her. "Where did all this meat come from?" She didn't say a word - an experienced accountant - simply wrote her resignation silently. Once I say "goodbye," it means "goodbye" and not "see you later." Also, I don't like it when people screw me, I like to do it all

myself. How did I get acquainted with your "friend"? His "friend" works in my marketing department, a good guy. You know what, let's go straight to my plant. Shall we?

I'm going somewhere, being led somewhere. But where - I'm unaware. Where - unaware. Unawarewhere bull. There goes a little bull, swaying, sighing along the way... The swings bing-bang-bang, swingy-wingy, topsy-turvy.... Aaaaand whyyyy... was I not served? Waaaiit-or! Garcon, damn it! Hey, archangels, ...who are you? Who was spitting - why did you assume I was spitting? - no one even thought of spitting! I was expressing, not expectorating. I repent, I'm a socially insignificant person, I'm a man in a case.<sup>2</sup> Not a peep.... How ig-noooble of you, gentlemen. Gentlemen, where are you leading me? Gentlemen, I call upon you as witnesses! Look everyone! How a soviet person is treated! Unfinished bourgeois, many-headed capitalists. Hydras!... D-D-Despotism! A-a-a, people in white robes tie my white hands, swaddle me with bandages, carry me off, like a babe for sacrifice! Execution, gentlemen! Ex-hibi-ecu-tion! Sprint-lottery! Tied me up in a cocoon, a co-coooooon - and - carried off.... Cu clux clan! C-c-cosa Nostra! Only keep your hands ooooff! We are not slaves, slaves are not us! I am a Soviet person! And you are ten dollar trash! Coachman, don't rush the horses... bing-bing-bing... vast is my motherland, poets walk along the blades of knives... Darling, only you know how to love.... How could I have forgotten about you? Quietly, without going into details.... I am a scoundrel, I knooow. You are the holiest simplicity, the girl in a shawl.... Get looost, I'm contemplating.... If the right leg wobbles - I'll immediately smash your mug in. The heart, it feels... the heart of a beauty.... The earth stands on its hind legs. Earth on hind legs, shaking violently. Straight in my mug, as if with a mop - bang! Stepped on it - right on the forehead! Best not to move, best to lie down right away - lie low, lie still, fucking underground, let it swing, like a bubble... - and we will float together, my little shawl, on an around-the-world cruise to top all cruises.... Captain, there's a storm, stormy billows overboard.... Rats running from the ship-shit-it.... Dear God, can't lift my head, it keeps rolling, like a pear, rolling along a curve - an ellipsis, I'm sick of it, I could howl like a wolf, - and a quiet drooling "mooooo" ... smearing everyone....

Come along, Manya, don't pay attention to him. Get in the car. You know, I would prefer a cutthroat to this drooling element in wet pants any day. Stay in the car, I'll be right back. What happened? Yes, the cops signaled. I am in violation, I'll be right back. A strangely familiar person. Not without charm, but they all have charm. Ring with a signet - what do you know - show off! One brow rising, or rousing. Calm and a bit arrogant, knows what can be bought. Knows what he can afford, knows the price of things. Will you, Manya, bring me tea when I get sick? I don't know. You are an honest young woman. To be or not

to be? Well, that depends on how it all works out. He's coming back, seems pleased. Did the cops get you? Not too bad, they didn't ask for my passport, and my car registration is Russian. Don't keep cabbage laying around. All rich people are terribly stingy. Not all, the poor are stingy as well. You shouldn't be the one to accuse me of stinginess. You are right, forgive me. We'll be there in a minute, it's not far now.... You, Manya, started saying something about London... we were interrupted. Yes, I was telling you about the museum of torture. I have this strange feeling that my head was cut off in my previous life. Sometimes my neck aches, you know, like old wounds in bad weather. I have to massage it, do exercises - I turn my head, stretch the muscles, strengthen them. Well, in this museum of torture I saw an execution block and an ax near it, on the straw. The block was plain, like a wooden stump, the top covered with shallow and deep cuts, all chopped up from frequent use, and seemed to me painfully familiar. The ax was dark with time, unsharpened for ages, leaning against the block, an honorary retiree - as if saying, those were the days - but now idle, annoyed by the constant conveyer of visitors. Oh, if only I could chop all of you to bits! I chose a moment when there was no one left in the hall with the execution block, approached it, got on my knees and tried it out with my head. The head lay down comfortably, slightly at an angle, hard to lift it right away - it required an effort, and, as I discovered, there was even a notch for the chin - it was cozy, like on a pillow. And you know, it was a strange feeling, I seemed to have calmed down. Like after visiting a familiar place, a place of recollections. You, Manya, simply have a wild imagination. I don't know about that, after all I didn't feel like testing the chains or the Spanish boot.... I was only drawn to the execution block. Are we there? Looks like a good location, close to a church and not far from downtown.

