

Kolya

“I met Nikolai Subotin on the fifth of August at a resort on the Black Sea coast. I knew him for two days. On the seventh of August, at midday, Kolya killed himself. He jumped from the roof of a twelve-story hotel with his arms outstretched, and smashed head- and chest-first into the marble steps that ran from the first floor of the hotel out into the courtyard and went up to the second floor of the restaurant. The same steps where I had met Kolya two days before and where, the previous night, Kolya had introduced me to Sveta. According to witnesses, Kolya stood on the roof for several minutes, seemingly oblivious to the shouts of the people gathered in the hotel courtyard below. Then he shouted, ‘I’m through with it!’ and leaped off as if he was diving, and as he fell threw the air he called out . . .”

I’d kept that entry in my drawer for several years. I can’t even remember why I started writing about Kolya, nor when I wrote that passage. Nor can I remember whether or not I planned to carry on writing that entry at some point; I would probably never have gone back to it had I not received a letter from Murmansk a couple of days ago . . .

It was on the fifth of August that I arrived at the coastal town. I caught a taxi from the railway station and went straight to the resort. The driver asked me for seven rubles and told me if I rounded it up to ten he’d carry my bags to my room. I gave him eight rubles and carried the bags up myself. I had reserved the room from Tbilisi, but still had some trouble at reception: the hotel administrator tried to put me in a single room. I smiled as politely as I could and said, “My friend is arriving from Moscow tomorrow morning. And I can see you’ve got ‘room with twin beds’ written next to my name in the register.”

“Everyone says that. They get a twin and then nobody else shows up: no friend, no wife, no cousin. It’s only ever temporary wives here, sometimes several in one day.”

Still smiling, I answered, “As you’ll see for yourself tomorrow, my friend couldn’t really be anyone’s temporary wife, for the simple reason that he’s a man.”

“Well, if he really does come we’ll transfer you to a twin room tomorrow.”

“So you’re saying that what’s written in the register doesn’t matter?”

“That’s right.”

I sighed. “Okay, fine. But remember one thing: Georgian men never go on holiday alone.”

“As I said,” replied the woman, slightly nervously, “if your friend does arrive we’ll transfer you to another room. That’s the best I can do.”

How can I put it? I think that woman jinxed me—when I was coming back from the beach at midday she waved me over just as I was about to get into the elevator and said rather humbly, “Your friend’s named Dato, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“He phoned from Moscow ten minutes ago. I put him through to your room but you weren’t in. He spoke to me instead . . .”

My heart skipped a beat. “What did he say?”

“He said he can’t come just yet; apparently he’s got hepatitis. He said he was sorry, and that you’d still see loads of people you know and that he’ll be here in a week or so. He’ll ring you at four and try and catch you in your room. What a funny guy—kept me talking for ages . . .”

“Oh, he’s got a knack for that,” I smiled, and remembered that when I’d spoken to him from Tbilisi the day before he’d said he wasn’t feeling well.

“So, er, how old is he?” the woman asked, out of the blue. “Who?”

“Who? Dato.”

I looked her in the eye. Then I looked her up and down and said through clenched teeth, “About your son’s age? And anyway, people with hepatitis can’t have relations—of any kind—for several months.” I muttered under my breath, “That’s all you lot ever think about.”

“I’ll thank you to watch your language. I haven’t got a son.”

“That’s your problem,” I tossed back, and went back over to the elevator.

At four o’clock Dato rang. He was in a jovial mood. He told me that he’d been admitted to the hospital but that he hadn’t told his parents.

“They think I’m coming home tomorrow. Let them think that—I don’t want to worry them unnecessarily. If my dad phones tell him I’m there with you.”

Then he remembered the hotel administrator. “And what’s the story with her?” he laughed loudly. “I just flirted with her a bit because I was drunk and the next thing you know she’s practically jumping on a plane to Moscow. She gave me the number of a couple of friends of hers here. You should talk to her. I reckon you’d have her within ten minutes—I’d even put money on it.”

