The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Selected Writing by Svetlana Alexievich

By The Moscow Times

October 09, 2015



Svetlana Alexievich

Landscape of Loneliness: Three Voices

Translated by Joanne Turnbull

VOICE ONE

When he said: "I love you," but didn't yet love me, didn't realize how deeply he'd fall in love, I said: "What does that mean? That word?" He hesitated and looked at me with such interest. I guess it was time and he decided he had to say it. Typical story. Classic. But for me love's a strange word... A short word... Too small to contain everything that was going on in me, everything that I felt. Then he left. We'd meet again, of course, the next day, but even before the door closed I began to die, I began to die a physical death, my whole body ached. Love's not a glorious feeling, not at all glorious, or not only glorious... You find yourself in a different dimension... life is shrouded, veiled, you can't see anyone, can't throw yourself into anything, you're in a cocoon, a cocoon of insane suffering which grinds up everything that happened yesterday, the day before yesterday, that may happen tomorrow, everything that happened to him before you, without you. You stop caring about the world; all you do is this work, this work of love. I dreamed about how happy I'd be when it ended. How happy I'd be! At the same time, I was afraid it would end. You can't live at that temperature. Delirious. In a dream. I'd suffered before him, ranted and raved, been jealous, I'd had a lot of men, I'm no prude, but what he gave me, no one had... He was the only one... We were soul mates, each other's whole world. No one gave me that experience of self-sacrifice, I suppose... He didn't even give me a child... Even... A child? No, he didn't... And I'm a good mother... (*Searches for words*). Love throws you into the very depths of yourself, you dig and you dig, sometimes you like what you find, other times you're frightened. Love blinds you and makes a fool of you, but it also gives you greater knowledge. This woman said hello to him, and right away I knew she was his first love, they chatted about this and that, very social and what you'd expect. But I knew it... Knew she was the one... She didn't look at me, didn't even glance in my direction, there was no curious stare: who are you with, how are things? There wasn't anything except some sweet gestures. But I sensed something. They huddled together, together in the middle of a big crowd, a human torrent, as if there were a bridge between them. Like an animal I sensed something... Maybe because, before, when we happened to drive along that street, past those particular buildings, he always had this look on his face, this way of looking at those shabby, perfectly ordinary entrances... Something like that, that science can neither prove nor refute, that we can't understand, can't understand. (*Again searches for words*). I don't know... I don't know...

We were on the metro, we worked together, we taught at the same college and went home the same way. We were colleagues. We didn't know yet, I didn't know, but it had already begun... It had already begun... We were on the metro... And suddenly he said gaily:

"Are you seeing anyone?"

"Yes."

"Like him?"

"Not really."

"How about you?"

"Yes."

"Like her?"

"No, not really."

And that was all. We went into a store together, he pulled an antediluvian string bag — by then they seemed funny — out of his pocket and bought some macaroni, cheap sausage, sugar, and I don't know what else, a classic selection of Soviet products. Lump sugar... Cabbage pies in a greasy paper bag... (*Laughs*). I was married at the time, my husband was a big boss, we didn't live that way, I lived a completely different life. Once a week my husband brought home a special food package (*they were doled out at work*) of hard-to-come-by delicacies: smoked sturgeon, salmon, caviar... We had a car... "Help yourself, the pies are still hot," he ate them on the run. (*Laughs again*). I was a long time coming to him, it was a difficult journey... A difficult journey... His sheepskin coat had been clumsily patched up in back with the thread showing. "His wife must have died and now he's bringing up their child alone," I felt sorry for him. He was gloomy. Not good-looking. Always sucking heart pills. I felt sorry for him. "Oh, how Russia ruins you," a Russian woman I met on a train once confided. She lived in the West, had for a long time. "In Russia, women don't fall in love with beauty, it's not beauty they're looking for and not the body they love, it's the spirit. Suffering. That's ours." She sounded wistful...

We bumped into each other again on the metro. He was reading the paper. I didn't say anything.

"Do you have a secret?"

"Yes," the question so surprised me that I answered it seriously.

"Have you told anyone?"

I felt numb: My God, here we go... My God! That's how these things begin... It turned out he was married. Two children. And I was married...

"Tell me about yourself."

"No, you tell me about yourself. You seem to know everything about me already."

"No, I can't do that."

"Why?"

"Because first I'd have to fall out of love with you."

We were going somewhere in the car, I was driving and after that remark I swerved into the opposite lane. My mind was paralyzed by the thought: he loves me. People kept flashing their lights, I was coming right at them, head-on. Who knows where love comes from? Who sends it?

I was the one who suggested it:

"Let's play?"

"Play what?"

"That I'm driving along, see you hitchhiking, and stop."

So we started playing. We played and played, played all the way to my apartment, played in the elevator. In the hall. He even made fun of me: "Not much of a library. Schoolteacher level." But I was playing myself, a pretty woman, the wife of a big boss. A lioness. A flirt. I was playing... And at some point he said:

"Stop!"

"What's wrong?"

"Now I know what you're like with other people."

He couldn't leave his wife for six months. She wouldn't let him go. She swore at him. Pleaded with him. For six months. But I'd decided I had to leave my husband even if I wound up alone. I sat in the kitchen and sobbed. In the process of leaving I'd discovered that I lived with a very good person. He behaved wonderfully. Just wonderfully. I felt ashamed. For a long time he pretended not to notice anything, he acted as if nothing had happened, but at some point he couldn't stand it anymore and posed the question. I had to tell him. He was sorry he'd asked... He blurted it out but his eyes were pleading: "Don't answer! Don't answer!" I could see in them his horror at what he was about to hear. He began fussing with the kettle: "Let's have some tea." We sat down and we had a good talk. But I answered all his questions, I confessed. He said: "Even so don't go." I told him again... "Don't go." That night I packed my things... (*Through tears and laughter*). But there too... Now we were together... There too I sobbed every night in the kitchen for two weeks, until one morning I found a note: "If it's so hard, maybe you should go back." I dried my tears...

"I want to be a good wife. What would you like?"

"You know, no one has ever made me breakfast. I'd like you to call me to the breakfast table, that's all, I don't need anything else."

He got up every morning at six to prepare for his lectures. I felt downcast because I was a night person, I went to bed late and got up late. This was going to be hard, it was a hard clause. The next morning, I staggered into the kitchen, threw some curd cakes together, put them on the table, sat there for five minutes, and shuffled back to bed. I did that three times.

"Don't get up anymore."

"You don't like my breakfasts?"

"I see what a huge effort they are, don't get up anymore."

