



## AN ALMOST UNKNOWN MAN

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Communication starts quickly on the train. Especially if you have a long way to go, in two or three days, and the scenery outside the window flashes like the frames of a movie. Fields and forests look alike now and, in an hour, and it doesn't matter: the sun is shining in your eyes or its rays have jumped over your head and are frolicking on a small hand luggage net, like in a hammock, swinging at every joint of the rails. As if by magic, although there is no miracle, a teaspoon dances a cancan in a glass of thin glass. And the cup holder, bright as a doorman in an expensive restaurant, does not allow her to jump out of this vicious circle.

At first, the traveling companion does not seem dangerous to Lila. Although his whole appearance is a clear challenge. A clean-shaven face smelling of expensive perfume, a little like a pancake in its rounded shape, full red lips. The slender fingers are clearly well-groomed, marked by the vigilant attention of an experienced manicure master. And there's nothing to say about the hairstyle – the thick strands of hair are laid so thinly that it's time to think about a brilliant stylist who adjusted each small bundle of hair to fit it. So that there was not a single thaw, but everything was swaying like the Amur waves....

«I am glad to welcome you, Lilia Nikolaevna» the man nods slightly with those stunning curls. – I hope you don't have to travel long, otherwise you would have gone on the road by plane.

«How do you know me?»

– The young woman is surprised.

– Of course, of course," the interlocutor raises his eyebrows in amazement. "Don't you remember me?"

Where do you want to remember me? You were absolutely brilliant this evening! They are dressed up in all the riches of the world, a luxurious dress, a gold brocade belt at the waist, emphasizing the fragility of what is hidden under it. Thin lips, blush on her cheeks, golden curls curled on a thin pencil and hanging slightly over her amazing ears. And for those who would not be struck down by this beauty, there were also bright pearls on a high neck. And golden, almost invisible threads on her wrists, decorated with dewdrops of the most refined diamonds.

«It can't be, it was impossible to see it in one second, – Lilya shrugs her elegant shoulders. «So you're not the doorman». The tables were set by the time I arrived – the waiter also disappears. The paparazzi? An underground reporter for a tabloid newspaper is clearly not the topic.

So who are you, the mysterious Captain Nemo, emerging from the depths of the sea?

«A gallant entertainer», – he smiles for the first time. – It must have been my disastrous evening, since you didn't remember me....

Allow me to introduce myself.

My name, oddly enough, is Arnold Archibaldovich. – My mother was a young signalman at the front, fell in love with the brave Marine Archie, and when she realized that she was pregnant, she



found out that my future father had already been sent overseas. She received only one letter from him, in which her lover asked: if there is a boy, to name him Arnold in honor of his grandfather....

There is a short pause in the compartment of the sleeping car.

– Don't blame me, – the woman continues. – I think it was my husband's anniversary. He really wanted to introduce me to his circle. I felt like Marguerite at Woland's ball. I smiled at everyone a lot, but I remembered a few...

– I suggest we hush up this awkwardness, – the old pirate suggests. – For me, the trip will last almost seven days, and therefore my friends suggested that I pass this time with the help of excellent French cognac Camus Extra Elegance. We decided not to bother with half-liter bottles – exactly 10 «portions» of zero-seven. One liter of amber nectar per day of travel.

Madam, may I ask: Would you like to take a sip of this wonderful drink with me?

Lilya doesn't have time to answer anything.

The traveling companion, with the dexterity of a magician, takes out two elegant crystal glasses from a small bag, cuts slices of fragrant orange, a small jar of black caviar, and crispy French rolls on a small glass plate.

«Don't be surprised by the orange» – Arnold explains. – The fact is that it is wrong to use lemon for skating. Acid kills the taste, but orange, on the contrary, enhances perception. The fact is that this particular Camus variety contains notes of orange jam, walnuts and almonds.

– Are you such a subtle expert?

– Once upon a time we were trotters! The glass holds exactly 30 milliliters. For me, this volume is no more than two drops of atropine in both eyes. But we're not going to get drunk, we're just going to have a nice chat.