Vasia the night guard opened the door. The owner arrived with a young lady after nine. An automatic machine gun hangs on Vasia's shoulder, an old model, he fought in Afghanistan. We won't be long. I just want to show my sausage to the young lady and we'll leave. I'm just kidding. We make sausages in the morning. There is no one in here now, empty premises. Of course you'll be able to see the enormous meat grinders and the vats for cooking and smoking. I have samples in the refrigerator, would you like to try some in my office? No more room? Yes, to say that we had a big meal would be an understatement. Where is the freezer? Would you like to go in? It's best not to. There is meat hanging on hooks there. We keep the sausage in the storage facility. This is the processing room, and this is the processing table. Yes, it's clean. It's washed every day and wiped dry. Manya.... Should we spread a cover perhaps, it might be more comfortable.... Or go to my place... instead.... Well, as you wish. The guard? No, he guards the door. Just imagine, you could get a guy drunk, offer

him a woman, let him have some fun, and then - whack on the neck, and into the meat grinder! Laughs. Yes, Manya, I can imagine, and you are quite a jokester. Tell me, George, your teeth, they are so white and straight - are they false? To be honest, yes - he laughs - but not all of them.

How dare you?! Wake me so abruptly! I was sleeping, so sweetly, so pleasantly. I was fucking and was coming, coming, and the dream wouldn't come to an end! I was stronger than all the other bulls. I am the God of all bulls, of fertility and love! Legs trembling, nostrils tremoring, all the cows languishing and desiring, awaiting me - me! A low, vibrating "moooooo" carried over the entire earth! How dare you wake me? How dare you grip me in a vise? Am I a bull or am I not? The heavy mallet approaches with the speed of fate. Irreversible and hurtful. It's my enemy. I'm headed toward you! A tense, raging bull. You shouldn't tease me, drive me crazy - you will pay for it, you will be sorry. I am frightening and angry, untamable, like hundreds of exploding bombs! I'll blow you to pieces! Muscles flushed with strength, screeching mallets, rushing blood, steal and muscles welding. The muscles charge at the mallet, another strike, and the multi-ton mallet bounces off, like a ball, dancing hard rock. I'll blow you to pieces.... I'm strong, but *not strong enough*.... The anvil feels no pain. The firm body submits, starts giving in, sags under the weight of the mallet, misses a strike - doesn't counter just that one strike, tires, - and a pitiful, infuriated "moooooo"! Mooooooooooooo! Damn you, sons of bitches! Moooooooo-aaaaaand-oooooh! The spine cracks, the mallet is hitting swiftly-swiftly, it becomes easy, easier with every new strike. The bull is wheezing, trembling, showing his tongue, thick, blue and very tasty, blood pours, splattering, dripping from the muzzle, from the tongue, pours into a small quiet stream, almost black from thickness. The mallet slurps and smacks, beguiles to the point of torpor. To stand and stare is the essence of life. The meat, like any meat, squishy and firm, saturated with blood, must hang before consumption. The shapeless carcass, lifeless, will soon stiffen, harden, like marble. And there will be sleep. A quiet, shapeless "mooooo...."

Goodbye, Manya, goodbye. A magical evening and a lovely meal. He drove her to the house, walked her to the door. You are a man of interesting circumstances, and your meat.... I will never forget.

