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The Mother by Gorky

A family saga

By

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Translated by

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V: My mother and her sisters were always jealous of Dianka.

W: From right back when they were children.

X: They were jealous she had money. Money to buy crepe paper. And make an Autumn costume for the autumn ball.

W: A ball the sisters were forced to attend dressed as depressing gauze snowflakes.

V: All three of them in the exact the same outfit.

W: But then it rained.

X: And Dianka's Autumn costume disintegrated.

W: But the sisters, nevertheless, were always jealous.

V: Dianka's family sold vegetables and strawberries for a living.

W: Everyone knew that they fertilised their garden with actual shit, and this was the reason they had excellent vegetables and strawberries.

X: Everyone used shit on their garden back then.

W: But Dianka's family used actual human shit on their garden.

V: And that's wrong.

W: So I've always associated Dianka with a strong sense of shame.

X: Everyone's always associated Dianka with a strong sense of shame.

W: It was shameful to sell all that stuff.

V: All covered in shit, just disgraceful.

W: Especially since it was actual human shit.

X: And it was equally shameful not to believe in Communism.

W: They still believed in Communism in the sixties, you see, though not so much by the seventies.

V: But the autumn ball was in the sixties?

W: Round about. The end of the sixties.

X: And so, at the end of the sixties, Dianka fled the autumn ball almost naked, her crepe paper costume soaked through and falling to pieces, clinging to her body like burnt skin.

W: And that was shameful.

V: What is shame?

W: I've felt shame when someone's beat me up.

X: I've felt shame when I've beaten someone up.

W: And if someone looks up your skirt at your underwear, that makes you feel shame too.

V: But what's even more shameful is when someone reaches down and pulls your underwear all the way up over your head.

W: Though let's not talk about that, okay?

X: Let's talk about Dianka.

W: They asked the sisters: what do you want to be when you grow up?

V: And they replied: we want to be good socialists.

W: But Dianka replied: I want to be a mother.

X: The sisters were friends with her.

W: But then they started to hate her.

V: They used to be friends, then they started to hate her.

W: Dianka's family sold their vegetables, which had been grown in real human excrement, at a bazar.

X: The village didn't have a bazar. Except for a few little makeshift market stalls down by the station. And anyway, who in the village was going to buy a bunch of vegetables, knowing they'd been grown in literal shit?

W: There weren't really any trains passing through the village either. Except for the freighters bound for Moscow. The freight trains carrying coal still all went to Moscow in those days.

V: So where, in the early nineteen seventies, could anyone possibly hope to sell vegetables doused in human faecal matter? Could they go to another city or settlement to do so?

W: They could go to Alchevsk, for example. My cousin and I got some nice tomatoes there back in 2001.

X: Though back then Alchevsk was called Kommunarisk.

W: And Kommunarisk was so polluted no one could breathe.

V: It still is. I mean, Alchevsk still is.

W: You can't hang your underwear outside to dry there: it turns black.

X: You pass through there on the train, even in winter with the windows closed, and you know exactly when you're in Kommunarisk. You can tell by the smell.

W: Two of my classmates went to uni in Alchevsk. To the mining and metallurgy institute. They rented a flat there, too.

V: And then a guy broke into their flat, killed them with an axe and stole their tape recorder.

W: In Kommunarisk.

X: Alchevsk.

W: Climbed in over the roof. And stole their two-track tape recorder.

V: A Chinese tape recorder.

W: With LED lights.

X: Then one of them's father went crazy.

W: No. He had a heart attack.

V: The other one's mother went crazy.

W: And the other one's father said: there's only one person for me to live for now.

X: And what about the first one's mother?

W: Let's get back to Dianka, shall we?

V: Who cares about Dianka?

W: So the sisters went off to the same institute back in the Seventies.

X: To train as engineers.

W: But Dianka went out dancing.

V: Or, as they called it back then, she went to the disco.

W: And there she met a Greek.

X: A very beautiful Greek.

W: By the name of Pistofidis.

V: Who smelt of the sea, as opposed to human manure.

W: As opposed to the shit from her garden.

X: And he said to her: let's go. And he didn't care that Dianka's evening dress was actually a nightshirt.

W: A silk one.

V: And he didn't care that Dianka didn't believe in communism.

W: Dianka's parents pampered her and bought her whatever she wanted.

X: Like a wealthy heiress. Like Pronia Prokopovna from the movie *Running After Two Hares*.

W: Whatever she wanted, they bought it.

V: Is that where she got her taste for things from, is that why she didn't even believe in Communism? The sisters, meanwhile, were reading Hemingway and "The Proletarian Woman".

W: And going to Luhansk to see Vysotsky play. Or going to watch the orchestra.

X: It was called Voroshilovgrad back then. And it would've been Leontiev they'd have gone to see.

W: But the Greek didn't care.

V: He didn't give a fuck.

W: And Dianka didn't give a fuck that he didn't give a fuck.

X: The Greek didn't want the spoils of a rich family's garden, like Golokhvastov from the movie Running After Two Hares.

W: He didn't want to dig them up either.

V: The Greek was as free as a bird.

W: He took a shit and flew away.