We had a child... I was forty-one, it was very difficult even physically, I realize now, though at the time I thought: Ah, it's nothing. But it wasn't nothing. Sleepless nights. Diapers. The baby got a staff infection. Which meant twice as many diapers and washing them a special way. I felt dizzy... There weren't any pampers yet... Just diapers and more diapers... I washed them, rinsed them, dried them... Then one day I went completely to pieces: the diapers in the stove had burned up, the washing machine had overflowed and the bathroom was ankle-deep in water. I'd flooded it. The baby was screaming and I was mopping up the water with a rag. It

was winter. I sat down on the edge of the bath and burst into tears. I sat there and cried. Then he walked in... He looked at me in this cold way, like a stranger... I thought he'd come rushing in to help, I thought he'd feel sorry for me. I was going out of my mind. But he just said: "How quickly you 'cracked.'" And turned around and walked out. It was like a slap in the face. I didn't even say anything back, I was so undone. Very hard... I was a long time coming to him, it was a difficult journey...

Later I understood... I understood him... He lived with his mother, who had spent ten years in the camps and never once cried and always sent jolly, humorous letters home. The letters still exist. In one she wrote: "Yesterday a very amusing thing happened. I had gone to see a flock of sheep during a blizzard. [A livestock specialist by profession, she was allowed out unescorted to treat sheep.] When I got back the guard dogs didn't recognize me — they could barely see me — so they attacked and we had a very funny tussle." She went on to describe how they'd rolled over the steppe gnawing each other. And ended: "But now I'm fine, I'm in the hospital, they have clean sheets here." They'd torn her flesh... Those guard dogs... He grew up among women like that... And here I was wailing because of a broken washing machine... His mother's friends had all come back from there. One woman had been so badly tortured she had a broken vertebra, but she always looked elegant and erect in her corset. Another woman... They'd taken her naked to be interrogated. Her interrogator had sensed her weak spot, he knew that by doing that he might break her. Her hair was gold, she was little, fragile. "They took you there naked?" "Yes, but that wasn't the funny part." She had been sentenced not for political crimes, but as a socially dangerous element (*SDE*). As a prostitute. In a dark alley, as that heavenly creature was proceeding between two armed escorts, one of them, a backwoods boy, whispered: "You really an SDE?" "That's what they say." "Can't be." And he looked at her with rapture. It was a famous camp — the Aktiubinsk Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland — a camp of beautiful women... They had lost everything in this life: husbands, relatives, their children were dying of hunger in orphanages. That word — "cracked" — came from there. They arrested his mother and he was left with his grandmother. His grandmother "cracked." She beat him till he was black-and-blue, screamed at him. Her son had been arrested, her daughter and her daughter's husband. She had lost face. In his diary, he wrote: "Mama, a-a-a!"

His mother... She'd come to see us at the dacha, this was many years after the camps... She had her own room at the dacha. It was a big house. And I decided to clean it. I went in — there weren't any things lying about anywhere — and began to sweep. Under the couch I found a small bundle. Just then she appeared:

"My little knickknacks," that's what she always said: not my dresses or my shoes or my things, but my little knickknacks.

"Under the 'bed boards'?"

"I just can't get used to it."

And what do you think she did with her miserable little bundle? Did she unpack it? Hang it up somewhere? You'll never guess... She stuffed it under the mattress...

You could listen to her forever... I was such a long time coming to him...

Prison. Night. A suffocating cell. The door opens and in walks a woman wearing a fur coat and wafting French perfume. I can't remember her name now, but she was a famous actress, she'd been arrested right after a concert. They all surrounded her and began stroking her fur coat. Smelling it. It smelled of freedom and their former female life. They were all beautiful women... Commissars always married beautiful women, with long legs and good educations, preferably from the formerly privileged classes, the ones who were left, who'd escaped notice. In Persian thread stockings. It was Nabokov who noted that the scratches life leaves on women heal, whereas men are like glass.

How much I remember, how much it turns out I remember... I was such a long time coming to him...

Nighttime... In the barracks... A young girl with long wavy hair... From an old noble family... She would sit by the hour brushing her hair and remembering her mother. One morning they woke up and she was bald. She'd pulled out all her hair, no one had a knife, of course, or scissors, she'd used her hands. They thought she'd gone crazy. What have you done to yourself? They were trying to recruit her, she said, they'd promised to let her go free on condition she become an informer. The barracks wept, but she was smiling: "I was afraid I'd falter and they'd let me go, but now there's nothing they can do, I'm bald. That's it, I'm here to stay."

He grew up among women like that... And I was supposed to become like them... Like his mother... And I did...

VOICE TWO

Who can explain fate? No one. People are mostly unhappy no matter how much they want to be happy. It's a difficult question... I can't learn anything from other people; I can only dig around in myself. Life isn't very beautiful; it's we who make it that way in our minds. Maybe that's it, um-hum... I want to find a book about love that describes someone like me, a woman like me, not the usual heroes and princesses. I'm surrounded by ordinary life. Dislike is everywhere, all over the place: dislike for one's husband or wife, dislike for one's work, dislike for one's family. It's good I like to fantasize... My fantasies are everything to me... Tell me about a woman like me: an eight-hour workday, small apartment, small salary and vacation once a year. And I used to be very beautiful... Very beautiful when I was young...

What's my life like? I get up at six and make breakfast. Then I take the kids to kindergarten. Drop them off and go to work. It takes me an hour (*with two changes*). By nine I'm at work. In my office. Forms, forms, forms... Money for goods, goods for money... I'm an economist at a large factory. After work I shop for food. First one store, then another... Loaded down I run for the bus. It's the end of the workday. Rush hour. People are angry, tense. I pick the kids up from kindergarten. Get home and figure dinner out. I'm an appliance, a machine, not a woman. After dinner my husband reads the paper, the kids watch T.V., I wash the dishes, do the laundry, iron. Until midnight. Then I go to bed and set the alarm for six again... First I took the kids to kindergarten, then they walked to school, now they're in college. I had a first husband, now I have a second, but I still get up at six, still rush back and forth to work and from one

chore to the next: cooking, vacuuming, shopping, washing, mending. Maybe that's it... The hardest thing to understand is our life. The hardest thing... The constant whirl... Round and round... Where's the joy? (*Smiles for the first time*). Here's an example... My younger son was five, wait, let me think, no, that's right, he was five. I was doing something in the kitchen, I heard him snuffling behind me. I didn't turn round, I let him sneak up on me. He pulled a stool over, climbed up onto it and hugged me from behind, around the shoulders. He hugged me hard. And I felt such a masculine tenderness...

I'm surprised... I'm astonished... More than anything I'm astonished by how short life is. People say: "When I was young", but I was young only recently, I was still young yesterday. For some reason it took me a long time to get pregnant the second time. The first time it was a snap. But the second time, I just couldn't. For three years. One day I went into a church. I stood by the Virgin and it was as if she spoke to me:

"What do you want?"

"A son."

