

TULUBAIKAPORTIA



by VANECHKA

Translation and commentary by Vanya Bagaev

Episode 13: about buying strange cats from drunkards

nova-nevedoma.com/buying-strange-cats-from-drunkards/

“Perfect nonsense goes on in the world. Sometimes there is no plausibility at all.” — “The Nose” by Nikolai Gogol

— Well, I was sittinn there, lookinn out t’window as I do, and along comes Leo, that rotten scoundrel, holdinn a kitten in his arms, and says (Leo, not t’kitten), “Fancy buyinn a pet, Baba Nüra?”

— And thee?

— And I, why in blazes would I need a cat? I tells him. Who’s gonna feed it? I spend me days sittinn by t’window, me legs ain’t what they used to be, tha knows that, but sittinn there, openinn t’window, watchinn t’world go by, feelinn t’wind on me face, t’sun dazzlinn me eyes, t’heat bakinn me, summer flyinn by, I take off me headscarf, let me hair down — long hair, mind thee, grey but long — put on me dark glasses, and there I am, sittinn like I’m at a bloody resort, but no need to shake on a bus or a train, just open t’window and breathe in nature. Once, me granddaughter even snapped a photo of me like that, cheeky

thinn. “Tha should be a model, Grandma, tha’s a spittinn image of un, a diva,” so she says, aye, she does, but I’m an old lady now, I know I am, as far from a model as to Beijing doggy-style, but still, it cheered me up, she’s a clever lass, top of her class, a real beauty, just wish she’d visit more often than wunst a year as those ungrateful children brinn her to see me, if she was older, she’d come on her own and take more pictures. I do love those photos — when else will tha see thyself lookinn like a bloody Aphrodite? But thee, thee won’t see that photo, tha hasn’t earned a peek at me beauty yet, thee old rag, half-blind as tha is, tha’d probably go stone blind, or hex me, for sure.

— Eh, what art tha natterinn on ‘bout, Nüra? Hexinn? Thee? Tha could hex anyone thyself, if tha blinked.

— I do, unlike thee, thee sly old witch, go to church, I do. Light me candles, pray to t’Father, and t’Son, and t’Holy Spirit, and a whole host of other good folk.

— Well, I go to church, too.

— I’ve never clapped eyes on thee there, thee saggy old sow, not even wunst.

— Mayhap we go on different days. Goddie sees everythinn, Nellie, even thy foul gob.

— I’m only teasinn, lovingly, thee daft lass.

— Well, what ‘bout our Leo then?

— So, he comes to me, with a kitten, mind thee, and says, “Would tha fancy buyinn a kitten, Baba Nüra? Prices are fair and square, right fittinn for thy pensioner’s purse.” Cheeky sod, he’s never even seen me purse, ‘tis got a black hole in it big enough to fall through, especially since t’pension they pay nowadays is barely owt, as tha knows. Factually, I went to t’post office wunst, to collect me pension (back when me legs still worked a bit), and there’s that scrawny cow Lena sittinn there, tha knows her, Tonya t’Fanny-for-sale’s daughter, and, well, she’s got five nippers now, a spittinn image of her mother, poppinn ‘em out like a breedinn sow, bojeupasi, and she tells me, “There’s no pension yet, Baba Nüra, they haven’t brought t’cash,” and I says to her, plain as day, “What am I supposed to eat then, thee daft halfwit?” and she just shrinks into her chair, all deflated like, and says, “Tha could try beinn less rude, Baba Nüra. I know all ‘bout thy temper, but tha’s out of line now.”

— She said that straight to thy face? And what didst tha do?

— I told her, “I’m only teasinn, lovingly, thee daft lass.”

— Go on, what did she say?

— She says, “I don’t need love like thine, Baba Nüra, I’ve got plenty of me own, so tha can shove it up thy arse, and deep.”

— Well, I never...

— I thought, that’s it, end of t’line, t’youth these days are totally out of

hand, no shame, no conscience, no compassion, no respect for t'older generation, for in our time, remember, after a fifty-hour work day, we'd just sit by t'window, prayinn for our fiancé to return from war, prayinn for t'oats to grow and t'bugs not to eat our spuds, and then, instead of a fiancé, remember that time, a tank rolled up? Remember what I did with it?

— 'Tis a story for t'ages, Nüra, love. How could un forget?

— A wee reminder won't hurt, though. I'm sittinn by t'window, and here comes this tank. I step outside, grab its barrel, and tie it into a knot. Out of t'tank, these bloody Germans start crawlinn in droves, babblinn in their language, some gibberish. I just show 'em me proletariat woman fist, give 'em a look fierce as an Amazon warrior, and they, scared witless, shite their black trousers and scurry back into their tank, off they go — phew!

