

Name

by Sergey Bolmat

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WITH CHEERFUL FIRMNESS, ANNE presses the red doorbell button. Her husband Jed, who is standing near her on the porch carrying two large canvas bags bulging with groceries, looks at his wife with an encouraging — but at the same time somewhat sceptical little smile.

A weak jangle of the doorbell reverberates through the house behind the massive black door shining with recently applied layers of varnish. It should probably still smell of turpentine, thinks Anne — or whatever this glossy substance is made of, an acrylic resin, maybe — like it did many years ago when her father would hire people to sand this door, to paint it with the same shade of black, deep and warm, and to coat it in layers upon layers of soft, satiny lustre. She can all but feel this faint, sweet smell emanating from the smooth surface. Like the door, the porch with two plump columns supporting a little plain pediment, and the entire house bear a similar aspect of soundness. Anne, Jed, and their daughter Delphine, who is standing behind her parents, wait for response. The massive brass door knocker is different though, thinks Anne; it's new. She restrains herself from actually smelling the door — although the idea of doing it, the image of her nose almost touching the smooth sheen of the surface, briefly crosses her mind. Irresistible, she thinks with her eyes half-closed — the smell of

childhood bringing back an entire world at once. Delphine turns and looks at the fountain of lilacs in full bloom surging near the porch in thick, fragrant cascades, at all the excess of hydrangeas in the front garden, at the clear blue sky visible from beneath the little portico. The house is old — it is a fully detached property dating from the mid-nineteen century. Anne looks at the small camera installed in the corner high above her head.

They wait for about three minutes.

‘You sure he’s home?’ says Jed.

‘Of course, he is,’ says Anne. ‘I called him.’

After a while, she presses the doorbell button again.

They wait another minute.

‘No, he isn’t,’ says Jed.

While he is still speaking, the door swings open so suddenly and with such a whoosh, that Anne takes a small step back. Behind the door, in the dark anteroom appears a small man of about eighty with a strangely youthful pink face of a perpetually disappointed child. The man is wearing an old bathrobe, old cord trousers of a onetime intensely crimson hue but now dusty grey on the baggy knees, old blue sweater

with a couple of holes on the chest showing pale blue underwear beneath, and old slippers. He looks at Anne with marked indifference, as if expecting her to introduce herself and explain the purpose of her visit, and then, after a second, makes a little twitch with the left corner of his lips indicating a smile.

‘Well,’ he says, ‘look who’s here.’

Jed looks at his wife. She understands that what he sees now is not so much her bright, wide smile as the considerable effort — on the brink of a nervous breakdown, really — she must invest at this moment into her carefree, friendly appearance. It is not helpful, she thinks but then again — this is what she likes about her husband so much: his ability to see people and things as they are, even if it means a healthy dose of cynicism invariably permeating his attitudes, and the inevitable irony accompanying this knack, percolating right now through his superficially preoccupied glance. She likes this friendly irony though, she wants to respond to it; more than anything she wishes that everyone involved could share in the inevitable zaniness of this situation and, maybe, laugh a little. She looks at her father and grins even wider trying hard to suppress a hysterical guffaw.

‘It’s me,’ she says instead, calmly, ‘and this is Jed as you may

remember, and this is Delphine.'

She pushes her daughter forward. Delphine makes attempt at a smile too.

'Is it?' says the man.

'Yes, it is,' says Anne with just a tiny bit more confidence. She turns to her daughter. 'Delph, say hello to your granddad.'

'Hello, granddad,' says Delphine in a low, awkward voice.

'You're a big girl now,' says the man. Jed beams a smile at him too but the man ignores his son-in-law completely, pointedly.

'She is almost eleven,' says Anne with pride.

The man looks at the girl as if slightly surprised with the news although he knows full well how old his granddaughter is and this little demonstration of pretence makes Jed cringe innerly, which, he is sure, his father-in-law duly notices too.

'So, it's been ten years,' says the man looking at his daughter.

'What makes you do this? Surely, not affection?'

Now her husband looks away from her; he glances past the man in the doorway, this time without any smile. Apparently, he caught,

through the doorway, a glimpse of a picture on the wall — a small seascape — and pretends to inspect it but Anne knows what he thinks. We are wasting our time here — this is what he thinks. Your father is having fun at our expense again — this is what he thinks. The best thing we can do right now is to turn away and walk back to our car. This is what he thinks and he is right, she concludes — perhaps. For now, at least. But the point is to turn this situation the right way, she thinks. We may be wasting our time here but we are in the middle of something fluid. Such immediate hostility though, she thinks — and this outfit so impressively, humiliatingly snazzy in its purported shabbiness, so obviously chosen, meticulously, to demonstrate how little he cared about anyone. How could she miss this man so much? Did she really?