Maybe that's it... (*Musing*). No matter how far we are from the stars... No matter... They're there, watching us, looking after us, I went to bed again that night and thought, I can't remember what I thought. I'll be honest: I've always wanted to write letters to people, or rather to a certain person, I've always dreamed of meeting a person like that, even if we couldn't live together, I could write to him. Sometimes he would answer. Fantasies... Fantasies are everything... I'm sorry, I suppose, sorry that we're all lonely. (*Pauses*). Although no, I realize now... Women are never lonely, men are lonely. I feel sorry for them. Always. Even though they've let me down and haven't lived up to my hopes, I still feel sorry for them. I don't love them so much as I feel sorry for them. That's the main thing, the biggest confession I have to make. About my life. And actually, if I think about it, I've never known where my life is, unless it's with the children. Which is why I just cover my face with my hands and forge ahead...

My father was in the military. A veterinary doctor. We moved all over the Urals with him. Our gypsy life drove my mother to tears, as soon as we'd gotten used to one place, we'd be sent to another. When Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago first came out here, everyone was talking about it. I bought a copy and gave it to my brother. A few days later he asked me:

"Have you read it?"

"Not yet."

"Read it. It's about everything you and I saw as children."

I began reading... The first things to enter my mind were not pictures, but sounds. And the barking of dogs... Some kind of weeping... not human weeping, but the weeping of a violin... My brother and I, we'd run out of the house, sit on a tree stump and listen. We lived on a hill. Surrounded by the taiga. In a military settlement: a few houses for officers, a commissary in the center, and soldiers' barracks. Down below was a prison compound. A camp. In the evening someone there played the violin. Papa said: "A music professor from Moscow." The first real music of my life. We didn't have a radio, or a gramophone and records, I'd never

heard music like that before. As if someone were playing not down below, but up above... In the sky... And the barking of dogs... The camp was guarded by fierce Alsatians. And there were watchtowers...

We had a good view from up above, it was interesting.

"Look what a big bird house," my brother pointed.

"Where?"

"Over there. A man's sitting in it with a rifle."

Mama found us and led us away...

Papa treated sick horses. The winters in the Urals were bitterly cold. Men streamed into the taiga. In endless columns... gray... black... They were going to work. The work was backbreaking. In the taiga they made trestles out of logs, then pushed timber-loaded trolleys on metal wheels along that wooden road to the main road. There the horses helped, they pulled the draughts to the station stop. Papa always said: "I'm sorry for the horses. Car engines will stall in the cold, but these are animals." Men in the columns collapsed. The Alsatians got them up, forced them to stand up... Black Alsatians, black men.... Some of them would strip naked, their bodies exuding steam... That was how they protested when they no longer had the strength to work... Or else they wanted to die without anything on... without those black clothes... I don't know... And I still don't understand... One man put his hand down on a stump... And chopped it off... They picked up the hand, tied it to his back and made him walk the whole way to the hospital. Six miles from our settlement... Papa told us about it...

Once we saw an Alsatian tearing a man to pieces... A man who'd collapsed... "Wolf! Wolf!" I screamed. "People, help! Help!!"

Mama found us and led us away...

When Stalin died, everyone was afraid. A neighbor came and told Mama. Mama began to cry. But one officer... he was so happy he started dancing... He laughed and danced by the commissary... They locked him up in the guardhouse... (*Pauses*). I was a little girl... but I remember this clearly... Two men walked out of the compound carrying something. One was young, the other old. They stopped. My brother and I were playing nearby and I had two lumps of sugar in my pocket. I jumped up and ran to them. I gave them to the young man. He smiled. The old man began to cry.

Mama found us and led us away...

Maybe that's it, um-hum... From then on... from then on whenever I saw a lot of men, at a train station or a stadium, I always thought of that... Even now... I think of that... Decades later... (*Happy or sad, you can't tell*). I didn't pick a very good husband either. I didn't fall in love with him, I felt sorry for him... We met at a dance; he was five years older. I'd just started university, he'd already finished. He would walk me home and then stand around, he wouldn't go away. I'd look out the window and he'd be standing there in the dark, when I turned out the light he'd still be there. He froze his ears off that winter. I wasn't planning to marry anyone yet, certainly not him, but he said: "Without you I'll become a drunk. I'll fall apart." And,

actually, as soon as we became friends he stopped drinking, stopped smoking. His sisters — there were four of them, he was the only boy in the family — couldn't get over it: "He loves you, he's become a different person. Completely changed." I thought so, too. That spring, on my birthday, he arrived with two buckets of flowers, he'd carried them around the city that way: a bucket of bird cherry in one hand, a bucket of lilacs in the other. "You're crazy!" I couldn't stop laughing. "Marry me. I'll fall apart without you." Mama tried to talk me out of it: "That's how he is now, but one day it'll start all over again. He'll go back to drinking. And you'll feel sorry for him." My mother knew me through and through. But we got married... Maybe that's it, um-hum... I was fond of him, cooked him delicious meals. The house was always neat. I baked the pies he liked. I thought: that's what love is. A clean house and hot pies. I wanted a daughter first... The doctors made me happy: "You're going to have a girl." I moved into my belly... (*Laughs*). My soul moved into my belly. Mama's advice: "When you've had your baby, ask them to bring it to you right away and make sure you kiss it. You may not want to, but you must. If you kiss it, you'll love it." They brought me my daughter and I kissed her on the cheek. One child... Then another... A boy... My heart was full... I thought: and this is love... But he began to drink. A lot. Life was hard enough and now he wasn't bringing any money home. We lived in Perm, a big industrial city. When we were first sent there after university, it was considered well supplied, but gradually everything disappeared. Food, things. You'd walk into a store and there wouldn't even be any cans, no canned vegetables, no canned fish, nothing but three-quart jars of birch juice. As soon as any meat turned up, there was a huge line, if you started to complain — that you'd been given a bad piece or that the meat was old and refrozen — you'd be kicked out of the line. Take it, or get out of here! Everyone was angry. I guess I'm strong... A good friend of mine couldn't take it: "Life is hopeless. My husband drinks." I remember the moment... I'm strong... He got down on his knees: "I'll fall apart without you." I didn't believe him... not anymore. I decided to get divorced... He didn't fall apart, he found another woman who took him as he was. Here any man is in demand... Like after the war... Still... But two years after we'd divorced we were still living together in the same apartment, two small rooms — we couldn't swap them for anything. On days off he'd buy himself a carpetbag full of wine, cheap apple wine, and stretch out on the couch. Come evening I couldn't help saying: "Go eat something. You'll die of hunger." I felt sorry for him... That was my whole first marriage... My whole love... (*Laughs*).

I was left with two children: a daughter in first grade and a son in kindergarten. Somehow I didn't complain, I was used to it. Whether or not I had a man in my life, the children were always my responsibility. Every year I took them to the sea, to Sochi. I never bought myself new clothes, I economized wherever I could, I wanted my children to grow up healthy. I scrimped all year to pay for our vacation. If I took them to the sea, they didn't get sick, if I didn't, they'd be home with colds all winter. And that was that. I met my second husband in Sochi; we're still together. Whether it's love or not is hard to say... I know that the woman has to feel sorry for the man... Or maybe it's just the men I meet? (*Laughs*). The only strong men I see are in movies... On posters... In the Marlboro ads on TV... (*Laughs*).