“I’ve already talked to her, for half an hour.” “And?”

“And nothing, we just argued.”

“You’re unbelievable. I’ve never understood how it is you lot always manage to fight with women. Vakho was here for two days, and in that time he managed to hit six women and swore at four of them. Then he swore at us too and buggered off to Tallinn to see his Kristina. He’s prob-ably swearing at her by now, even though he doesn’t know Estonian and she doesn’t know Russian . . . Of course, that’s probably how they’ve stayed together so long. So how old’s this administrator, anyway?”

I smiled bitterly. “What, have you two got the hots for each other? She asked me how old you were, too.”

“No, man! I’m just trying to work out how old her friends would be. About thirty-five to forty, would you say?” He was spot-on, but I lied shamelessly: “Davit, have you lost it? She’s fifty if she’s a day!”

“No kidding.”

“I’m telling you! Don’t believe me if you don’t want to.”

“Well, fuck it! She didn’t sound that old . . .”

Then he told me about the hepatitis. He said the doctors had told him it was a mild

form and that he'd be discharged in a week. He begged me to hang on until he could get there. We couldn't decide what to do.

"The place will be packed! Of course you'll see people you know!" He wasn't about to back down on the trip. "And there'll be loads of girls there too. Worse comes to worst, you can make nice with the administrator. I mean, you're not going to come back tomorrow, are you? There's nobody left in Tbilisi! I'm stuck in hospital all week—are you telling me you can't put up with a week by the sea? Have you lost your mind?"

I promised to stay for three days, then he would ring me on the seventh at six and we'd decide then what to do about the rest of the week.

"Look, joking aside," he eventually said to me, "buy the administrator some flowers from me, would you? Seriously."

"Yeah, whatever," I said, and hung up.

Then I went to the beach again. I swam for half an hour, then went up to my room, got changed and went to the bar on the second floor of the restaurant to have a few beers.

That was the night I met Kolya.

I came out of the bar and stood on the steps. I couldn't decide whether to go into town to see friends or leave it till the next day. I knew for a fact that Zaza and Tamuna were staying somewhere in the same resort, but I wasn't in the mood for traipsing around hotels. Anyway, I thought, I wasn't going to find them in their room during the evening, so I decided to go to the beach the next morning and find them down there. I leaned against the railings and lit a cigarette. Kolya was coming up the stairs. He stopped suddenly.

"Have you got a light?" He smiled.

I gave him a match and looked out to the sea. I assumed he'd light his cigarette, give me the matches back, and go on his way. "You're new, aren't you?" he smiled again. "I got here five days ago and by now I recognize nearly everyone in our hotel."

I nodded, took my matches, and put them back in my pocket.

He held out his right hand and said, still with the same smile on his lips, "Nikolai Subotin. I'm twenty-seven, I live in Murmansk, and I'm here for two weeks." Then, with more of a grimace, he added, "I've got previous convictions, for hooliganism. I was inside for two years. They let me out six months ago."

I shook his hand and told him my name.

"Oh, you're Georgian, are you? You don't look it, I thought you were one of us."

"No, I'm not one of you," I said. That comment irritated me.

"What does it matter, anyway? We're all human, aren't we?" He hadn't even noticed I was angry. "I like everyone, especially Georgians. Although your women aren't that great."

I felt the blood rush to my brain.

"Is that right? Well, you can just get lost!"

"Have I offended you? My apologies." He seemed genuinely upset. "I didn't think you'd be upset by that. It's just that I've never really seen a pretty Georgian woman . . ."

"And how many Georgian women have you seen, then?" I moved away from the railings, moved my feet apart slightly, and tensed my shoulders.

Just one more wrong word and I was ready to hit him. Physically, he looked much stronger than me. Anyway, he must have read my mind—he put an arm around me and said gently, “That’s the other bad thing about Georgians, you’re way too volatile.”

“Leave me alone.” I shrugged him off and left him on the steps.