‘I missed you,’ she says to her father as if answering her own question instead of turning away and walking back to their car. ‘And I thought that you probably could miss us too.’

‘Well,’ says her father and turns back to the girl, ‘I certainly missed you, young lady. How you’ve been doing so far?’

‘I am all right,’ says Delphine.

‘She looks phenomenal,’ says the man to no one in particular. ‘Do

you still remember my name?’ he asks Delphine.

‘Yes, of course I do,’ says the girl pretending to be taken aback.

‘It’s Dan.’

‘That’s right,’ says the man. ‘Now, tell me more about yourself.’

‘There’s nothing much to tell,’ says the girl. ‘I go to school. It’s nice. I have friends. I am taking piano lessons.’

‘Are you?’ says the man. ‘Good girl.’

‘She’s quite all right,’ says Anne. ‘She is a good swimmer and a good reader.’

‘Is she?’ says Dan. He looks at his daughter and in his pale, transparent, unblinking eyes of a former public servant Anne sees such emptiness, such indifference that she looks at her husband seeking support. Her husband responds with a gaze so insincere, so distant that Anne suddenly feels abandoned. The feeling is like walking on a narrow plank hundreds of feet above the ground between two voids. She also thinks, if only for a split second, that her father could be right and that her suave handsome husband could be a stranger to her and, overall, a shallow, pretentious individual she never really knew well enough.

‘We brought a cake,’ he says though, showing his father-in-law

one of the bags.

‘It’s a true invasion then, isn’t it?’ says Dan addressing an empty space somewhere between his daughter and his son-in-law.

‘We just came to visit you, granddad,’ says Delphine. ‘Aren’t you happy?’

‘No, well, yes, I am,’ says Dan acting comically flustered and embarrassed — the sure sign he is enjoying the situation immensely. At this moment, Anne thinks that her father knows very well why they are here. She feels absolutely sure about that. She thinks that he knows quite a lot about her, as usual, and about the particulars of her life in spite of their long-lasting estrangement. He obviously knows everything about their circumstances, she thinks looking in his transparent, vacant eyes, about their current financial situation; she can imagine that he even knows the exact number — 476 — representing the imminent calamity of an irreversible overdraft in her banking account. ‘I am happy,’ he continues in a carefree, impersonal, even voice of a public announcement. ‘Do, come in. We could all have some tea, I suppose.’

He steps back and aside inviting them all into the house. They

enter. Dan closes the door. All together, they proceed to the large reception room with four windows and many pictures on the walls. Jed, trying to act undaunted with all the wealth of display, places his bags on the floor near a sofa. With the same exaggerated assertiveness, which makes her husband uncomfortable, Anne produces a long orange box out of the nearest bag, opens it, pulls a heavy bottle of sparkling wine out of the box, borderline cheap, and places it on the table.

'Ta-da!'

Dan looks at the bottle. Anne and her husband had an argument about the wine in the supermarket. Jed said that they either needed something a lot better and more expensive or nothing at all. Anne argued that it was more a sign of goodwill and that the wine wasn't exactly cheap at £11 a bottle. Jed said that it was offensively, patronisingly priced so as not to appear outright cheap but that it still looked cheap enough to not even justify the price. said that he was too analytical about that. Do not complicate things, she said, they are already complicated enough. Jed takes a box with a cake out of the other bag and places it on the table next to the bottle. A moment of awkward silence follows, which Dan, apparently, has no intention to interrupt. He looks like he is waiting for something else to happen, but nothing

else is happening for quite some time while all three of them stand around the table looking at each other. Delphine comes closer to a mantelpiece and inspects an old bronze clock.

'Should I help you with the tea?' suggests Anne picking up one of the bags.

'Well, why not?' says Dan.