We were lying on the beach. I felt wonderful: the sea, the sun. The children were in heaven. Bronzed, beautiful, my son looked like a little black boy, that's the kind of skin he has, it loves the sun. One day, a second day... A week... Some guy was following us around, if we went on an excursion, he'd go too, if we went into the restaurant, he'd sit opposite us. Every morning we'd look for a new place to try to lose him, but he'd pick us out of the crowd. He always found us. Maybe that's it, um-hum... How can you escape fate? You can't... My son cut his foot on a

sharp stone and we stayed home for a few days, didn't go to the beach. We read stories. One evening the landlady of the apartment where we were staying called to me: "Come quick!" I went to the door and there he was.

"Good evening! I found you!!"

"What of it?"

"I was afraid you'd gone away. And I don't have your address.'

"What do you need my address for?"

"I'm going to write you letters..."

"..."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm reading the children a story."

"May I listen?"

"..."

No one ever courted me the way he did. Like in an American movie. He took me to the most expensive restaurant. We danced a lot. It was raining. We were the only ones there. We danced by ourselves: "See, I reserved the whole restaurant for you." No one ever kissed my hands the way he did, every finger. Over and over again. He even kissed my footprints by the sea... In the sand... The first night we talked until morning... His young wife had died of cancer two years after they were married. His father, too, was in the military and had always been working. His mother raised him. His mother had wanted a daughter and brought him up like one, he was her only child. He played with dolls until he was ten and he still likes to buy them as presents. But to look at him, he was so manly, so strong. And dashing. My soul began to sing, it never had before, though my soul is easily stirred. Just touch it! Touch it and it starts to ring and sing. But at the end of the vacation I came to my senses: "I have two children. No! No!" And that's how we left it... I went to Perm, he went to Chita. We were hundreds of miles apart. I thought I'd never see him again. It had been a wonderful dream... And now I'd woken up... And didn't remember the dream... I remembered something colorful, sunny, nothing real... Just a dream...

Six months went by... He called me every day... Courted me and courted me! Every day: "I love you." And I got used to it... I would just be thinking of him and the phone would ring. He also wrote to me. Every day. I have a suitcase full of his letters. Then he came to visit... I went to meet him... I forgot my gloves in the taxi. It was chilly out. October. He got off the train... Smiling for all he was worth... He took my hands and started warming them... Kissing them... That night he confessed: "I saw your hands and I was stunned. Everything inside me stopped." We passed a flower shop and he bought me a bouquet of lilies. By the time we got home it was lunchtime. We sat down to eat. We laughed. Talked about last summer. Suddenly he stood up: "I feel so well here. So comfortable." And headed for the door... As if someone were calling him... Then something absolutely incredible happened... He began to fall... Arms

flailing in all directions... For a second I thought: what a joker, now he'll try to pull something! But he was already on the floor. "What happened? What's wrong with you?" "With me?" He only half heard me. Then he lost consciousness altogether... Now I was frightened: I didn't have a phone then. By the time I got down from the ninth floor, by the time I found a pay phone... A man I barely know comes to see me, and dies... Dies in my arms... I didn't know where to run? What to do? I shook him by the shoulders and screamed:

"Wake up! Wake up!"

"What's the matter?" he opened his eyes.

"Were you joking?"

"I don't remember anything. I only remember coming here..." He got up and sat down on the couch.

"What's wrong with you?"

"That's it. I'm home."

He had lived alone for seven years. He was tired of loneliness. Of longing. Again we talked all night. Until dawn.

"What was that all about?" I asked him in the morning.

"I realized that I'd finally found you. And my heart stopped."

At first I was very afraid of hurting him, he's so... hmm... tender... so vulnerable... The first year he was always giving me flowers, even if it was just one. He confided in me: "I don't think I loved my wife this much. She was the first woman in my life. But this is real love." Every day some new thoughts... New words... "Now I understand why some people kill themselves because of love. Hang themselves, shoot themselves or find some other way. I didn't understand before." Maybe that's it, um-hum... You can't remember everything... Just the bits that flash through your mind... As if you were flying along on an express train and could't distinguish anything out the window, except sometimes, like a child: "Mama, there's a car... there's a cow... there's a house..." He loves me, I believe him... We've lived together seven years. Do I love him? Let me think... Sometimes I wonder... I don't know... I don't want to admit to myself that I'm used to him, that I feel sorry for him, but don't love him. I'm spinning the wheel of life... There should be a man in the house... That's life's law, nature's law... I'm spinning that wheel... I get up every morning at six — and stand over the stove. I go to work — everything's under control. I come home — and work one more shift. He loves me, I believe him... (*Laughs*). He still courts me... He is so touching sometimes... But he's never hammered a single nail, he doesn't know how, if the iron burns out, I'm the one who fixes it. (*Laughs*). Yesterday I repaired the telephone. My sister has a PhD, she's a feminist: "You have a slave's psychology." Yes, at home I'm a slave. Whatever my husband wants, I do it; whatever my son wants, I do it. My daughter... But at work I can stand up for myself; at work, men are afraid of me. I'll break their back. What can I do? I've grown a shell. Claws. I have a family to take care of. A home. But at home I'm a slave. That's right! I admit it. I'm an actress. Without that my house would collapse of its own weight. Maybe that's it, um-hum... I have to manage

to act like a man in the outside world and like a woman at home. (*Laughs*). What can I do? My husband isn't a fighter. I've made my peace with that; it's not in his nature to fight. For him, life is a book. Dreams. He loves to philosophize. He was better off in Soviet times, when everything was equal and everyone the same. People didn't stick their necks out. They read a lot of books and sat around each other's kitchen tables discussing world problems. They collected stamps. But now everything's different; every day is a battle. You need to survive. To go on behaving the way we did before would, I think, be odd, absurd and dishonest. We're proud but poor. Our vacuum cleaner is twenty years old, barely turns over, the refrigerator is thirty years old. But I value my husband: he's an honest man, a good man, not an operator, not a dodger. I have a habit of taking the weak person under my wing. Sometimes when he's sad I ask him: "What are you thinking about?" "About death. Some day we'll be gone." It's typical of a man to think about death. I think about how to economize so we can buy a new car, remodel our little dacha. Where can I earn some extra money? How can I save it? My neighbor's husband, like mine, is a teacher. Both men teach history and are paid practically nothing. Well, at night he paints apartments and hangs wallpaper, before that he sold things at an open-air market. But my husband? Never... He couldn't bear to do that. He'd be ashamed. Besides he doesn't know how. He's taken a back seat. I'm the one who keeps our house together. I've made my peace with that because I feel sorry for him... And he can be so touching... So tender...