— That, I remember. Now, what 'bout Leo?

— So, I told him straight, I've got no money. Nil, as much as our dear footballers score.

— And what did he say?

— Nowt much. "I know tha has it, Baba Nüra, tha's trickinn me, tha's just got thy pension, I'm not a fool," he says. So, methinks, he won't leave it be, that drunken twat, and I decide to appeal to his conscience. "Why ain't tha in t'army, Leo, don't tha love thy country?" But he

straightens his crooked back, all proud, and says, “I’m a writer, Baba Nüra, what’s a scribbler like me to do in t’army?” I’m starinn out t’window at him, in me black glasses, grey hair nearly touchinn t’ground, like a siren, or a mermaid, a diva, in a word, and I say, “What kind of writer art tha, Leo? In our time, what were writers? War heroes. What did they write ‘bout? T’hardships at t’front, ‘bout legs blown off, ‘bout our Glorious Army’s victories over t’enemy, ‘bout heroic deeds, ‘bout Goddie, ‘bout feelinns, ‘bout love, and ‘bout how our women could stop a tank in its tracks and tie its bloody barrel into a knot, and what will Leo, our in-house alcoholic, write ‘bout? How jolly it looks at t’bottom of a bottle and at t’bottom of our society? Sees he’s a Leo and fancies himself a Tolstoy. Oh, by t’by, just this winter, I was runninn to t’shop, so—

— Eh, thee? Runninn? Don’t kid thyself, Nüra. A runner, are we? Where dost tha think tha’s off to, thee old cow?

— I am runninn, I am, legs movinn like a young lass, tha’d chop-chop thy legs faster with that frost like that, not even me old bear coat, left over from me granddad before they set him off on a raft down t’river, does any good, nor t’knitted fur scarves, nowt at all, so there’s nowt for it but to grit me teeth and run.

— And where’d tha get ‘em teeth from? Tell me that story, too, Nüra, please do, deign me.

— From a bloody unicorn, they grew in. Eat right, not like scrabblinn in horse dung, and tha’ll grow ‘em too, thee raggedy mop.

— So there tha is, runninn along, and what happens next?

— Well, next I see Leo, standinn there, t'writer, pullinn out his “pen”, and he's peeinn on a snowdrift, but he's not just peeinn, he's writinn, letter by letter, like some Tolstoy'd really come crashinn down on us.

— And what didst tha do?

— I shouted at him. “What art tha doinn, peeinn here, thee bastard, got no shame nor conscience, thee sewer rat?” but he just turns, looks at me, not a flicker of reaction on his face, tucks his pen back in his trousers and staggers off, face all red, covered in snow, clearly just stood up from that very snowdrift.

— And what did he write?

— Well, he wrote it down, expressed it, tha might say, t'whole essence of t'universe in un word.

— And what word was that?

— Eeh, “CUNT”, in big letters like that, all golden and glitterinn in t'sun, it were a clear day, always is when 'tis nippy like this. I thought to meself, here, that's young folk for thee, artist, writer, painter. What art tha laughinn at, thee daft old bat? Why art tha neighinn like a bloody horse?

— Well, could he, Leo, write not 'bout t'nature of existence, no, but 'bout thee, me dear.

— Now, don't muddle t'waters, thee old hag.

— So, tha pulled him up on his writinn, and what did he say?

— He says, "I am, Baba Nüra, writinn a novel, 'bout our Tulubaika and village life, and thee," he says, "Baba Nüra, tha's in it too."

— Am I in it, am I?

— Sorry, love, our dear Karenina Anna, but who needs thee? "This novel," he says, "is really 'bout t'structure of t'universe and how it works, and t'village is just a framinn device," was what he said, I remember this nonsense word for word, still got a sharp memory, I do.

— And what are these forces?

— Well, I'm like t'queen of t'universe, greatest creature in it, guardian of its structure and essence, historical creation, sole chronicler, would-be empress, and Leo — t'fool, entertains me with his jokes.

— Tha's fibbinn.

— Go ask him thyself, thee dyed tart.

— Next time I see him, I'll ask, Nüra.

— "Our Tulubaika," he says, "is nowt less than a perfect model of t'universe, where various human essences, good and evil, come together in a long, magical dance. They dance and waltz, until in this dance is born t'Istina, with a capital I, that un, where human and

more-than-human nature is fused, and through us, t'universe comes to know itself, choosinn me as its chief representative among mankind."

— Tha should tell this to t'priest, he'd smack thee with his thurible for such heresy.