X: Took a shit in the garden.

W: How did this Greek by the name of Pistofidis end up in our neck of the woods anyway? In a place that had nothing except freight trains, slag heaps and smugglers headed over the border to Millerovo?

V: It wasn't even technically smuggling back then because it wasn't even technically a border. But the Greek could've escaped any sanction at all.

W: And somehow he'd turned up in the village.

X: And got Dianka pregnant.

W: And, lo, the heir to the faecal-vegetable oligarchy was born. And the countdown to a new era began.

V: An era of kindness and mercy.

W: And that's when the Greek buggered off.

X: The beautiful Greek buggered off. Dianka never tried to look for him or chase him up for child support.

W: She was proud when her family said:
- We'll feed him ourselves.

V: But didn't she want to humiliate him?

W: What's humiliating here?

X: Let's not talk about this.

W: But it's an important question. This is our inciting incident.

V: No, it's just a given circumstance.

W: No. We have to talk about it, or there'll be a question left hanging in the air forever: where was the father?

X: No. The question left hanging in the air forever will be: what did the mother do next? Because Dianka was always there.

W: No. Let's just leave the question – what happened to the Greek by the name of Pistofidis? - hanging in the air forever and move on.

V: I hate you.

W: I hate myself.

X: Basically, the Greek buggered off.

W: The sisters studied, then went off on work placements. One of them was posted to Tashkent.

V: My mother got posted to Riga.

W: To Pribaltika.

X: It's just called Latvia now.

W: We have the same mother.

V: Wherever the sisters were posted, they always tried to get back home, to the village. To their mum.

W: My mum went off to Riga like she was going off to her grave.

X: Riga's so far away it's almost death.

W: And her mother, my gran, said:
- Come home as soon as you can.

V: And put some money in her bra.

W: And wrote her a list of things to get.

X: Because you couldn't buy anything in the village. Except for a copy of "Labour", the proletarian newspaper. You couldn't even buy Dianka's shit-covered vegetables in the village.

W: You had to go out of the district.

V: You had to go to Voroshilovgrad.

W: You had to go all the way to Moscow just for oranges.

X: Just for wallpaper.

W: Just for ladybirds.

V: You're skipping ahead.

W: My mum came home as soon as she could. And stayed. She said: they don't like Russians there. And she didn't want to learn Latvian.

X: So I lost my chance of being fathered by a beautiful blue-eyed Aryan, instead of an undersized Jew with sticking-out ears.

W: I could've grown up in the European Union and no one would ever have beat me up or pulled my underwear all the way up over my head.

V: Instead, mum went off to work in a factory in Alchevsk.

W: Took the train every day from the village, an hour and a half each way.

X: It was better for her than learning someone else's language, with someone else's difficult grammar.

W: It was better for her to live with her family.

V: For the wider family she brought presents back from Riga, and for her sisters she brought tampons.

W: The sisters didn't know what tampons were.

X: They said aren't these...

W: ...Only for people, who've already...

V: ...for people who've already had a baby.

W: ...or for people who've already had two babies.

X: Their parents had never talked to the sisters about menstruation or sex.

W: They'd told them a lot about Communism, but all they knew about sex was:

- Don't ever kiss without love.

V: They weren't Dianka, after all.

W: Dianka was all about love. And they didn't even know about tampons.

X: They didn't know about sanitary towels either.

W: The best they could hope for was cotton wool in their pants.

V: What about Dianka?

W: Dianka probably definitely used cotton wool.

X: The sisters tore up old bedsheets into cloths. The full extent of sex education in that household was the look my grandmother gave the sisters to tell them not to tear up bedsheets that were still perfectly serviceable.

W: They used the cloths like panty-liners. Then washed them afterwards.

V: But the trick was to make sure no one saw you washing them.

W: And if you couldn't get the bloodspots out of the cloths, then you boiled them on the stove in a huge pot.

X: But, again, you made sure no one saw you.

W: And if that didn't work then you burned them in the garden.

V: And made sure no one saw you.

W: They made sure not even a spy-plane or passing space rocket on the edge of the atmosphere could see the sisters out in the garden, burning their smoking dirty rags on the fire, like cavewomen, the rags burning badly, soaked, as they were, in a large quantity of fresh menstrual blood.

X: Looking from afar like American children roasting marshmallows.

W: And the sisters weren't children at this point. The middle sister got married first. To an engineer. They'd studied together: my mum, the middle sister, and the engineer.

V: That is, they were all engineers.

W: The engineer met my mother first, but then started going out with the middle sister.

X: Thank God.

W: Their daughter, my cousin – Marina – started going out with the son of Dianka and the beautiful Greek.

V: Started going out with Pistofidis Junior.

W: Whose name was Zhenia.

X: The horticultural-lavatorial conglomerate rejoiced, that born to them was such a beautiful son, and they even forgave the Greek for running away.

W: Though by that point, it didn't matter, he was gone.

V: But through love for her son Dianka forsook her bourgeois ways.

W: No more nights down the disco in her silken nightshirt.

X: No more vegetables covered in human shit.

W: She had a child, and she had to raise him somehow.

V: As a single parent.