In the kitchen, he takes a large teapot out of a cupboard. Anne knows this teapot very well; it's been in the family for at least twenty years. It is an almost spherical two-litre affair decorated with poppies and cornflowers embossed on the plump sides of the vessel, a present from her father to her late mother for her fifty first birthday. A blue finial on the top of the lid in the form of a finch was knocked off once, when the lid had fallen on the floor — it was a tragedy her father was keen to discuss for days. The tiny splinters were all meticulously collected; the finch was glued back together and returned to the top of the lid with the help of a precisely placed transparent drop of superglue, but the chink on the side of the lid remained. Looking at the teapot Anne can, momentarily, see all the faces of many guests — all at once — sitting at the table in the large reception room; she can almost hear their voices; it seems to her for a second that she can follow their discussion

about something ... about politics, maybe. Uncle Ned, Aunt Zoe, Mr Redwood, Ira, Tom and Fiona, their son Trent, her onetime friend. For some reason — but of course because her mother's birthday was in early March — all these faces are associated with a very specific kind of light — pale, bright, illuminating even the darkest corners in the room with radiant vernal glow. Also, the multitudes of restless naked branches outside come to mind, the entire thick mesh of them flattened by the intense afternoon sun against the dim blue sky, the fresh smell of the warm wind outside the house.

‘She looks so wonderful,’ says her father while she is rinsing the teapot. ‘She is such a great girl.’

‘Isn't she?’ responds Anne with much enthusiasm. At last, she feels the old connection with her father, long lost, established again.

‘What school does she go to?’

‘This is the problem,’ says Anne with a sudden ease. My father, apparently, has someone to help him with the household, she thinks, coming once or twice a week; otherwise, he is doing it all himself and he doesn't really like doing all these lonesome chores; he could be missing that genuine familial atmosphere of a preparation for a party,

of close domestic togetherness and warmth; she certainly misses it, she thinks. Everything is possible, she thinks with the swelling conviction while filling a large bowl made of thick blue glass with fruit she already took out of the bag, rinsed under the tap and wiped with a towel, which doesn't look and smell good enough for her. She places oranges next to dark blue plums; places bright green apples next to the oranges. Suddenly, she feels a lot more confident. You can return to that fairy tale place of your childhood where all were once so happy together preparing food for friends, celebrating, helping each other; you can step in that stream twice. 'The school. She goes to St Michael's,' she says. 'It's a good school but ... She is very good at so many things. And she has a chance. She can have a bursary at the Putney School, which is a very good school for girls. She passed an interview, actually, a week ago ... but they are very strict about everything. About maths, and history, and science ... They have such a high standard. And she needs it. She needs that school. It's very good for music too and she's already grade 5. Now, we hired private tutors but we ... we struggle a bit to tell you the truth. The magazine where Jed worked closed three years ago and now he is freelance, and it's a huge difference ... Oh, it's a nightmare, to be honest.' She sighs and wipes her hands. 'No one pays

on time and it's a lot like starting your entire career all over again. And our company is struggling too. They had to lay off twenty per cent of the entire personnel recently.'

'And you work?' asks her father snatching a plum from the bowl and immediately taking a bite, hungrily, with a little sucking sound. This is why she bought plums in the first place, she thinks: she remembered how much he loved them.

'The same,' she says. 'Sales, global media outreach,' She smiles weakly. 'Those who remained are scared to death. No one is even complaining, everyone is just like, you know ... catatonic, like rabbits in the headlights. It's a small company and we are all petrified, to tell you the truth, waiting for the next cull — that is, if the firm survives at all because there are rumours that our CEO just absconded if you can imagine such thing. It's bizarre, this economy ...'

She looks at her father and finds him in a particularly bright mood, smiling and staring at her triumphantly with his bright pale eyes as if he had just found an answer to a riddle, which pained him for several days already.

'She does deserve it, doesn't she?' he says with a slight joyful

chuckle as if making an especially wry observation or a joke.

‘What?’ asks Anne holding a knife and a pack of salmon in her hands.

‘Such an exceptional education.’

‘Well, of course she does,’ says Anne opening the vacuum package. ‘And there’s nothing exceptional about it. This is what you need today — this is the minimum of what you need today — to get a slimmest possible chance in life.’

‘I think you overdramatize the situation,’ says her father taking another plum. ‘I know many, many people who achieved a lot in life without such lavish contribution from their parents.’

‘There’s nothing lavish about it,’ says Anne placing the pieces of salmon on a large blue plate, ‘it’s basic.’

‘No, statistically it’s not,’ responds her father. ‘Statistically, private education is a huge luxury and I honestly don’t see why Dolphin here might need such a luxury. She is a normal girl. And also — private education separates people from reality.’

‘It didn’t separate you from reality,’ says Anne.

‘In my time it was different.’

‘And who is Dolphin?’ asks Anne.

‘Dolphin,’ says her father. ‘Your daughter.’