— Well, our priest drives a bloody G-Wagon, I reckon he doesn't give two hoots 'bout these metaphysical shenanigans, bless him, look at t'jowls on him, only his collar covers his four chins, might as well be a politician, or a mayor, or a governor, or go straight for president, they like that sort of enterprisinn beauty there, big demand for that breed. Tha knows Nick t'One-Eyed?

— I know. How can I not know him?

— Galina, our church caretaker, wunst told me that Nick t'One-Eyed came to atone for his sins and lift curses, and he's got 'em aplenty, a whole G-Wagonload, as they say, plus a small cart, and three more trailers on t'way.

— Hast tha seen t'palace he's built for himself?

— I wunst told him, when I bumped into him on t'street, he was walkinn with his brute of a bodyguard, a daft giant, in his boots as black as pitch, as if he licks 'em off himself every morrow, only to tramp through t'same muck, mind thee, that thee and I walk in, and he walks past me without so much as a glance, and I whispered, just loud enough to be heard, "may tha never raise thy mast again, thee bloody imp."

— And what did he do?

— Well, he must have good hearinn, with everyone always whisperinn ‘bout him, even in church, he shot me a glance and continued to tread muck with his licked-off boots.

— Tha’s a bold un, no fear in thee.

— So he comes to church, like a toad to a viper, as they say, and whispers to our priest, “I’ll donate to t’church, and tha’ll absolve me of me sins, deal?” Our priest’s no fool, he agreed, absolved him of his sins, and now he’s drivinn ‘round in his G-Wagon through our native mire.

— Can tha get through our mire on owt else though? What’s t’fuss ‘bout? He earned it — bought it, absolvin sins isn’t easy nowadays, look at t’amount of work.

— They should walk, t’bellends, they’ve ruined t’entire road.

— So what ‘bout Leo, our writer?

— What a bloody writer he is. I told him straight, but he keeps blatherinn on, says mayhap I’d like to buy a kitty, and there I was, wiltinn in t’heat, sittinn and starinn at him from under heavy eyes, black and judgemental, heavier than all of Nick t’One-Eyed’s unabsolved sins.

— That’s thy talent.

— And he says, “I’ll give thee a discount, Baba Nüra, love, as t’guardian

of t'universe, take this new fluffy friend for half price."

— Was t'kitty bonny at least?

— T'kitty, I must admit, was absolutely lovely, I saw her from afar — tangerine, long fur, eyes green as gooseberries, some exotic breed, not from 'round here.

— And what didst tha do?

— I told Leo I had no money, said: "Give me t'money, and I'll buy thy animal."

— And what did he do?

— He looked at me with such pitiful eyes, like a wee nipper. "Thee," he says, "Baba Nüra, tha's t'true local kingpin, everyone knows thee, tha's our real strength, t'backbone that holds t'whole village together, without thee," he says, "our tiny universe would crumble like sand from a broken hourglass, and imagine, Baba Nüra, thee sittinn by t'window, enjoyinn our lovely summer, dreaminn, and beside thee, or even on thy lap, sits this kitty, purrinn, radiatinn kindness, love, positive cosmic energies, and in winter she'll warm both body and soul, for cats are such creatures, they catch mice and heal chakras."

— And what didst tha do?

— I must confess, I melted at such a pitch.

— There tha has it, he conned thee, me dear, charmed thee, a cupid in businessman's clothing.

— Who's conned who, thee holey sack. I sees this lovely creature in t'arms of that raggedy cretin, Tulubaika's own parasite, a boozed-up flea, a sodden louse, I does. Lookinn into Leo's bloodshot eyes, and t'cat's precious green ones, while I sits in me black glasses. He can't see how me eyes are movinn, to him, I'm just a statue in t'window, Venus, bloody Venus of Milo—

— Or of Willendorf...

— Oh, shut up! And methinks, I gotta save that cat. She'll perish with that wretch, or he'll sell her to his drunken mates, 'em great degenerate decadent novelists just like him, and 'tis lucky, if 'em boozy lips end up flogginn her to some decent soul, otherwise, bojeupasi, gobble her up when there's nowt to chase t'vodka with, I've seen worse in t'war years, I have.

— Tha goes on like tha was t'only un in t'war.

— And where wert thee? Sharpeninn thy tongue or lyinn under t'enemy?

— Me dear, me mother hid me in t'woods, in an oak tree, fed me on crushed acorns and nettle soup.

— We've seen it all, we have. Horses, dogs, cats, leather belts, dreadful times... So, methinks, I can't leave this cat, with eyes like two

gooseberries, to such an infamous scum, our village's daft Leo, a thrall to Dionysus. I decides to buy t'critter off him, not just buy, but trade, set up a barter, pressinn on his sorest spot.