Maybe that's love? Also love... (*Pauses*). I've gone over everything I've said in my mind... But to be completely... and totally honest... I'm still waiting for something... What am I waiting for?

VOICE THREE

He's walking along and... Sometimes, when I turn round, he's floating above the grass, his feet not touching the ground. That's the only way I see him in my dreams... I, of course... Talking about it has the same effect on me... (*Falls silent. Then fast and full of joy*). It's all sounds, sounds... But the music is inside me, I put that record on and it all comes back again. All I have to do is close my eyes... I used to be afraid of death, until I realized that nothing disappears, nothing turns to dust, everything remains. Everything that ever happened to us. You can't begin anything again. From the beginning. Sometimes I think: you don't write symphonies, don't paint pictures, but that doesn't mean they don't exist, there's so much we can't even guess at, and that leaves us hope. My God, how lucky I am to have this. I revel in my thoughts, revel in my memories, revel in myself now that I've understood. It's an androgynous existence, how could I want another man? I can't get any higher. I get as far as myself, try to catch those bits and pieces... I'm in despair sometimes, but never for long. I go on and on. The way is there and I'm in no rush...

My first husband... That was a wonderful episode. He courted me for two years, then we married and lived together for another two years. I badly wanted to marry him because I needed all of him, I didn't want him to go anywhere. I remember it as a sickness... I don't even know why I so needed all of him. Why I couldn't bear to be separated from him, why I had to see him all the time and pick fights, and fuck, fuck, fuck, endlessly. He was the first man in my

life. The first time was really so... um... just interesting: I didn't know what was going on. The next time, too... and, basically... a sort of technique... And it went on like that for six months... For him, though, really, it didn't have to be me, it could just as well have been someone else. But for some reason we got married... I was twenty-two. We were students at the same music college; we did everything together. I can't remember now how it happened, the moment escapes me, but I fell in love with the male body when it belonged to me... At that point I didn't even know... I sensed it as more significant than just one man, to me it was something cosmic... You break loose from the earth and spin away somewhere... Try to spin away... (*Smiles suddenly*). It was a wonderful episode. It could have gone on forever or been over in half an hour. So then... I left him. Left him of my own accord. He begged me to stay. For some reason I'd decided to leave. I was so tired of him... God, was I tired of him... I was already pregnant, already showing... What did I need him for? We'd fuck, then fight, then I'd cry, then we'd fuck again. If we'd had a child... I probably should have waited but I didn't know how to then. How to wait. To have patience. I walked out, closed the door behind me and suddenly felt so glad to be gone. Gone for good. I went to my mother's, she lived here, in Moscow. He came after me that night and was completely bewildered: I was pregnant, but always dissatisfied somehow, as if something were missing. But what? I turned the page... I was very happy to have had him, and very happy not to have him anymore. My life has always been a treasure trove. Of beginnings and endings, beginnings and endings... I turned the page... (*Again smiles*).

Oh, giving birth to Anka was so beautiful, I liked it so much. First, my water broke: I'd been walking in the woods, for miles, and at some point, at mile X, my water broke. I didn't know what to do — did that mean I should go to the hospital right away? I waited till evening. It was bitterly cold. But I decided to go anyway. The doctor looked at me: "You'll be in labor for two days." I called my mother: "Bring me some chocolate. I'll be here for a while." Before morning rounds, the nurse said: "Hey, the head is already sticking out. Come with me." I could barely walk... It was as if someone had stuck a soccer ball up there... "Quick! Quick!" the nurse screamed. "Call the doctor." My stomach was so huge, it blocked everything, but then I saw the baby, it was coming out, that's when I began to shriek... Something started gurgling, quacking... The doctor said: "Here it comes. It's almost out," and showed it to me: "It's a girl." They weighed her: nearly nine pounds. "Listen, not one rip or tear. She took pity on you." Oh, when they brought her to me the next day... Her eyes, the irises were like saucers, dark, floating, that was all I saw...

So then... It was a whole new life. I liked the way I'd begun to look. It's just that... I was suddenly so much prettier... Anka fell right into place, I loved her very much, but somehow she wasn't absolutely connected with men in my mind. Someone had made her... Conceived her... But no! She'd come from the sky... She was always independent. When she began to talk, people would ask:

"Anechka, don't you have a papa?"

"No, I have a granny instead."

"Don't you have a dog?'

"No, I have a hamster instead."

We were like that, she and I... All my life I was afraid of not being me. Even at the dentist's, I'd ask them not to give me any painkiller. My feelings were my feelings, good or bad: Don't disconnect me from myself. We liked each other, Anka and I. And then we met him... Gleb...

If he hadn't been who he was, I would never have married again. I had everything: a child, work, freedom. Then he appeared... absurd, nearly blind, short of breath... To let a person with such a heavy burden — twelve years in Stalin's camps, he was just a boy, sixteen, when they took him — into our world... With the burden of that knowledge... of the difference... Our life together wasn't what I'd call freedom. What was it? Why? Am I saying that I only felt sorry for him? No. It was also love. That's exactly what it was. (*More to herself than to me*). He's been dead seven years... And I'm even sorry that he never knew me the way I am now. Now I understand him more, I'm finally old enough for him, but he isn't here. So then... Even what I'm telling you... I'm again afraid... I'm afraid that I won't be me... It's terrifying sometimes... Like in the sea... In the sea I used to love to swim way far out until one time I became frightened — I'm alone, the water's deep, and I don't know what's down there...

(*We drink some tea, talk about other things. Then, just as suddenly as they stopped, the memories start again.*)

Oh, those seaside romances... Short and sweet. A small model of life. You can begin them beautifully, and end them beautifully, the way you'd like to in real life but never manage to. That's why people like to go away. So then... I had two braids and a blue polka dot dress I'd bought at Children's World the day before I left. The sea... I swam way far out, more than anything on earth I love to swim. Every morning I did exercises under a white acacia... A man came walking along, just a man, very ordinary-looking, not young. He saw me and for some reason was glad. He stood there and stared.

"Would you like me to read you some poetry tonight?"

"Maybe, but now I'm going to swim way far out."

"I'll be waiting for you."

He was a bad reader of poetry; he kept adjusting his glasses. But he was touching... I understood... I understood what he was feeling... The gestures, the glasses, it was all nervousness. But I have absolutely no memory of what he read, or why it must have meant so much. Feelings are separate beings... Suffering, love, tenderness... They live unto themselves, we feel them, but don't see them. You suddenly become a part of someone else's life, without even realizing it. Everything happens both with you and without you... At the same time... "I've been waiting for you," he said when he saw me next morning. He said it in such a way that I believed him, even though I wasn't at all ready. Just the opposite. But something was changing around me, I didn't know what or how. I felt calm because of what was about to happen to me, it wasn't yet love, but I just sensed... I had this feeling... That I'd suddenly been given a whole lot of something. One person had heard another. Had gotten through. I swam way far out... I swam back. He was waiting for me. Again he said: "We'll be fine together." And for some reason I again believed him... So then... He met me by the sea every day... Once we were drinking champagne: "It's pink champagne, but at the regular-champagne price." I liked that phrase. (*Laughs*). Another time he was frying some eggs: "It's a curious business about me and these eggs. I buy them by the dozen, fry them in pairs, and I always have one left

over." Sweet things like that...