W: And Zhenia was able to use the power of his beauty. If he did wrong all was forgiven.

X: And her work was no picnic either.

W: No easier than in a factory.

V: Just you try growing something.

W: Then try and sell it.

X: First plant the seeds in a box.

W: You need to make sure the seeds are good, high-quality.

V: Then you've got boxes on the windowsills, on the tables, on the sofa, everywhere in the house. It becomes more of a home for boxes rather than people.

W: Then you make your seedlings.

X: And transfer your seedlings to the greenhouse in yoghurt pots.

W: And then.

V: And then.

W: And then.

X: And then.

W: Then back to the boxes again.

V: And sell what you've grown.

W: No easier than in a factory.

X: No easier.

W: Her little son Zhenia grew up to be very beautiful, and Dianka wanted only the best for this scion of the beautiful Greek.

V: I've no idea what "the best" meant back then. When I was a kid it meant a Puma tracksuit.

W: When I was a kid it meant an Adidas tracksuit.

X: They used to say to people who wore Adidas:

- If you're wearing Adidas, you want to fuck a kiddie's ass.

W: They used to say to people who wore Puma:

- If you're wearing shitty Puma, then you've got no sense of humour.

V: I wore Puma.

W: I wore Adidas.

X: I started with Puma, then I switched to Adidas.

W: I started with Puma, then I switched to Adidas.

V: Dianka denied her son nothing – she wanted him to have the finest food, the nicest drink. A beautiful girlfriend from a respectable family.

W: And she didn't feel sorry for this potential girlfriend, quite the opposite.

X: Why would you feel sorry for someone else's child?

W: So Zhenia started going out with Marina.

V: My cousin.

W: The daughter of the middle sister, who'd married the engineer.

X: And who was herself an engineer.

W: And who was herself an engineer.

V: Engineers at the factory were paid one hundred and twenty roubles a month.

W: And Marina was herself a beautiful girl who wanted a beautiful life.

X: Her father was an engineer, after all. And her mother. And her auntie.

W: So Marina started seeing Zhenia because of beauty.

V: Because of that beautiful life she desired.

W: In other words, because of money.

X: Because of money, chewing gum, music, and motorcycles.

W: But she didn't really fancy Zhenia, she fancied another boy. Oleg. From the house across the road. Who looked like Dimitri Kharatyan.

V: Like D'Artagnan.

W: Like Dzhigarkhanyan.

X: So this guy looked good, but it was clear he wasn't an option.

W: Whereas Zhenia had money. He flashed it about.

V: Zhenia had money and a confident look in his eye. He'd treat you and you'd have a good time. Why are you laughing?

W: Because I can't possibly imagine where he might show anyone a good time in our village. Our village is like Dianka's garden: nothing but shit everywhere. So where did he show them a good time, then? In the bathhouse? In the one tiny beer hall? In the hairdressers at the train station? At the bakery? I've no idea where else.

X: That's what she said: he showed them a good time.

W: That's what our cousin said. Let's put it in simple terms: they drank homebrew on a bench.

V: No need to argue.

W: There's nothing to argue about.

X: I remember the bathhouse, the beer hall, the bakery. I've been to them all.

W: Because that's how my mum, an anxious thirty-three-year-old engineer, ended up meeting a short-statured Jew who'd been injured in the last imperialist war, and who was also awkward and unmarried.

V: When you could've been fathered by a beautiful Baltic blonde.

W: Like Donatas Banionis.

X: And then you wouldn't have burned your hair with peroxide aged twelve.

W: And no one would've pulled my pants all the way up over my head.

V: The money Zhenia spread about the place wasn't from the hard but ultimately honest work of vegetable production.

W: Or even from his non-food-related absent Greek father.

X: It was procured by good old-fashioned theft.

W: Theft he committed with Oleg, who looked like Dimitri Kharatyan and who lived in the house opposite my cousin, the daughter of the two engineers, who used to fancy him, and with a bunch of other guys he used to knock about with.

V: And with this money he gave the girls a good time.

W: He made Oleg get him a lot of cash.

X: And Oleg's dad worked in haulage and found out about it.

W: And Oleg's mum – who was the one who introduced my mum to the short-statured Jew – cried as she phoned the recruiters to take him away.

V: The army's better than prison.

W: Was this the Afghan war?

X: No, it wasn't The Soviet Union anymore at this point.

W: The army's better than prison.

V: Then the army kicked him out – I don't know what the technical term is in Ukrainian. Because he'd been having fits and screaming (I don't know why).

W: So they sent him home on a white ticket. He supposedly started wearing women's tights about the place after that.

X: Everyone wears tights under their trousers when they're a kid.

W: But when a grown-up does it– that's shameful.

V: Why is leaving the army not shameful, but being kicked out of the army is?

W: Let's not talk about Oleg.

X: Let's talk about Dianka.

W: Oleg getting caught had burned them all. So everyone wanted to cover their own backs. And so they all testified against Zhenia, the son of the beautiful Greek.

V: He went to prison at precisely eighteen years old.

W: And they couldn't bribe their way out. There was either a bad harvest that year...

X: ...Or the human-shit fertiliser didn't work.