He came after me, followed me, called my name. He pronounced my name in such a strange way that I burst out laughing, stopped and turned around. He was still smiling. “Look, I’ve said I was sorry. If I’d thought you’d be offended I wouldn’t have said anything. Do you think I was put on this earth to apologize to you? I’ve backed off, I’ve said I’m sorry, what more can I do? I mean, when it comes down to it I’m at least five years older than you, aren’t I? So let’s just be friends.”

He was like a little child. A child who knows he’s done something wrong but can’t quite work out what. I couldn’t help but smile too. There was a spark of happiness in Kolya’s eyes.

“Come on, I’m going to the bar, let’s go and have a drink.”

I followed him. The bar was slowly filling up. Kolya bought us a bottle of vodka and two beers. He wouldn’t hear of letting me pay. “I invited you,” he said. After a while, Dima from Leningrad came to join us; he’d met Kolya the day before. Dima had an unusual way of drinking. He didn’t ask the waiter for a glass. Each time we took a drink he’d pick up the bottle, toast whatever it was we were toasting, lift his arm, bend it in the air, and pour vodka into his mouth from half a meter up—at least a shot every time. Kolya was very taken with Dima’s approach: “Look, look at what he’s doing!”

“He’ll be sorry in ten minutes,” I said. For some reason the guy was re-ally getting on my nerves.

Then Dima brought a second bottle of vodka and a Pepsi. “Pepsi for the ladies. If you want we can mix a bit of vodka in; they’ll get so drunk they won’t recognize each other.”

“What ladies? Where can you see ladies?” I asked in surprise.

Dima spread his arms open. “We’ve got to have girls! I was just about to get us some,” he said, and staggered off in the direction of one of the other tables.

“He’s had enough,” Kolya decided. He stood up and walked over to Dima with that trademark smile still on his face. He stopped him on his way toward a table at which two young Slavonic-looking women were sitting, and turned him around.

Dima didn’t give in, turned around and carried on.

“Come with us,” he shouted at the women. “If you want we can go to the restaurant, Dima will pay! Come on!” The women didn’t look particularly alarmed; they were, it seemed, used to drunk men approaching them. They laughed and whispered to each other. Kolya finally managed to get Dima back to our table. As soon as he sat down I was proved right—he was in trouble: he tipped his head over to one side, put his chin to his chest and started snoring.

“Shall we leave him?” Kolya asked me.

“Well, what else are we going to do with him?”

Kolya Subotin called the waiter over, slipped ten rubles into his pocket and told him

to take Dima back up to his room. No sooner had they hauled him off than we were caught off guard by two Armenians: “Were you both-ering our girls?”

“No,” Kolya said firmly, without even looking up.

“Well if it wasn’t you, who was it?”

Kolya poured some vodka into the glasses, clinked his glass against mine and knocked back his drink. I downed mine too.

“We’re talking to you,” protested one of the Armenians.

“What’s the problem, guys?” He didn’t look at them this time, either.

“We were gone for ten minutes. We just went downstairs to reserve a table in the restaurant. Did you give our girls any trouble while we were gone?”

Kolya pushed his chair back, spread himself out a bit in his chair, lifted his head and looked the man in the eye.

“I’ve already given you an answer.”

The other guy chipped in. “We were in the restaurant, booking a table. If you guys can’t afford the restaurant just sit here quietly in the bar and don’t bother other people’s women, got it?”

Kolya and I glanced at each other. We both started laughing out loud. “Come here, son.” Kolya pointed at the second guy. “Is this the first time you’ve been out with a woman or what? Why are you acting all macho? You want to talk about money? What’s the most you’ve ever seen at one time, eh? Five thousand rubles? Ten thousand? A hundred thousand? Have you made sure you’ve got enough to be able to leave the waiter a three-ruble tip? I can tell from looking at you that you’re not going to be able to leave any more than that.” Then he looked at me. “You and me managed to sort things out, but the whole country is full of idiots like him.”