‘Her name is not Dolphin,’ says Anne. ‘My daughter is called Delphine.’

‘What’s the difference?’ responds her father with much glee.

‘Dolphin means a fish with a womb in Greek, a swine if you wish, a sea pig, and that fancy French name means exactly the same.’

Anne looks at her father in disbelief.

‘Really?’ she says.

‘But of course,’ says her father readily. ‘Whatever your ideas, it all means the same. A pig of the sea, this is what it means. This is how you call your daughter. This is the name you’ve given to my granddaughter. A sea pig! A fish with a womb! All the while pretending to be such a fancy, sophisticated modern woman.’

‘This name doesn’t mean anything like that,’ says Anne defensively and fully aware that once again she fell into this trap of an argument with her father. She knows how much he can enjoy provoking her into such things. She can clearly remember herself shouting tremendous abuse at him last time they saw each other — and he

relished the scene. He was genuinely happy, she thinks; a rare sight: beaming with satisfaction. She suddenly realises, with a quick glacial chill along her spine, that last time they spoke, she interrupted their argument at exactly — but exactly the same place, with exactly same words. It feels like *déjà vu*, she thinks; this feeling makes her dizzy. She shakes her head trying to surface as rapidly as possible from a strange dream, muddy and wobbly like a jelly, which quickly absorbs everything around her, spreading like a toxic fallout, turning reality — the bowl with fruits, the teapot, her father, the plate with smoked salmon, the fridge — into vague shadows. This is how you step in the same stream twice, she thinks. ‘It is a name associated with a flower and with the Greek city of Delphi,’ she says helplessly, ‘and ... it’s just a name. Why are you so mad about it all of a sudden?’

‘Because this is who you are!’ exclaims her father pointing his wrinkly index at his daughter. ‘This is who you are! Danielle was not good enough for you. Esther was not good enough! The names of your mother and your grandmother!’ Now Dan points at two old brass urns standing on the shelf next to the pots of pasta and rice with the names engraved on them — Esther Burin, 1912-1995 and Danielle Redcliff, 1940-2007. ‘You needed something foreign, something chic!

Something to match your nonentity of a husband, that silly idiot, pretentious, condescending ... A journalist! A whore, this is who he is, an unprincipled, morally indefensible chancer! How could you marry such a nincompoop?’

Saliva flies from his quivering lips the colour of well-bled meat. His hands tremble. With a loud click, he puts the teapot back on the marble working surface almost cracking it at the bottom. His daughter looks at him frightened.

‘Would you calm down, please?’ she says.

‘No, I wouldn’t!’ screams her father. ‘No I wouldn’t! You treat your father like a pig! You think I am a fool, an idiot, a stupid asshole! No, I am not! You are very much mistaken here! And now you have the nerve to come back to me to ask for money?’

‘Did I ask you for anything?’ says his daughter.

‘Don’t tell me that you just came here to see me,’ hisses her father. ‘Don’t you dare to make me such a moron! I am not! I am not a brainless veg yet, not yet! And I am not a cow to milk! Bread loaves don’t grow on trees! You must earn your own sustenance! You must have learned it long ago! Dolphin! It’s not my fault that instead of ... of taking

responsible, reasonable steps in your life ... you prefer to cavort with a well-endowed sleek worm. It's not my fault that you're such an empty-headed little airhead! I did what I could!

‘Oh, you're such a nasty piece of work!’ says his daughter coldly, fully aware that right now she is repeating, again, the last words she said to her father ten years ago, before their separation, literally word for word. Strangely enough, she feels like she is enjoying them now once again too, exactly the same way as she did ten years ago. This repetition suddenly calms her; if anything, it feels like a vindication of all her doubts and suspicions about her father and her family. He never liked you, said Jed once and he was right, she thinks. ‘You are such a miserable little twerp,’ she says. ‘You did nothing in your life, you achieved nothing — and you are lecturing me! How dare you? All you have you received from your parents who both died in their early fifties earning all this for you and — ultimately — for your offspring, for me, and for your granddaughter, whose name you mock. This all here belongs to her, not to us.’

‘You will be surprised,’ says her father. ‘The Society for Bird Watching — this is—’

‘You were just a clerk all your life, nothing more,’ interrupts him

his daughter. ‘No career, nothing! Just the same position for fifty years! You didn’t earn a single little penny in your entire life, nothing, you still only own what they left you, and now you are lecturing me? Oh, you’re such a worm! Crawl back under your rock, I don’t care! I don’t need you!’