W: And this was the nineties, remember, everything was in crisis.

V: There was nothing to eat.

W: Only soy meat.

X: And carrot and onion cutlets.

W: ...or maybe, instead, it was Dianka's family who decided: he did the crime, let him do the time.

V: No.

W: Dianka's family wouldn't have let that happen?

X: Dianka wouldn't have let that happen. Can you imagine her sending her little Pistofidis junior off Sukhodilsk-way in a prison wagon, allowing his arse to be probed by desperate fellow inmates searching for cigarettes, while he tried to go to the toilet?

W: There must've been a problem with the harvest, then.

V: The problem was there wasn't any money.

W: It was always going to happen. No one wants to work on a market anymore. I wouldn't. There was no one to do it. An offensive idea. There was one to sell.

X: Dianka's mother was on the way out.

W: Her dad had died of a heart attack.

V: And the family was upset: was what they'd given Zhenia not enough?

W: But where was his father?

X: Where was the Greek?

W: In Greece?

V: In good old Ancient Greece?

W: Dianka couldn't do the garden on her own.

X: So the whole street helped her.

W: The whole street was divided: there were those who thought they were all in this together, so they all needed to answer for it together, all of them, and not just one little Zhenia. And then there were those who didn't give a fuck.

V: If indeed the lavatorial-vegetable empire did possess any leftover savings, they all went on treatment for Dianka's mother, the funeral for Dianka's father, and care packages for Zhenia in the Luhansk pre-trial detention centre, situated opposite the Luhansk locomotive factory and a Chinese restaurant called "Dragon", which occupied a converted public toilet.

W: And my cousin Marina's parents, both of them engineers, breathed a sigh of relief.
- We dodged a bullet there.
And they crossed themselves.

X: I'd started reading. I was six or thereabouts. I'd probably actually begun a long time before Zhenia got put in the pre-trial detention centre opposite the Chinese restaurant called "Dragon". But I'd had to go cold turkey for a while because we didn't have enough books lying around and we were skint.

W: We had nothing by Dumas or Remarque at home. You could only get books through connections.

V: And you needed a wall-unit to store them on.

W: And why on earth would my parents, meek as could be, spend money on books when they didn't even have a wall-unit to store them on?

X: We didn't have a wall-unit because we didn't have a flat.

W: We lived with my grandad, next door to Dianka.

V: Just over the fence from her stench-ridden garden.

W: The garden which was strewn generously with actual human shit by the dear departed parents of miserable Dianka.

X: So my mother didn't read Hemingway anymore – we didn't have him in our house.
There was nowhere to put him.

W: My grandad said:
- It's my house, so I'm in charge here.

V: My cousin came in and threw my toys about:
- It's grandad's house. He's in charge here.

W: I had no choice but to hide in the kitchen shed and read old Soviet editions of Spark magazine.

X: And terrible novels from the days of Socialist Realism.

W: A meagre selection of terrible novels from the days of Socialist Realism.

V: I didn't care about shitty Dianka and her actual human shit.

W: I didn't care about her shitty little son.

X: I didn't care that my father went off to work in the wreckage at Chernobyl, to make some money so we could join the cooperative.

W: And get a flat.

V: I didn't care that the money my father brought back to get a flat was only enough to go to Moscow and buy some wallpaper and oranges.

W: Where did you put the wallpaper if you didn't get a flat?

X: I didn't care.

W: Mum sewed the money into his underwear. And all he brought me back was a ladybird rubber.

V: I was upset and threw the ladybird rubber back at him.

W: I was counting on him getting me something a bit better than a ladybird rubber.

X: I expected more from Moscow.

W: These days I dream about a ladybird the size of that rubber coming to get me.

V: A gigantic ladybird.

W: A lonely ladybird.

X: A ladybird that asks me:
- What is shame?

W: But back then I simply did. Not. Care.

V: I didn't care that I had no friends.

W: Why should I be friends with anyone anyway?

X: Even a Donald Duck cartoon wasn't as interesting to me as...

W: ...as Stalin's cult of personality.

V: I thought I'd go to school and they'd tell me everything.

W: But I went to school and all they told me was:

- Kids, make sure you read this Vitali Bianki story over the weekend. And draw a picture of an animal.

X: I drew Stalin instead.

W: My whole life no one ever explained to me...

V: Why you can't swallow chewing gum.

W: And what is shame.

X: I cared about that. But Zhenia, no, I didn't care about him.

W: He got out of prison and went back home to Dianka, who'd just buried her mother and who was borrowing money from everyone in the street.

V: She owed so much that Zhenia would have to shit for months on end, to revive the garden and resurrect the faecal-vegetable empire.

W: Instead, he came back home and said:

- Mum, this is Yulka. She's going to live with us. Here's some money, get us some vodka and grub.

X: This Yulka was already pregnant and due in May.

W: And Zhenia never gave his mum any money. He was skint, just like me, only not because he'd been buying books.

V: So where would they get the cash from? Dianka wasn't exactly an engineer.

W: My mum didn't make any money at the factory, but we ate because we had a Singer sewing machine which my grandma's sister had brought back from Germany. But where were his father's relatives? Why hadn't they brought anything back from Germany?