He was still smiling, and I started to wonder whether it was possible for someone to just smile all the time, whatever the situation.

“Do you smile in your sleep, too?” I asked Kolya, slightly irritated. I turned toward the Armenians. “What do you think, does he smile in his sleep too? Or does he think about money like you and have nightmares?”

I didn’t get a reply. The Armenians stood there, eyes blazing, motionless.

“On my way into the bar,” Kolya said to one of them, “I didn’t see a sign saying ‘Please feel free to act like an idiot in here.’ Did you?”

The Armenians said nothing.

Kolya wouldn’t let it go. “I asked you a question.”

“I didn’t see, no.”

“That’s because it’s not okay to act like an idiot in here. Now get lost. Go and take care of your lovely ladies.”

“Let’s go and talk about this outside,” the Armenian said at last.

“You want to go outside and fight?” Kolya adopted a mock serious ex-pression.

“Are you coming?” the Armenian said, pulling himself up to look as big as possible.

“Yeah, okay, give it a rest,” said Kolya. “You go on out and we’ll be there in a minute.”

The Armenians left the bar.

“Stay where you are.” He was still smiling. “I’m not about to ruin my evening for those two idiots.” He called over to the two women, “Come over here and sit with us! It’ll be a nice little scene for your boyfriends to come back to.”

The women discussed it for a minute among themselves and then turned away. “Oh, come on!” Kolya raised his voice, “So you don’t have dinner with those losers, big deal! I’ll give you fifty rubles each and won’t expect a thing in return—neither of you are my type.” Then he turned to me and said, “I don’t suppose you fancy either of them, do you? It’d be worth a hundred rubles just to piss those idiots off, don’t you think?”

“Do I fancy either of them?” I wondered, looked over to the women and then called over to the one who was looking straight at me, loudly enough so that the whole bar could hear: “You slut!” I said it in Georgian.

Kolya guffawed. “What did you say to her? I think she’s guessed you said something bad to her. What an insult!”

“Couldn’t they just bite their tongues? Would it have killed them not to say anything?” I was getting gradually angrier.

“What are you worrying for?” Subotin leaned toward me.

“They’re pissing me off. I can’t stand girls who talk all the time.”

“Come on, man, let’s have a drink.” Kolya refilled our glasses.

I can’t really remember what happened next. I know that after a while the two women left and the Armenians never came back. I got horribly drunk. I remember Kolya saying something about having had enough of it all, telling me that the sea had been right up to his neck and that if he hadn’t met me he’d just end it all. I told him he needed to find himself a woman. I was right, he said, and reassured me that he would. Then we bought another bottle of vodka and a beer each and sat there until very late. Afterward we took a short walk in the fresh air and when we finally went our separate ways it was well past midnight.

Needless to say, I didn’t wake up until late the next day. I lay in bed for a long time, unable even to open my eyes. I really wished I’d brought a beer home with me from the bar. When I finally looked at the clock I leaped up in shock—it was five to three. I took a quick shower and went down to the restaurant. I had some breakfast, drank a beer, went back to the hotel lobby and settled myself into an armchair. I decided against going to the beach for a swim or into town to see Zaza and Tamuna—I really didn’t feel like doing anything. I don’t remember how long I sat there, half-dead. In the end, Kolya’s voice brought me around.

“Wake up, my Georgian friend!” He was standing over me and grinning from ear to ear. “What are you laughing for?” I could barely speak. “Aren’t you hungover?”

“My hangover only lasted till eight this morning.”

“Till when?” I almost shrieked.

“Eight. I went down to the beach. Then I had a shot of vodka. Now I feel fresh as a daisy.” Kolya sank down into the chair next to me.

“Bravo, my friend. Now tell me, what was it they put you inside for again?”

He obviously didn't like that. He started to look rather uncomfortable, but answered me anyway. "Hooliganism. I told you, I beat some idiot up."

"What, and he made a complaint against you?"