People would look at us and ask: "Is he your grandfather? Is he your father?" I was wearing a very short skirt... I was twenty-eight... It was only later he became handsome. With me. Why me? I was in despair at first. I must serve him. There's no other way. Or better not get involved. A Russian woman is ready to suffer: what else can she do? We're used to our men, ungainly, unfortunate, my grandmother married a man like that, and so did my mother. We don't expect anything else, and that gets passed down. We're all ferocious dreamers...

"I was thinking of you."

"What were you thinking?"

"That I'd like us to go for a walk somewhere. Way far away. Holding hands. I don't need anything except to feel you next to me. I feel such tenderness for you — I just want to look at you and walk beside you."

We spent many happy hours together; we acted like complete children. Good people are always children. Helpless. You have to protect them.

"Maybe we could go away together to some island and lie on the sand."

That's my... How should it be? I don't know. With one person, it's one way. With another person, another way. But how should it be? Who can gauge? Where are the scales... That... All of Russian culture, everything we see and hear around us, is built on the fact that our best school is the school of misfortune, we grew up with it. So then... But we want good fortune... I would wake up in the night and think: What am I doing? So then... I couldn't stop worrying, and because of this tension I... "The back of your head is always tense," he noticed. But how could I get it out of my mind... What am I doing? Where am I falling? There's an abyss...

He scared me right off the bat... The breadbox... As soon as he saw it... He would begin methodically eating up all the bread. Any amount. Bread must not be left. It was your ration. He would eat and eat; however much there was, he would always finish it. It took me a while to understand why...

They tortured him with a burning light... He was only a boy, for heaven's sake... Sixteen years old... They didn't let him sleep for days on end. Decades later he still couldn't bear bright light, even the bright summer sun. What I loved was the bright morning air, when the clouds were even higher, floating way high above you. But he could end up with a temperature... From the light...

In school they beat him and wrote on his back in chalk: "Son of an enemy of the people". The school director made them do it... Our fears as children... They stick out in us... Come to the surface... They stay with you for good. Forever. I heard those fears in him...

Where am I going? Russian women love to adopt unhappy souls. My grandmother loved one and her parents married her off to another. I can't tell you how much she disliked him, how much she didn't want to marry him. My God! She decided that at the wedding, when the priest turned to her and asked if she were going of her own free will, she would say, 'No'. But the priest was drunk and, instead of asking the question as he was supposed to, he said: "You be

good to him, he froze his feet off in the war." So then she had to marry him. That's how Granny wound up with our grandfather — whom she never loved — for life. What a perfect refrain for our entire life: "You be good to him, he froze his feet off in the war." My mother's husband was in the next war, he returned destroyed, spent. To live with a person like that, with what he brought back with him, was a lot of work, and it fell on a woman's shoulders. No one! No one has written anything, I've never read anything about how hard it was to live with the victors. With the men who returned from the war. Gleb put it exactly in one of his journals: in camp he realized that every other person in Russia had been in prison — for an arrested father, for a few ears of wheat picked up on a collective farm field, for being late to work (*ten minutes*), for not informing, for an anecdote... Our men are martyrs, they've all suffered some trauma — either in the war or in camp. For many, the war ended with camp, whole echelons walked straight from the front to Siberia. Right after Victory Day. Echelons of victors. That's the way it is with us: we're always fighting someone. And the woman is always ministering... She thinks of the man as part hero and part child. She is his rescuer. To this day... The Soviet empire fell... Now we have victims of the collapse... Look at how many people have wound up on the sidelines, have been thrown off history's hurtling steam engine — the army has been cut, factories have been shut down... Engineers and doctors are selling stockings at open-air markets... Bananas... I love Dostoevsky, but he is all about prison life. The subject of the war is eternal in Russia, we simply cannot let it go... So then... (*Stops*). Let's take a short rest... I'll put the kettle back on... And then we can continue... I have to go the whole way from beginning to end. With my little cup of experience...

(*Half an hour later our conversation resumes*).

A year went by or maybe a little more... He was supposed to come and meet my family. I warned him that while my mother was easy to get along with, my daughter wasn't exactly... she was sort of... I couldn't guarantee how she'd behave with him. Oh, my Anka. (*Laughs out loud*). She put everything to her ear: toys, stones, spoons... Most children put things in their mouth, she put them to her ear — to hear the sound they made. I began teaching her music fairly early, but what a strange child, as soon as I put a record on, she would turn round and walk out. She didn't like anyone else's music, music by some silly composer: she was only interested in what sounded inside her. So then, Gleb arrived, very embarrassed, he'd had his hair cut too short, he didn't look particularly well. And he had some records with him. He started telling us something, about how he'd been walking along and happened to buy these records. Now Anka has a good ear... she doesn't hear words, she hears the intonations... She immediately took the records: "What brutiful records." That's how their love, too, began. Sometime later she disconcerted me: "How can I keep from calling him Papa?" He didn't try to please her, he was just interested. They loved each other. I was even jealous sometimes, it seemed to me they loved each other more than they loved me. Both of them. Both Gleb and Anka. I don't think that's the way it was really. I wasn't hurt, I had a different role... He would ask her: "Anka, do you still stutter?" "Not as well as I used to." It was never dull with the two of them. So: "How can I keep from calling him Papa?" We were sitting in the park, Gleb had gone off to get cigarettes. When he came back: "What are you two girls talking about?" I winked at Anka — don't tell him, it was silly anyway. She said: "Then you tell." Well what could I do? I told him she was afraid she might call him Papa by mistake. Gleb said: "It's not a simple matter, of course, but if you really want to, call me Papa." "Only you watch out," my little miracle said in earnest, "I have one other papa, but I don't like him, and Mama doesn't love him." That's how it's always been with Anka and me. We burn bridges. On the way home

Gleb was already Papa. Anka ran ahead and called: "Papa! Papa!" The next day in kindergarten she announced: "Papa's teaching me to read." "Who's your Papa?" "His name is Gleb." The day after that her best friend had this news from home: "Anka, you're lying, you don't have a papa. He's not your real papa." "No, the other one wasn't my real papa, this one is my real papa." There's no use arguing with Anka. Gleb became "Papa", but what about me? I still wasn't his wife...