Where were his father's relatives?

Where were his father's relatives?

Where were his father's relatives?

Where were his father's
Relatives?

X: The middle sister, the engineer, Marina's mother, helped Dianka get a job working on the railway.

W: But she didn't help my mother. She said:

- I don't want people thinking I'm a nepotist.

V: But the money Dianka made went straight into a big black hole.

W: A big black hole named Zhenia.

X: But it was so little money that it was hardly enough to eat. And not enough food means not enough shit for her garden.

W: My cousin and I – the son of the two engineers, Marina’s brother – got forced to help in her garden.

V: Our job was collecting Colorado Potato Beetles.

W: Like slave labourers, in Panama hats and tiny little shorts, we collected up beetles and put them in old Indian coffee tins.

X: The garden seemed endless.

W: The potato field stretched all the way to the horizon.

V: The beetles had to be tipped out onto the road and crushed.

W: With our feet.

X: The brother – he was (and is) called Sasha – suggested:
- Let’s put the beetles in the sandpit and play concentration camps with them.

W: And then crush them.

V: With our feet.

W: This wouldn’t be done with May Beetles.

X: That would be blasphemy.

W: But with Colorados it wasn’t. It was just what you did.

V: Maybe because, as my grandmother said, the Colorado Beetles were dropped out of planes onto our fields by the Americans.

W: So we’d have another Holodomor.

X: My grandma was six during the first Holodomor.

W: But she said nothing about it, ever.

V: Nothing.

W: Ever.

X: Still, they taught us how to cut chickens’ heads off when we were kids.

W: I’ll tell you about that. It’ll still be a story about how nothing ever happens to us.

V: But it’ll have nothing to do with Dianka.

W: Well, there may come a day when we’ll need to know how to do it ourselves.

X: Is there anything scarier than the sight of a headless chicken running about in the yard?

W: Yes.

V: My cousin and I once got told to “give the old boar a ride” while they were killing a pig. When you’re cutting a pig’s throat the children are supposed to sit on it. I’ve no idea why.

W: And then my grandad comes over and says to my cousin:

- Grandson, come on, I’ll teach you how to kill a chicken.

But then the grandson, that is, my cousin, the son of the two engineers, says:

- No, grandad, I’m not coming.

And my grandad says:

- Ugh, you’re like a little old woman.

And I say:

- Grandad, teach me.

And I cut the chicken’s head off, and off it runs.

I sacrificed a chicken.

V: Does it help to think of it that way?

W: No. The chicken was just a defenceless victim. A wasted life.

X: Like a Colorado beetle’s life.

V: Like a May beetle’s life.

W: Like Dianka’s life.

W: She was always used to having someone do the work for her. But Zhenia drank, and not only did he drink, he didn’t want to work.

V: Dianka was always used to having money.

W: But Zhenia didn’t bring in any money. He was beautiful, and that was all. Like a vegetable grown in shit. And he thought that was enough.

X: She thought he’d get out of prison and come home to work.

W: But the person who took care of that was the person she’d least expected.

V: Yulka.

W: Zhenia’s round-bellied girlfriend.

X: They’d started writing to each other when he was in prison.

W: She wrote to him then he knocked her up.

V: And along came a beautiful daughter called Masha, also by the name of Pistofidis.

W: With the same dark eyes.

X: Like beads.

W: And a druggie for a dad.

V: A recidivist.

W: When her belly went back down, Yulka cut her hair short and went to Italy to make some money.

X: Dianka didn't like Yulka.

W: She said:
Going off to be a prostitute!

V: Yulka worked as a waitress.

W: At customs they got all the girls to hand over their passports.

X: And once they got to the other side, they said:
- Right, you're all prostitutes now.

W: And Yulka agreed.

V: Because if she said no, there wouldn't have been any cash for her dark-eyed daughter.

W: And because that was exactly what Dianka, her mother-in-law, thought of her.

X: And because you have to agree when someone's kicking you in the stomach.

W: Crushing you into the ground like a Colorado Beetle.

V: Yulka disappeared for a year.

W: Dianka didn't love Yulka. Dianka loved Zhenia. Dianka didn't love Yulka because she loved Zhenia.

X: Complicated.

W: But it raises the question: who did Zhenia love?

V: We'll leave this question hanging in the air, right where we left the question of where his father was.

W: Where *was* his father?

X: Where was the Greek, who smelled of the sea?

W: Back then, my brother and I also spent a lot of time with the third sister. Our aunt.

V: Who didn't end up being any kind of engineer, but who'd worked as a teacher in a kindergarten named after some kind of miners' congress in the city of Molodogvardeysk.

W: She had no children of her own.

X: Molodogvareysk is the city of the Young Guard resistance group, and of very cheap flats.

W: The flats were free. And Krasnodon is the city of the Young Guard resistance group, not Molodogvardeysk.

V: We walked down the street, my aunt, my cousin, and me, and saw bars, like in a prison, on the windows of all the first-floor flats.

W: My aunt told us what that meant.

X: It meant the flats had been abandoned for good.

W: And we walked down that street in Molodogvardeysk and saw that all the windows in the top-floor flats were broken.