— What's that spot, Nüra? Not his writinn tool...

— Hold thy tongue, thee pervert. His boozinn muscle, his liver, that is. I've got an alternative for thee, I tells him, a more universal currency, better than any luces, since our money's as good as toilet paper these days, mayhap even less so. When they start payinn pensions in copper coins, tha won't even have summat to wipe thy arse with. Sometimes I wonders, how did folk manage a couple centuries back without paper money, and now here we are, millions handed out, barely enough for a couple loaves of bread, some milk, sausage made of offal. So I says to Leo, t'fool, "Dost tha think happiness lies in luces?" And he says, "What else, Baba Nüra?" Well, I tells him, in peace of t'soul!

— Oh, is that so... And how is thine? Peaceful?

— Look here, I tells him, Nick t'One-Eyed has so much money, he could fill an airplane hangar, and still have room. What does he do with it? Buys off his sins, and thee, Leo, dear, got any sins to buy off? No, so why art tha, daft, all after money, when tha says a cat can warm t'soul? Now, can tha put a price on that?

— And him?

— Well, he's standinn there, scratchinn his nape with his free hand, his

hand all mucky, as if he'd been digginn in t'chort's arse, and t'kitten, squirminn all over, not wantinn to sit in Leo's arms, for he all reeks of booze and piss, and says, Leo, that is, not t'cat, "no, me dear mistress of t'universe, 'tis priceless, it is," and I says to him, "I've got, Leo, love, a bottle of pre-revolutionary samogón, artisanal, made with holy water — they only distilled such stuff under t'Tsar, stopped under Bolsheviks. Tha gives me t'cat, I give thee this bottle, and then our souls will both be at peace."

— Samogón? To Leo? Tha's quite summat...

— Hold on, not done yet, t'most important bit's cominn. So, we live, me and Mara, this cat, we dote on each other, go to t'shops together, collect t'pension, and off to church, she runs 'round me, rubs against me legs, jumps, sits on me shoulder, like a parrot, I swear, only me back ain't what it used to be, starts stiffeninn up after she sits there for half an hour, had this one: woke up un morrow, and this wee chortess climbed on me, purrinn so loud 'tis like a drum corps vibratinn through me spine, won't budge, so, I had to lie there till noon, couldn't get up, couldn't move. Had this dream wunst, sat on t'cat in it, Mara was huge in t'dream, like a horse, or a bloody outlandish elephant, and off we flew to explore our universe. Me with a glitterinn crown, her with those green eyes of hers shininn like floodlights, lightinn our way through t'cosmos. We're flyinn, light speed, mayhap even faster, and all we see are traffic lights blinkinn and cars honkinn, but no coppers or any other beinns that could stop us — such is life for t'mistress of t'universe and her faithful friend Mara. I even brought her fresh milk a couple of times

from thy cow, sneakinn out at four in t'morn, milked a cupful and brought it to her.

— So it was thee...

— Don't tha shriek, what, a cup of milk too much to spare? Thee and thy old fart of a husband guzzle it down by t'bucketful every day, and t'cat, bless her, probably never seen fresh milk in her life, well now she has, 'course. If tha'd seen how she gulps it down, lappinn it up like an excavator, almost scoopinn t'cup along with it, a trifle to thee, but a joy to Mara, she's like a nipper, me lass, and it makes her happy and me too, keeps me from sittinn alone all day.

— And what am I to thee?

— Thee and thy old fart, I'm sick of t'sight of thee both, me soul's fed up with thee, but with her, here's summat new, tha won't even see such beauty on t'telly.

— Thanks a bunch, friend.

— Tha hush, I'm just teasinn, lovingly. What are we to each other?

— I don't even know any more, Nüra, what we are, mayhap nowt.

— But we've been through fire, water, and those copper pipes, seen everythinn there is to see, either in person or on t'telly, but Mara, she's seen nowt, so I showed her, and then un day she just disappears.

— Oh... Just like that?

— There tha is sighinn, but if tha'd seen me sighinn. Half a day she's gone, a day, two days, thought she certainly wasn't off courtinn tomcats, t'furry wee strumpet, summat must've happened, felt like a bear was squeezinn me ribs, tryinn to crush 'em, break me heart. So, I took a wee corvalol¹, and other things, chamomile chai, herbal liqueur for calminn, sat by t'window, watchinn cars drive, muck churn, drunks wander back and forth, t'priest in his G-Wagon cominn from t'banya with some discounted fannies, Nick t'One-Eyed on his errands — t'village livinn its life as if nowt's happened, and me Mara was nowhere, just gone, as if she'd evaporated and merged with t'ether, so, methinks, time to start a search operation. Remember when Marfa's husband got lost, went for mushroom pickinn, old fart?