"All he ever does is make complaints; he's been doing it my whole life and he still is now. He's really not worth talking about, but anyway, for some reason so long as there's breath in our bodies we can't leave each other alone."

"Why? Who is this person?"

"He *wants* me to leave him alone, and he fixed it so that for two years I'd have to, but beyond that . . . I won't leave him alone. I can't tell you how much I loathe him. We can't break free of each other, because something binds us together . . ."

"What?"

"My life, my whole world, my being . . ."

"You're not making any sense." I got up from the armchair. "What do you mean, your life? Tell me."

"Let's not talk about it now. I'll tell you some other time."

In a more cheerful voice he told me he'd taken my advice on board. "I'm going to sort it out today. In an hour or two I'll introduce you to my lady friend."

"Have you found someone?"

"No, but I will. Two hours is plenty."

"Yes, but would you have thought about it if I hadn't say anything?"

"What, about getting a woman? I don't take women too seriously. If they're there, fine, if they're not there, even better." "You're a strange guy," I said, with my eyes closed.

"Come on, we should go for a swim in the sea, it'll sort you out in no time."

"Have you lost your mind? I can't move. If I even see the sea I'll throw up."

Kolya stood up. "Okay, but I'm going. Don't spend your whole life in this armchair," he said, and went out of the lobby.

I lit a cigarette but didn't like the taste and threw it away. At that moment I wanted a glass of orange juice more than anything, but I really didn't feel like going outside and walking all the way up to the second-floor bar. I lay there half dead until I noticed a Russian girl coming toward me. She had a devilish smile on her face and was holding a wristwatch.

"Excuse me, what does your watch say? Mine's stopped, so . . ."

She looked about seventeen or eighteen and she wasn't bad-looking. I sobered up as quickly as I could, glanced down at my watch and answered, "It's half past four now. I don't suppose you'd mind meeting up with a certain young man outside the restaurant at seven, would you?"

She laughed, adjusted her watch, put it back on her wrist. What she said next almost made me fall out of my chair.

"Why would I mind? But seven's still a while off so . . . Do you fancy meeting a young lady in the bar at five?"

"Let's go now!" Hangover? What hangover? I was soaring like a bird!

"Calm down, there's no hurry; the bar doesn't open till five."

“Oh, what a shame,” I said. “In that case sit yourself down, we can wait here.”

We settled ourselves down in the armchairs. I found myself liking her more and more.

“So, is he nice then, this guy?” she asked me.

“What’s your name?”

“Lena.”

“You know what, Lena, how should I put it? He may not be quite what you deserve, but he’s not all that bad. He’s from Tbilisi and he looks a lot like me . . .”

“And his Russian is really, really bad,” added Lena. “That’s true,” I smiled, “but his Russian’s hardly the most important thing, is it?”

“It’s not? What *is* the most important thing then?” She stared at me with those devilish eyes again.

“What, you’re saying his Russian *is* the most important thing?” I was really confused.

“Well what then?”

“Oh I don’t know, everything else?” I couldn’t think of anything better to say. I think it was obvious from my face that I was confused. Lena threw me a lifeline.

“Of course his command of foreign tongues isn’t the most important thing; the most important thing is his command of his *own* tongue.”

That was so ambiguous it confused me a bit, but I was still not nearly as confused as I’d been a moment before.

“Oh, he’s highly skilled with his own his tongue, don’t you worry,” I said daringly, “but only at certain times and in certain places . . .” I thought maybe I’d gone too far so I changed the subject quickly. “Tell me honestly, was your watch really broken, or . . . ?”

“Or what?”

I was starting to get irritated now. Why did pretty girls always have to be so silly, I asked myself for the hundredth time. Then I went on the attack. “Or did you see me and use the watch thing as an excuse to meet me and get to know me?”

“It was just an excuse, really. I did want to meet you. I’m still deciding whether I want to get to know you. Is that a good enough reply for you?”

“Yes,” I said, as decisively as possible.

“What’s this young man’s name, then?” the girl said, and looked at me alluringly.