V: And that meant that the owners had left Molodogvardeysk, but still had some hope of selling their flats.

W: These flats were now inhabited by cats and alcoholics.

X: Cats or alcoholics.

W: Barred on the bottom floor, broken on the top.

V: They'd shut down the mine and closed the kindergarten along with it.

W: And the school.

X: They'd left only the slag heaps.

W: Like huge ancient burial mounds. Like lots of Calvaries, without a cross in sight.

V: Teachers earned very little. But they drank a lot. Whereas miners drank a lot and earned a lot.

W: But sporadically.

X: My aunt's husband was a miner.

W: I thought they loved my cousin more than me.

V: At night I lay on the sofa, adrift in the cosmos of their living room, and cried. I couldn't be like my cousin.

W: They'd told me: be more like him.

X: And that meant – be more relaxed.

W: But I couldn't be more relaxed, because my parents were an awkward engineer and an awkward Jew. You think any child of theirs would be relaxed?

V: My dad never played with me or talked to me.

W: What would he play with me? What would he talk to me about?

X: One time he did actually say to me:

- Let's go and play.

W: And we went off to play in Gapkin's glade.

V: Gapkin's glade was where Gapkin used to live. We picked gypsy flowers.

W: This was around the time of my mother's abortion.

X: They were trying for a more relaxed child.

W: Dad said:

- The flowers are good luck. So it'll definitely be a boy.

V: The doctor said no. It's not a boy. My condolences.

W: There are a lot of things I can't forgive my mother for...

X: But for that abortion – I'm grateful.

W: We put the gypsy flowers in a vase in the kitchen.

V: Grandad said:

- Get them out of here, it's my house.

W: My mum and dad argued, and he vowed to run off to Israel.

X: On permanent residency.

W: He went to Luhansk.

V: And brought back a brochure for himself.

W: He'd somehow not realised that he'd need to learn Hebrew.

X: He saw it in the brochure and said:

W: Sod that for a game of soldiers.

V: And never uttered a peep about it again.

W: Yulka was gone for a year.

X: Dianka crossed herself and thanked the Lord.

W: Everyone crossed themselves back then. Even my mum, an engineer, watched psychics on the telly.

V: After a year Yulka sent some money.

W: As far as Dianka was concerned, this was the best form of existence for a daughter-in-law.

X: The money came back, but the daughter-in-law didn't.

W: Masha lived on state child benefit.

V: And Zhenia took all the money for himself.

W: After two years Yulka herself came home. She got pregnant and gave birth to Lyosha, a beautiful boy.

X: No less beautiful than Zhenia.

W: No less beautiful than the beautiful Greek.

V: But Zhenia wasn't there.

W: Because Zhenia was in prison again.

X: Yulka went back to Italy.

W: On the one hand, Masha and Lyosha didn't matter at all to Dianka.

V: But it was due to their presence that the entire street gave her food, all of which she'd of course take dutifully over to Zhenia in the Luhansk pre-trial detention centre

opposite the locomotive factory and the Chinese restaurant called “Dragon”, which occupied a converted public toilet.

W: Dianka asked to borrow some money from the sisters and hated them for that.

X: Yulka had by now shown her true whorish nature.

W: She’d stopped sending money and started sending children’s things and food.

V: Dianka went off to Luhansk, and before visiting the pre-trial detention centre she went and sold the nice Italian children’s things and sought-after Italian foodstuffs on the bazar.

W: Yulka had sent them thinking Dianka at least couldn’t hand them over to Zhenia in prison: could he snack on some baby rompers while lying in his cell? Swap a bunch of children’s tights for tea? How many packs of cigarettes would a parcel of fancy kids’ clothes get him?

X: I remember when Yulka came back to the village and swanned up and down the street.

W: In a mink coat.

V: In summer.

W: Wheeling a suitcase.

X: We got the train together, and my mum hit me on the hand:

- Don’t touch!

In front of us stood Yulka, who had just left the seat I was touching.

W: People hated Yulka because she was a whore. But, more than that, for getting out. For making a new life and sending money back.

V: I was playing out in the yard and saw a girl with black eyes and a doll behind the fence.

- Is that a Barbie?

- No, it’s her friend. Marianna.

- Did your mum buy you that?

- Yes, my mum’s a hooker.

- When I grow up I want to go to Italy too.

- When I grow up I want to be a lawyer. To get my dad out of prison.

That’s when we went quiet and stopped playing.

W: What could you possibly play with a girl who didn’t know anything about Stalin’s Cult of Personality?

V: Yulka left again. Zhenia got out.

W: Guys in cars, loud music blaring, pulled up beside him.

V: They scared him, but only a bit.

W: We got a flat.

V: We snuck in under the wire.

W: A wall-unit materialised.

V: And a garage.

W: But books did not materialise.

V: The wall unit's shelves were as empty as a top-floor flat in Molodogvardeysk.

W: In the summer and at weekends I went to my grandfather's.

V: Mum said:

- Be careful.

W: But I didn't understand: what was she talking about?

About Zhenia's friends?

About the headless chickens running around in the yard?

About dying in a nuclear explosion?