— Aye, I remember, bless his soul.

— So there I was, thinkinn I've done this before, heads straight to t'Community Centre — they're cultured folk there, understandinn, compassionate, sure to lend a hand; I walks in and says, "Eh up, lovely lads, I've lost me cat, Mara, cryinn day and night I am, she's been gone three days, me wee joy." And they goes, "And what can we do for thee, Baba Nüra?" I says, "Print me some flyers like tha did for Marfa's husband, here's a lost cat, tangerine, fluffy, with eyes like gooseberries, green with a yellow sheen, answers to Mara." They makes me a dozen of 'em flyers, I'm wanderinn 'round t'village, stickinn 'em up on poles, cryinn me eyes out, t'world's all dark, like 'tis t'end of days.

— So some human feelinns left in thee, then?

— Human feelinns might've upped and left, thee daft old bat, but plenty of cat ones. Cats, tha knows, they don't ask daft questions, just sit there quiet, meow now and then (that's their language, innit), tha feeds 'em, waters 'em, pets 'em, and they're happy with thee, but folk these days, try pleasinn 'em, all drunks, junkies, hoes, and thee two ancient relics, too stingy even to spare milk for a kitten, bet tha'd begrudge water from thy rusty tap when I'm dyinn — that's half t'people, one's a thief, another a murderer, a fifth already in jail for all t'above, but a cat? Sacred creature, by Leo's account, probably t'real essence of t'universe.

— So, did Mara turn up?

— So there I am, mourninn, same as ever by t'window, in me black shawl, me best black dress, t'one I buried me old man in and saw off me wayward friends, all in mourninn I am — Mara's gone, no sign of Mara, anyone might pass by t'window, young or old, a thug or a priest, a stray dog or a filthy pigeon, but not me dearie. Even t'sprats I bought for her went off, and me heart's gettinn worse, every part of me creaks, fallinn apart like an old shed, but then I see — Leo cominn, t'bastard, face red as a watermelon, in his torn old dad's quilted jacket, holey rubber boots, splashinn through puddles, and guess what he's holdinn?

— Mara?

— Nay, ah, if only — me flyer, “lost cat, name's Mara, find her and tha's

a champ, and champs deserve a reward these days.”

— And where’s Mara?

— “Baba Nūra,” says this twat, “thy cat’s with me, safe and sound, sittinn at home, guzzlinn milk down like there’s no tomorrow, tail’s not waginn, nose cold, eyes still that same green.” What a daft lad, eh? What sort of writer is he, can’t tell t’difference between gooseberry-green and just green? I got all excited, told him to brinn Mara, brinn her quick, why turn up empty-handed? And dost tha know what he says?

— What?

— He’s after a reward! “That’ll be a million,” says t’cheeky devil, “no less, and I don’t want thy vodka, nor even thy famous samogón, nowt. Drank thy piss thyself,” he says, “and felt only worse, so wretched I nearly hanged meself, already borrowed a rope on credit, found some soap, picked a tree, then realised I wanna live, understood where true happiness lies, so hand over t’lucres,” says t’cursed fiend, “and then tha’ll see thy cat.”

— And what didst tha do?

— I got so angry, I was boilinn over, muscles tense, veins bulginn, almost breathinn fire. Grabbed t’porcelain ashtray next to me, flung it at him, at Leo, with all me might, nearly fell out t’window doinn it, but hit him, right in his empty noggin, echoed all ‘round t’neighbourhood, surprised it didn’t shatter t’neighbours’ windows, and he, Leo,

t'mountain goat, leaps up, starts huffinn, thought he'd gone mad. "Give me t'cat," I yells, "thee vermin."

— And what did he do?

— Nowt — left. "Come and get t'cat thyself, thee old cunt," he says, "and now I definitely won't give her to thee without t'million. Tha's got no soul," he says, "tha's no mistress of t'universe, that's just me fiction."

— And what's thy point in all this?

— What dost tha mean, what's me point? I've got no choice, do I? Need to save me cat, me beloved Mara, but to save her I need to find a million somewhere, and 'tis still a week and a half till me pension (I'm countinn t'days), so she doesn't perish with him, that rotten scoundrel. That's why I came to thee, to ask, see if me dear friend would lend me a small million till payday?

Notes

1. A Soviet-era sedative and the go-to remedy for everything from heart palpitations to existential dread, despite being banned or restricted in most Western countries due to its barbiturate content. Can replace nostalglin and melancholin in some rare cases.

Read next part

Episode 14: about ways of spending your summer

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