May I ask you a favor, madam?

– It depends on which one, – Lilya says, alarmed.

– Don't think anything bad, – the entertainer assures. – I know what an irresistible impression I make on women. Almost hypnotic. So please don't try to persuade me to do anything like that. I had my appendicitis removed three days ago, and therefore any excesses will only harm my recovering body....

– Are you kidding me?! – Lily is amazed. – Yes, you are an impudent man!

– My job is to warn you, – with these words Arnold fills the glasses.

Cognac is really good. It dissolves in every cell of the larynx, gently envelops it, slips down with a pleasant warmth.

– It's enchanting, – Lilya admits. – And how much, if you'll excuse my indiscretion, is a drop of this divine dew worth?



– I didn't measure it in drops», – the man shakes his head. – And the whole bubble is about 70-75 units with three zeros. But don't worry, it's a gift from a friend.

– Three quarters of a million? – A woman gets up from the seat.

– You don't choose your friends, – Arnold says. – As our famous classic Leo Tolstoy said: «Never listen to those who speak ill of others and well of you»...

The first stack is quietly followed by the second, then the third. Lilya notices that they are not hitting like a sledgehammer on the head, but are filled with the singing of birds of paradise. The evening becomes languid, but the gentleman is in no hurry to move in with her, which makes Lily a little embarrassed: is she really so bad that she can be neglected?

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At half past five in the morning, there is a gentle knock on the door.

– Citizen, wake up, the guide whispers. – Your station is in half an hour...

Lilya croaks something in response, saying, thank you, I woke up.

She listens to the silence.

Strange. According to her assumption, an imposing man after cognac should snore like a drunken boatswain.

But nothing scares the silence.

She quietly changes her clothes, pulls on a light raincoat, and then a voice stops her:

– Are you planning to desert? Escape?

– Why run away? Just my stop.

He still doesn't move.

But he says it barely audibly.:

– You'll be fine. If in doubt, leave a note with your email address on the table. I am always ready to support...

She's doubtful. But life is really a very strange thing. Then he will press the hammer to the anvil, then he will let go. And the people who are ready to breathe a spark of life, drown disbelief in a sea of optimism, can be counted on the fingers.

Lilya hastily scribbles hurried English letters on a piece of paper and leaves the compartment.

Whether there will be a continuation of the acquaintance, she doesn't care much. The train, slowing down, leaves the station building behind.



«I'm home», – Lilya rejoices, and after waiting for the train to stop, she gets off the platform....

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But everything is not as rosy as it might seem at first glance. Hope, like a saucer during bench shooting, shatters into small fragments.

First of all, Mom. Of course, the stroke was extensive, but that was the salvation - otherwise Lilya would have arrived at the memorial service in time.

It would be possible to slowly develop arms and legs, especially since the paralysis of the limbs, like a well-fed wolf, came to the end of the meal and only slightly bit the nerve endings.

But my mother decided to set up a sanatorium, obviously hoping that her younger daughter would come to her, and not the eldest. And they, as in their daughter's deep childhood, will merge into a single embrace on a planet "Not of this world"....

Secondly, Lorca, who cannot be treated otherwise than as a garbage pig.

Two days before Lily's departure from the capital, she called from Switzerland and literally begged her older sister to drop all her business and come to her mother urgently. «You know how hard it is to open a visa and how unaffordable the plane tickets are. I'll call you back in a couple of days and let you know when I'll come and relieve you...»

After «a couple of days», she called back and, as if nothing had happened, began to sing a song she had already heard a hundred times: "Well, darling, you understand that I cannot leave my husband alone. Some shark will immediately swim up to him and devour him with all his guts. And then I'll stay on beans, and goodbye to the homeland of cheeses and chocolate! What did I forget in your rawhide countryside?"

Lilya remembers for a second Vadka, the bespectacled programmer, Lorka's husband. Yes, on his sunken chest and the inscription on his forehead: egoist and consumer, it's not that sharks won't take care of it – flies won't land.