Like they did in Hiroshima.

V: Or was it that none of the locals wanted to be friends with me.

W: Except a little girl called Yulia from **Kiev**. Except a little girl called Sasha from Moscow.

V: But they weren't friends with each other and so I had to arrange to see them at separate times.

W: After that, while my grandfather vegged out in front of some episode of Santa Barbara...

V: ...My grandmother died: fell asleep and never woke up.

W: I climbed out of the window and went for a walk with Yulia.

V: Past the river, past the bench, through other people's gardens.

W: And we heard music coming from the nightclub.

V: And dogs barking.

W: And they didn't let us into the nightclub.

V: Because good girls go to bed at nine p.m.

W: You'll laugh, but Zhenia went to prison again.

V: For the third time.

W: Yulka left him. She left, and she went back to Italy. The children – Masha and Lyosha – were taken by her mum, that is, Yulka's mum.

V: It turns out she had a mum too.

W: So Masha and Lyosha left to meet a woman they'd never met before and begged her to take them in.

V: The steady stream of expensive imported goods was diverted towards Yulka's darling mother's address, and away from Dianka.

W: Dianka's source of income had once again disappeared, and her resentment returned.

V: She marched down the road shouting:

- Slut, slut, little fucking slut! To leave a child with nothing to eat!

W: Someone who didn't know better, a tourist just passing through, would've presumed she was referring to Yulka's children, Masha and Lyosha.

V: What on earth would a tourist be doing in our village talking to Dianka?

W: I don't know - a member of the British society for locomotive enthusiasts?

V: What?

V: Just passing through. Except that this tourist just passing through would've presumed Dianka was referring to Yulka's children, when in fact she was referring to her own.

V: To Zhenia.

W: You'll laugh, but when he got out this time he brought another pregnant girlfriend with him.

V: Where does he find them all?

W: They write to each other.

V: Weird: how did he learn to write?

W: This pregnant girlfriend was called Ninka Varlamova.

V: The local police chief's daughter.

W: A girl only a few years older than I am.

V: From a good family.

W: It turns out she'd been in love with Zhenia ever since she was little.

V: In love with Piston.

W: That was what they called him.

V: Ninka looked beautiful in her school uniform.

W: And Ninka didn't kick back like a mare.

V: Ninka didn't kick back, like Yulka, Dianka's previous daughter-in-law. Ninka was under Zhenia's thumb. And she was fine with his business interests.

W: She shared those interests with him.

V: Zhenia's friends now came to see them both.

W: They did it all together.

V: One time Zhenia disappeared.

W: Everyone obviously thought he'd gone to prison again.

V: Dianka was left on her own with pregnant Ninka. Then two cars pulled up, and some guys got out and completely tossed the house. Ninka was tied to the bed and Dianka locked in the cellar.

W: Then Zhenia came back and said:
- Anyone come looking for me?

V: Ninka gave birth to a daughter, Kira, prematurely.

W: Not as beautiful and Greek-looking as Zhenia's previous children, but Kira can't be blamed for that.

V: Ninka's parents came over to see Kira.

W: At night.

V: Ninka's mother came in, but her father stayed outside in the car.

W: He hadn't seen his daughter since she'd married a recidivist.

V: Zhenia and Ninka argued, shouted and hit each other all the time.

W: Zhenia used to chase Ninka out in the garden, where by then only potatoes grew.

V: Although there was a lot of shit out there, the potatoes were growing badly.

W: The striped Colorado Beetles had eaten them all.

V: In winter Zhenia locked Ninka, naked, in the outside toilet.

W: The neighbours called the police.

V: The police didn't come.

W: Ninka didn't look beautiful anymore.

V: Dianka came over to my grandad's, holding baby Kira, all dirty, and asked for some buckwheat.

W: While she was there Kira crawled into his dog Genie's doghouse and felt, perhaps, quite at home.

V: He gave Dianka some things for Kira. Old clothes. A bit of food.

W: She sold them and gave the money to her son.

V: Dianka phoned Yulka, her former daughter-in-law, when she came back to Ukraine, and complained to her, as if she were her best friend in the world, about Ninka. And then she asked Yulka for money.

W: As if that was the way to get someone to give your son money, I just don't understand: is that how you're supposed to do it?

V: I've no idea. I don't remember the noughties.

W: I remember them very vaguely.

V: I remember the first time I ever got drunk – in the school toilets on Victory Day. The next morning I watched a talk show with a bunch of veterans from the Red Army and the Partisans on it, and I threw up all day to images of the 20th century. They zoomed in on a shot of the red flag over the Reichstag and I realised that it was a bedsheet soaked in menstrual blood.

W: I vomited up my goodbyes to the twentieth century. And after that my memory gets pretty vague.

V: But the vomiting wasn't caused by aversion to alcohol.

W: It was caused by aversion to myself.

V: So I left.

W: I stopped living in the village after that.

V: And where could I go that would possibly be as bad as my village?

W: The city of Luhansk. Or Voroshilovgrad.

V: The city of Luhansk was as bad as my village.

W: I didn't realise until then that the whole world is just one big village.

V: Where chickens peck at everyone's washing.