I had vacation. I went away again. Gleb ran down the platform, waving goodbye. But I began an affair almost immediately, on the train. There were two young engineers from Kharkov, also on their way to Sochi. My God! I was so young. The sea. The sun. We swam, we kissed, we danced. It was simple and easy for me, because the world was simple, cha-cha-cha and spin your partner, I was in my element. They loved me, worshipped me, carried me up a mountain on their arms... Young muscles, young laughter. An all-night bonfire... Then I had a dream. It went like this: the ceiling opened... And I saw the sky... Gleb... He and I were walking somewhere, along the shore, not over sea-polished pebbles, but over horribly sharp stones, thin and sharp as nails. I had shoes on, but he was barefoot. "Barefoot," he explained, "you hear more." "You don't hear more, it hurts more. Let's switch." "What do you mean? Then I won't be able to fly away." Then he rose up into the air, folded his arms like a dead person, and was carried away. Even now, if I see him in a dream, he's always flying. Only his arms for some reason are folded, like a dead person's, they don't look at all like wings...

God, I must be crazy, I shouldn't be telling you all this... I mostly have the sense that I've been happy in this life. Even after Gleb died. I went to the cemetery, and I remember thinking... He's somewhere here... Suddenly I felt so happy I wanted to scream. God... (*To herself. Unintelligibly*). I must be crazy... With death you're left one on one. But he died many times over, he'd been rehearsing death since he was sixteen... "Tomorrow I'll be dust and you won't find me." We're getting to the most important part... So then... In love I slowly began to live, very slowly... In slow sips...

My vacation ended and I went home. One of the engineers saw me all the way back to Moscow. I promised to tell Gleb everything... I went to see him... A magazine was lying on the table, he'd drawn all over it, the wallpaper in his study was covered with scribbles, even the newspapers he was reading... Everywhere there were just three letters: s... i... o... Big, little, printed, script. Followed by three dots... I asked him: "What does that mean?" He translated: Seems it's over? Question marks, too, were everywhere... Like the clefs... In sheet music... Well, we decided to separate. Now we'd have to explain somehow to Anka. We went by to get her in the car, but before she could leave the house she always had to draw something! This time, though, she didn't have time. She sat in the car and sobbed. Gleb was used to her craziness; he considered it a talent. It was a real family scene: Anka crying, Gleb trying to explain something, and me in the middle... The way he kept looking at me... (*Falls silent*). I realized what a wildly lonely person he was. (*Falls silent*). Anka went on sobbing... A real family scene... Thank God, I didn't let him go... Thank God! We had to get married, but he was afraid. He'd already had two wives. Women betrayed him, were exhausted by him and you couldn't blame them... I didn't let him go... And I... He gave me a whole life...

He didn't like people to ask him questions... He hardly ever opened up, and if he did, then it was with a sort of bravado, so as to make the story funny and hide the starkness. That was his way. For instance, he never said "free", it was always "free-ish." "And now I'm free-ish." The

mood didn't often take him... But when it did, he told such delicious stories... I could just feel the pleasure he'd come away with: how he'd gotten hold of some pieces of a rubber tire and tied them to his felt boots, he and other inmates were being herded from one prison to another and he was so happy he had those tires. Once they came by half a sack of potatoes and then, while they were working outside the compound, someone gave them a big piece of meat. That night in the boiler room, they made soup: "It was so good, you have no idea! So delicious!" When Gleb was freed, he received compensation for his father. They said: "We owe you for the house, the furniture..." His father was a famous man... They gave him a large sum... He bought himself a new suit, new shirt, new shoes. He bought a camera, went to the restaurant in the National Hotel and ordered the best things on the menu: expensive fish, caviar, cognac, and coffee with cake. At the end, when he'd eaten his fill, he asked someone to take a picture of him at this, the happiest moment of his life. "I went back to the apartment where I was living and it dawned on me that I didn't feel happy. In that suit, with that camera... Why didn't I feel happy? Then I remembered the tires, the soup in the boiler room — that was happiness." We tried to understand... So then... Where does that happiness live? He wouldn't have given camp up for anything, wouldn't have traded it. From the age of sixteen until almost thirty, that was the only life he knew. When he tried to imagine his life without those years in camp, he became terrified. What would have happened then? Instead of camp? What wouldn't he have grasped? What wouldn't he have seen? Probably the very core that made him who he was. When I asked: "Who would you have been without camp?" he always said: "A fool driving around in a red racing car, the fanciest there was." Former inmates are rarely friends, something inhibits them. What? They can see the camps in each other's eyes, they're inhibited by the humiliations they suffered. Especially the men. Former inmates rarely came to see us, Gleb didn't seek them out...

They threw him in with common criminals... Just a boy... What happened to him there no one will ever know. A woman can talk about humiliations, a man can't. A woman finds it easier to talk about it because somewhere deep inside she's prepared for violence... That knowledge is in her... Even the sexual act... She begins life over again every month... Those cycles... Nature helps her...

Two third-degree dystrophies... He lay there on the bed boards covered with boils, drenched in pus... He should have died, but for some reason he didn't. When the guy lying next to him did die, Gleb turned the body over so that it faced the wall. And slept with it like that for three days. "That one alive?" "Alive." That made two rations of bread. All sense of reality disappeared... All sense of his material being... And death no longer seemed strange. It didn't frighten him. It was winter. Out the window he could see corpses, neatly stacked... Mostly male...

He returned home on an upper bunk. The train took a week. He didn't come down during the day, he went to the toilet at night. He was afraid. Other passengers would offer him food and tell him their troubles. They would get him talking and then they'd find out that he'd been in camp.

He was a wildly lonely person... Wildly... Lonely...

Now he announced to anyone who would listen: "I have a family." He was constantly surprised by normal family life, he was somehow very proud of it. Only fear... fear gnawed and

ate at him. He would wake up at night in a cold sweat: if he didn't finish his book, he wouldn't be able to support us, and I would leave him... First fear, then shame because of that fear. "Gleb, if you want me to become a ballet dancer, I will. I could do anything for you." In camp he'd survived, but in ordinary life... the traffic cop who stopped him could give him a heart attack. "How did you manage to stay alive?" "I was very much loved as a child." The amount of love we receive saves us, it's what allows us to endure. I was a nurse... I was a nanny... An actress... So as to keep him from seeing himself the way he was, to keep him from seeing his own fear, otherwise he couldn't have loved himself. To keep him from finding out that I knew... Love is an essential vitamin, without it a person can't live, his blood coagulates, his heart stops. Oh, what resources I found in myself... Life is like running the hundred-yard dash... (*Falls silent. Rocks ever so slightly in rhythm to her thoughts*). Do you know what he asked me before he died? His only request: "Write on my gravestone that I was a happy man. I managed to do so much: I survived, I loved, I wrote a book, I have a daughter. My God, what a happy man I am." If someone were to hear that or to read it... To look at him you would never have believed it... But Gleb was a happy man! He gave me so much... I changed... How tiny our life is... Eighty, a hundred, two hundred years would be too little for me. I see the look on my old mother's face in the garden, she doesn't want to part with all this. The way she looks at that garden! And in the evening... In the evening, how she peers into the darkness... Into nowhere... It's too bad, it's so too bad that he never knew me the way I am now... I understand him now... It's only now that I've come to understand him... So then... He was a little afraid of me, just a bit. He was afraid of my feminine essence, of a... Of a sort of vortex... He often said: "Remember that when I'm not feeling well, I want to be alone." But... I couldn't do that... I had to follow him around... (*Finishes her thought in silence*). You can't purify life before death, can't make it as pure as death, when a person becomes handsome and free, the way he really is. I suppose it's senseless to try and force one's way through to this essence in one's lifetime. To try and get closer to it.