The older sister is trying to reason with the younger one, they say, this is our mother – how many nights has she not slept?! But the youngest one doesn't care: «If you don't want to sit with the old lady, hire a nurse»!

Mother Margarita Viktorovna doesn't want to hear about the nurse:

– You're crazy! I've raised thousands of students, what will they think of me?!

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Three months later, Lilya sums up the sad results.

It seems that 10-15 years have been taken out of her life during this time. Dimmed, haggard.



Mom turned out to be domineering and grumpy, she won't let me sit down for a second:

«You haven't combed my hair since this morning!» I don't look like a peasant woman who brought carrots to the market.

– Give me an urgent massage on my left ankle, it seems that I have pressure sores there.

While mom is at a distance, it feels like there is no more perfect person, closer, kindred.

But it's worth being under the same roof with her, and even in such a position, and different thoughts come to mind. Was she going to turn her daughter into a debtor? And to be in prison forever and ever and only a scythe on the street...

At first, my husband called five or six times a day, but now once a week. And really, is it worth turning into a recluse with an absent wife? In joy, they are always nightingales – the trills do not stop. And in grief they prefer to pour themselves in front of others.

And at the moment when she and her mother almost turn into blood enemies and lick their mental mutilations, each in her own room, a thin beep sounds from Lily's mobile phone – a letter arrives by e-mail.

It's unlikely from Lorca – they had a big fight. And what to take from the Cerberus guarding the bone?

A husband?! Hardly. If he is already «seducing» some «unique» one, then he does not care about the legitimate spouse. Husband or mother? The age-old rhetorical question. «Guys, let's live together!»

And if they are sitting 10 meters away from each other, and there are not enough hands to hug them at the same time? A heart breaks between both of them—and a heart break is certain death.

Lilya looks at the phone screen – the subject of the letter is «Camus Extra Elegant».

Of course, it's Arnold. He reports that all 9 unopened bottles of divine nectar are intact, because half a day after its "descent" in his native harbor, he was severely ill, and doctors at the district hospital where he was diagnosed with peritonitis. They fought desperately for his life. But he was undoubtedly saved by their meeting – Camus, small glasses of nectar, and spiritual unity.

Without knowing why Lilya answers. Out of desperation, in detail. Life is unbearable, there's nothing to lose...

A stormy correspondence is unfolding between us.

As a man who has seen life, he tries not to ignore her every question. It teaches you to build a proper relationship with your mother, to find words of support in any situation.

It offers recipes for hundreds of dishes that can lift the mood even when it has rolled into the darkest corner.



He sends her photos of thousands of the most beautiful flowers and dozens of the most delightful melodies.

First she listens to them by herself, and then with her mother.

They finally feel like they're in a boat together and rowing in the same direction.

One day, Lilya's mother asks her friend to ask an unusual question: «What is the most important quality a gentleman should have»?

He immediately sends a reply: «A gentleman should distinguish a jackdaw from a crow. The rest is unimportant – good manners, courtesy and other gallantries are all at the genetic level, in the blood».

On Lily's birthday, the doorbell rings. There's a messenger on the doorstep with a huge bouquet of snow-white roses.

– For some reason, 85, – the boy says guiltily.

It's incredibly pleasant, but why 85?

– You're still stupid, – Mom smiles. – That's exactly how old we are today...

Life is filled with bright colors. They do fortune-telling on coffee grounds every morning. What kind of surprise will Arnold Archibaldovich prepare today?

One day, almost at dawn, mom looks into her daughter's room.

– No letter yet? What is it?" she asks hopefully.

– Mom, – Lilya is suddenly amazed. – Mom, are you walking?!

She screams. And he rushes headlong to his bed.

They celebrate the first «hike» with champagne and a delicious cake.

– Tell me, after all, what's going on between you and Arnold?

– Nothing, – Lilya smiles into her glass. – There's never been anything!

– So, who is he?

– If only I knew about it myself! An almost unknown man...