Manya can't sleep, Manya is suffering, her stomach is like a rock. She tosses in bed. Meat is hard to digest for the unaccustomed. What is the time? Late night or early morning. The French would say morning. In Russia it is late at night. The clock irritates, ticks away at the brain. Manya gets up and crawls to the mirror in the bathroom. Bluish skin, extinguished gaze. She's got to do something. Manya has to decide - two fingers in the mouth or a hose up the bottom. The hose is more pleasant. While it's pouring in, she can doze off for a

while, then sit, abandon herself to the stream. Her head is resting in the palms of her hands, her elbows are on her knees, in a while she might be able to fall sleep. It seems the pain has eased up. I don't suffer from sleeplessness. The bed preserves the warmth. Chills and shivers - it's a forceful intrusion after all. I warm up, it's cozy, my nose pressed into the pillow, a blanket over my head, only a small peep-hole for breathing. A lair in the snow.

I walk along a wooden corridor - it's either a stable or a barn. On the left, there are small dark rooms in the wall, they resemble monastic cells, small and dark. It seems like there is kindling burning in them. There is definitely someone in there. Perhaps dead monks. I avert my eyes, don't want any provocation, look in front of myself - the floor is wooden, made of boards, dark. Some big cluster begins to stir, I know that it's a living, dense cluster. I look into the darkness and see a bull standing in my way, bluish black, with purple streaks. He looks at me. I don't hold a grudge. I stretch out my hands, open my palms - look, I don't have a weapon. The bull steps toward me, approaches, pushes his muzzle forward, I get chills down my spine, but do not avert my eyes - his eyes are moist, as if from tears, lashes trembling; he stands very close to me, the floor boards sag under his weight, they shudder with every step of his hoofs; a close-up of the head - the muzzle right in front of my face, I detect a bovine smell, milk and manure, very pleasant, he puts his wet nose into my palm and breathes, he inhales - the palm feels cool and ticklish, and exhales - warm and moist. I understand: he's a friend. I keep walking, past the bull. He follows me, submissively and silently. I feel calm, I feel good. He is my friend and protector. But the corridor runs into a wall, a dead-end, I turn around, look back. The bull slowly lowers his head and raises the floor boards with his horns. A section of the floor is elevated like a shield. The bull vanishes under the floor. An earthquake starts. Everything - the floor, the walls - is shaking back and forth, I grab on to the wall, and see my mother and my grandmother, standing. "Stop," I tell them. "Don't come close, don't come here, there's a bull here." "Where?" they ask. "Here, under the floor." "Let's take a look." The three of us lift the floorboards, take the floor apart, a hole opens up - there, at the bottom, on the ground, lie the remains of a huge animal, half decayed, his bones, skull and scraps of black meat.... The phone rings.... I throw the floor boards aside. Jump back. I want to scream. The phone rings.... Horror prevents me from screaming. I gasp for air. The phone rings.... Shi-i-it....

The phone rings. My heart is pounding. God, what time is it? I lift the receiver. The "Friend" is speaking:

"How come you don't pick up the phone, girl?"

"I am still asleep.... Thanks for waking me."

"Listen, yesterday your Toto teacher was searching for you, he was worried, called me. Said he was not feeling well all evening.... How did it go last night?"

"All right."

"Listen, what does he want from you?"

"Who?"

"Your teacher."

"What do you mean?"

"Is he after you?"

"Are you crazy?"

"Then what were you doing in his hotel last time?"

"We were meditating."

"Did he by any chance screw you?"

"You just don't understand, it's all very serious. Anyway, let me go back to sleep, I didn't sleep all night."

"What happened? Did you get ill?"

"I overate."

"The aged American overfed you? Is it all very serious with him as well?"

"You ask him. All right, bye."

I hang up. But why call him "aged"? He seems like a normal, earthy, real guy. A person of interesting circumstances. Just unenlightened.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This conversation is presented in English in the original.

<sup>2</sup> Reference to Chekhov's story "Man in a Case."