W: But in the village everything's yours. It's shit, but it's your shit. And everyone hates each other. But in the city it's shit too, but the shit's someone else's. And everyone still hates each other.

V: I found a boyfriend.

W: He had a phone.

V: He showed me a video of the Chechens cutting some soldiers' heads off.

W: That's how he charmed me up.

V: My cousin Sasha went off to earn some money.

W: My cousin Marina was left at home to raise her children. She dreamed of being a young mum. She didn't make money, but she shared her life with others.

V: The third sister's husband died from cirrhosis of the liver. The money that had been borrowed from him was never paid back.

W: It still hasn't been.

V: The many mysteries of Stalin's Cult of Personality faded into the background. There were floors to be washed, lace knickers to be sold on trays down the market, and gold to be polished in the window of Carat, the second-hand jewellery store.

W: Why do people think Soviet gold is the best?

V: Why do they think that pink stone in the window display is a real ruby?
- GO AND TELL EVERYONE THAT'S NOT TRUE!

W: Mum and Dianka grew a bit closer.

V: They dug out the potatoes and collected the beetles.

W: Dianka said:
- Life's not fair.

V: By which she meant: my daughters-in-law are arseholes. Yulka at least brought some money in, but this one does fuck all.

W: As far as Dianka was concerned Zhenia was the sun. The source of all light in the world. Whose rays could never converge.

V: But his was a sun which sucked in warmth, rather than gave it.

W: Ninka had to buy Zhenia's toilet paper for him.

V: Because he was in prison again.

W: Though this time he got out pretty fast.

V: Ninka bought him six rolls.

W: Yellow toilet paper with little flowers on it.

V: At home he just used newspaper.

W: Zhenia wrote to Dianka:
- Mum, why did you raise me so badly?

V: Dianka shouted at Ninka:
- Why'd you buy him that gay-looking toilet paper?

W: ...D'you want him to wipe his arse with it, or frame it and hang it on the wall?

V: She wanted to get rid of her, but that would mean she'd take Kira.

W: And Kira was a kid. **Who had benefits.**

V: Zhenia got out pretty fast.

W: Dianka told my mum that Ninka would do anything for smack.

V: Because Zhenia had got her on smack.

W: Yulka meanwhile sent Masha off to study economics, and Lyosha to do law. Fully paid places for both.

V: While their dad wiped his arse with newspaper.

W: Dianka asked my mum where I was...

V: ...Where I was working.

W: Mum said: at the jewellery store. She deals with a lot of gold.

V: The jewellery store called Carat.

W: And Dianka replied:

- What's the address?

V: Mum was smart enough to say she didn't know.

W: Dianka bought a plasma TV on credit from an electronics superstore.

V: A plasma TV with a huge LCD screen, on credit.

W: Who let her have it on credit?

V: Well, officially she still had that job on the railway, the job my mother's sister had got for her, the sister who was an engineer.

W: The mother of Sasha and Marina, my cousins.

V: The bailiffs came for Dianka.

W: Kira crawled out to meet them.

V: Dianka silently took a piece of bread Kira was chewing out of her mouth and put it to one side – for Zhenia.

W: There was nothing for the bailiffs to take.

V: Zhenia disappeared again.

W: And Dianka kicked Ninka out.

V: She said she had AIDS.

W: And she wasn't lying.

V: Ninka's parents wouldn't take her back.

W: Then the war started. Ninka lived in Gapkin's abandoned hut out by the forest, where she was visited by both the separatists and the Ukrainian troops. And all of them knew she had AIDS.

V: Ninka, who had looked so lovely in her school uniform, died of an overdose.

W: No one knows where Ninka, who died of an overdose, is buried.

V: If she was buried at all.

W: If she even had a grave.

V: Or if she didn't.

W: Maybe a slag heap could stand for her headstone.

V: Her daughter Kira wasn't pretty like Masha and Lyosha.

W: Not as pretty as her benefits.

V: Yulka came back from Italy.

W: She had cancer.

V: She bought a house in Krasnyi Yar.

W: There was shooting there.
V: In 1943.
W: And in 2015 as well.
V: Lyosha went to look for work.
W: But they told him:
- Look somewhere else. You're not right for us.
V: Lyosha, the son of the beautiful Zhenia and the whorish Yulka.
W: Look somewhere else. Not with your background.
V: Sorry.
W: Masha had wanted to become a lawyer and defend her dad.
V: She ended up opening a combined bar and hairdresser's salon in Krasniy Yar.
W: Lyosha pulled pints in Masha's bar.
V: Zhenia surfaced in Khmel'nitskiy district.
W: Living there with a new woman.
V: He said to this new woman:
- Let's have a baby and get some money from the government.
W: The woman said:
- No.
V: Or she didn't say anything.
W: But she didn't have a baby.
V: Then Zhenia decided he wanted Kira. He could've just got her benefits card instead.
W: But then if social services decided to come round they'd see she wasn't there and stop paying him.
V: So Dianka put Kira on a train and sent her to Zhenia.
W: Kira didn't have a mobile phone. So Dianka had no way of knowing if she'd arrived there or not.

[...]

END

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