Anne storms out of the kitchen and walks back into the reception room. Her husband and her daughter look with alarm at her red, excited face.

‘What happened?’ says her husband.

‘We are leaving!’

He laughs.

‘Already?’

Her father runs after her still holding an unfinished plum in his hand.

‘You are a liar, Annalisa! You are a liar! I worked hard! You will regret your words! Such a scoundrel! Coming to my house to beg for money and to insult me at the same time! What a warped little soul! I don’t want to see you anymore!’

He places the plum on the table.

‘Don’t you worry,’ says Anne coldly. She turns to her daughter and her husband. ‘Let’s go.’

‘What about all this?’ says Jed with a dejected smile indicating with his outstretched hands the large festive cake from a French bakery dominating the centre of the coffee table, the bottle of wine, and the assortment of other snacks.

‘Just leave it,’ says Anne prompting her daughter towards the front door.

‘No, you don’t leave it here!’ screams her father following them onto the porch. ‘You take all this fancy stuff with you!’ He throws the cake, all the wrapped snacks, one by one, and the bottle of champagne after his daughter and her family at the flagstones of the path leading across the front lawn to the gate. The bottle explodes with a tremendous report. The cake flaps onto the stones. Neither Anne, nor her husband turns back. Only Delphine stops for a second and looks at her grandfather with clearly visible genuine curiosity. She smiles but Dan doesn’t pay any attention to it.

‘And don’t come near this place searching for money!’ he screams. A lonely passer-by stops near the gate for a second and then continues

on his way. Anne, her husband, and her daughter all climb into their conspicuously cheap car. ‘Don’t you dare to come near me! Bread loaves don’t grow on trees! Remember that!’

The car starts along the street.

In the car, Anne catches her breath, looks at her husband, and starts laughing. She laughs with such infectious relief that, after a moment, her daughter joins her, and then her husband. All visions of happy childhood vanished in a second – this was the funniest thing, she thinks. She thinks that she can hear the melodious jangle of her dreams breaking apart; curiously, it sounds almost exactly like the doorbell chime in the house of her father.

‘Told you,’ says Jed.

Anne wipes tears from her cheeks.

‘I ... I completely forgot who he is.’

‘Was he always like this?’ asks her daughter.

‘No,’ says Anne, ‘sometimes he could be very nice. Sometimes he could be charming and even funny. I think, my mother loved him a lot.’

‘He is one stubborn old fart,’ says Jed.

‘He’s a peach, isn’t he?’ says Anne.

Jed touches the screen of the on-board car computer and finds a jazz melody on the radio. They turn the corner.

‘Let’s have a pizza,’ says Jed and although Anne knows full well that they can’t afford a pizza so tightly calculated is their budget of recent days, she eagerly nods.

‘Let’s have a pizza,’ she says.

‘Yay!’ exclaims Delphine with much enthusiasm. ‘With pepperoni and mushrooms and anchovies, and extra cheese, and San Pellegrino orange water!’

In the house, Dan stops in the middle of the reception room. For about half a minute, he stands still looking at some point between the mantelpiece and a picture on the wall, the point far removed from any reality around him. The daylight fades perceptibly in the room; the day wanes. After a while, Dan wakes up from his reverie. He picks up the plum from the table and, like a sleepwalker, in mechanical strides, moves to the kitchen.

In the kitchen, he looks around again as if searching for something. He sees the urns, the plate with smoked salmon, the teapot. He finishes

the plum and spits the stone out into the rubbish bin. Finally, his gaze falls upon a sheet of paper attached to his fridge among bills and notes with a small magnet in the shape of a strawberry. “Saturday, 18:30” is written on the paper, “Bird Planet”. Dan looks at the watch on the wall. It is 18:29. He quickly turns around, goes back to the reception room, and promptly switches the TV on. The show has already started; a red-faced man hiding in the reeds points at the sky with his gloved finger. A huge cloud of starlings pulsates in the cold, autumn sky. Dan presses the volume button and the voice of the man fills the room. Dan watches TV. The sky grows dark behind the window.



Sergey Bolmat published his first novel in Russia to great critical acclaim. To date, he has published three novels, two collections of short stories, many articles and essays in various periodicals, and a biography of Nikolay Chernyshevsky. Some of these books were shortlisted for literary awards, translated into many European languages, adapted for radio, and optioned and developed for film. His first short story written in English appeared in *The Higgs Weldon*.

Photo: Sergey Bolmat by Natalia Nikitin (detail)