“Oh, let’s forget all these games. This young man, this young man . . . Just ask me my name and I’ll tell you. I don’t want to hear about “this young man” anymore.”

“Are you always this rude?” She seemed angry with me.

“No, only between four-thirty and five. After that I repent of my sins.” “What sins?”

“Whatever sins I commit during that half hour.”

Now Lena was confused. “But you haven’t committed any sins yet . . .” Then she asked me my name and I told her. We went up to the bar and ordered some orange juice; the waiter wouldn’t bring us champagne, say-ing he couldn’t serve us alcohol. Then we had a coffee and she told me that she lived in Zagorsk, that it was a small town near Moscow and full of churches and monasteries. Then I offered to read her fortune from the cof-fee

grounds. I turned her coffee cup upside down, looked into it and made up some nonsense or other. She liked it, and laughed at everything I said. Finally I furrowed my brow, narrowed my eyes, stared into the bottom of the cup and said to her slowly, as if I really was reading the grounds, "In a few seconds a young man will kiss you."

That made her laugh. Really laugh. She laughed non-stop for five minutes while I sat there like an idiot holding the coffee cup.

"What's the matter? What's wrong with you?" I asked her every so often, but it turned out getting Lena to calm down was no easy matter.

Finally she stopped laughing, wiped her tears away with her handkerchief, leaned over toward me and told me in a near-whisper, "Which young man would that be, then? The one from Tbilisi who looks a lot like you?"

"Yes," I whispered back.

"What happened to 'I don't want to hear about 'this young man' any-more?'" She lowered her voice even more, closed her eyes and parted her lips slightly in anticipation of my kiss.

I kissed her, but pulled away again quickly; there were quite a few people in the bar. Then I kissed her again, for slightly longer. And then again.

"What are you doing now," she said suddenly, "repenting of your sins?"

"What sins?" I didn't get it.

"It was you that said it in the first place!"

"Oh yeah." I remembered. "Well of course! This is the preparation stage, where I reflect on my sins. Actually repenting is a longer, more pleasurable process." "That's good," she replied and took a sip of her juice.

She told me she'd come on holiday with her parents and her oldest friend. Her parents were on the fourth floor, Lena and Olya on the sixth. "Where's your friend at the moment?" I asked and she said she had a local admirer and had gone off somewhere with him. Then she asked me to dance but I said no, and we left the bar.

As Lena and I went down the steps we saw Subotin and a young woman coming up. As we drew level I looked away to avoid catching his eye. But he stopped and said in a loud voice, "First there were two of us, now there are four. Even better, don't you think?"

The women were confused. Lena looked at me, and Subotin's companion looked at him.

"Sveta, let me introduce you," Kolya said to his companion, and pointed at me. He told her my name. "He's my very best friend."

I was very surprised to be introduced as such, but I didn't say anything. I introduced Lena to Subotin and asked what his plans were.

"You see?" He was in a jovial mood and started speaking very quickly, without thinking. "It didn't even take me two hours. And Sveta's from Murmansk too, but we met here! That's how it goes, isn't it? And as for plans, we thought we'd go to the bar."

I told him Lena and I were going to the restaurant and invited them to join us.

“When your best friend asks you to do something, you can’t refuse. And if you want to spend the evening in the company of three amazing people, and in a restaurant to boot, then all the better!” Kolya declared jubilantly and the four of us headed downstairs.

I had known Subotin for one day and I had yet to see him in a bad mood. But that evening he was even more cheerful than usual. As soon as we went in he called the waiter over, ordered almost the entire menu and then turned to Sveta and Lena. “Right, ladies, what are you drinking?”

“I’ll have champagne,” said Sveta.

“Me too,” Lena said quietly and I realized that even though she would have preferred to, she couldn’t refuse Kolya. I followed the waiter to the kitchens and told him to work out how much it was going to cost so that I could pay up front. I knew that at the end of the night there was no way Kolya would let me pay.