When I learned he had cancer, I couldn't stop crying the whole night, and in the morning I rushed to the hospital. He was sitting on the windowsill, yellow and very happy. He was always happy when something in his life was about to change. First there was camp, then exile, then freedom, and now there would be something else... Death was just another change of scene...

"Are you afraid I'll die?"

"Yes."

"Well, first of all, I didn't promise you anything. And, second, it won't happen anytime soon."

"Really?"

As always, I believed him. I dried my tears and told myself that again I had to help him. I didn't cry anymore... I came to his room every morning, and our life began. Before we had lived at home, now we lived at the hospital. We spent six months in a cancer ward.

I can't remember... We talked so much, more than ever before, for whole days on end, but I remember only crumbs... Bits and pieces...

He knew who had informed on him. A boy who was in an after-school group with him at the

House of Young Pioneers. He wrote a letter. Either he wrote it himself, or they made him do it: Gleb had criticized comrade Stalin and defended his father, an enemy of the people. His interrogator showed him the letter... All his life Gleb was afraid... He was afraid that the informer would find out that he knew. He wanted to mention him in his book but then he heard that his wife had given birth to a retarded child, and he was afraid to — what if that was God's punishment. Former inmates have their own criteria... Their own attitudes... Gleb often ran into him on the street, he happened to live near us. They would say hello. Talk about politics, about the weather. After Gleb died, I told a mutual friend about his having informed on Gleb... She didn't believe me: "N.? That can't be, he always speaks so well of Gleb, about what old friends they were. He cried at the cemetery." I realized I shouldn't have... Shouldn't have... There's a line over which it's dangerous for a person to step. Forbidden. Everything that's been written about the camps has been written by victims. Their tormentors are silent. We don't know how to distinguish them from other people. So then... But Gleb didn't want to... He knew that for a person that knowledge was dangerous... For a person... For his soul...

He'd been used to dying since he was a boy... He wasn't afraid of a little thing like that... In camp, the criminals who headed up work brigades often sold other prisoners' bread rations, or lost them at cards; the ones left without any bread ate tar. Black tar. And died: the walls of their stomachs became stuck together. But Gleb just stopped eating, he only drank. One boy ran away... on purpose, so they'd shoot him... Over the snow, in the sun... They took aim... And shot... Merrily... As if they were out hunting... As if he were a duck... They shot him in the head, dragged him back to the compound with a rope and dumped him in front of the guard shack... Gleb hadn't had any fear in camp... But here he needed me...

"What's camp like?"

"It's a completely different life. And hard work."

I can hear... I can almost hear him saying that...

"Local elections in a nearby settlement. We were giving a concert at the polling station. I was the master of ceremonies. I stepped out on stage and said: Please give a warm welcome to our choir. Political prisoners, turncoats, prostitutes, and pickpockets all stood and sang a song about Stalin: 'And our song sails o'er the vast expanses to the peaks of the Kremlin'."

A nurse came in to give Gleb a shot: "Your behind is all red. There's no more room." "Of course my behind is red, don't I live in the Soviet Union?" We laughed a lot together, even at the end. Really a lot.

"Soviet Army Day. I'm on stage reading Mayakovsky's 'Poem about a Soviet Passport': 'Read this. Envy me. I am a citizen of the Soviet Union.' Instead of a passport I have piece of black cardboard. I hold it up... And the whole camp garrison envies me... 'I am a citizen of the Soviet Union.' The prostitutes, former Soviet prisoners of war, pickpockets and Socialist Revolutionaries all envy me..."

No one will ever know how it really was or what people like that come away with. He was a wildly lonely person... I loved him...

I looked round as I was going out the door and he waved. When I came back a few hours later,

he was delirious. He kept saying: "Wait a minute... wait a minute..." Then he stopped and just lay there unconscious. For three days. I got used to it. To his lying there and me living there. They put in an extra bed for me next to his. So then... The third day... By then they were having trouble giving him his intravenous shots... Blood clots... I had to tell the doctors to stop everything, he wouldn't feel any pain, wouldn't hear. And we were left completely alone... No monitors, no doctors, no more checks... I got into bed with him. It was cold. I burrowed under the blanket and fell asleep. When I woke up I didn't open my eyes: it seemed to me we were in our bed at home and the balcony door had blown open... Gleb wasn't awake yet... I still had my eyes closed... Then I opened them and it all came back to me... I started tossing... I got up and put my hands over his face: "A-a-ah..." He heard me. The death throes had begun... and I... sat there holding his hand so that I heard the last beat of his heart. I sat there for a long time afterwards... Then I called the nurse, and she helped me put his shirt on, it was blue, his favorite color. "May I sit here awhile longer?" "Yes, of course, you aren't scared?" I didn't want to give him to anyone. He was my child... What was there to be frightened of? By morning he was handsome... The fear had gone out of his face, and the tension. That was who he was! That was who he really was! I'd never known him that way. He wasn't that way with me. (*Cries. For the first time during our conversation*).

I always shone with his reflected light... Though I was capable of things myself, I could create... It was always, of course, work. Always work. Even in bed... For him to be able to... first him and then me. "You're strong, you're kind, you're the best. You're wonderful." I've never known a strong man, a man who didn't make me feel like a nursemaid. A mother. An angel of mercy. I've always been lonely... I won't hide it... I admit it... I've had relationships since Gleb... Right now I have a friend, but he's also all in knots... Unhappy... Insecure... That's our life... Strange, incomprehensible... We grew up in one country with the ideas of Marx and Lenin, and now we live in a completely different country — after Gorbachev. On top of more ruins. On top of more rubble. The old values are gone, the new values still unclear. Even Gleb was braver, after Magadan... After camp... He had self-respect: Well, I survived! I endured it! I know all about it! He was proud. But this man has nothing but fear. He's fifty years old and he has to start a new life. Everything from scratch. And my role is still the same... I minister... minister... Always the same role...

Yet I was happy with Gleb. Yes, it was hard work, but I'm happy, I'm proud that I was able to do that work. Most of the time I have that sense, that happiness. All I have to do is close my eyes...

First published in GLAS New Russian Writing.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/10/09/selected-writing-by-svetlana-alexievich-a50182