

TULUBAIKAPORTIA



by VANECHKA

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Episode 3: about all the fuckery & beyond

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“Think you’re escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way home.” — “Ulysses” by James Joyce

Into her eyes, the wind drove smoke and ash from a poorly kindled mangal¹ and made the sky dissolve. Celestial bodies rolled about like billiard balls, be it the stars, the moon, or satellites and the ISS. Our heroine felt them upon herself, their brightness, their weight, their distance, both physical and metaphorical. The sky above the dacha² was clear. Visibility stretched far, so far that one’s eyes rippled at its magnificence. Too beautiful, she thought. Such beauty ought not to exist. Such beauty could drive one beyond one’s wits. Such beauty should be outlawed, denied legal counsel, stripped of the presumption of innocence, for it, this unattainable beauty, is the prime cause of all human joys and woes. Yet, for some reason, no one else paid any attention to it at that moment; instead, they looked at each other, and not just looked (“Would be terribly awkward, wouldn’t it?”), but interacted, conversed, socialised. Was their interest genuine, or was it all a game with unspoken rules that everyone pretended to play? The people around were far from celestial, not yet anyway (“Touch wood!”),

and far from luminaries, except perhaps in the sciences³ (“Fingers crossed”), but it was pleasant to share the same space and time with them, to observe them, to analyse their Chekhovian-Beckettian dialogues for meaning, while remaining silent herself. She could crack a joke when appropriate, throw in a sharp remark, answer a question directed at her. Yes, there were oddly many of those — she had suddenly become interesting (“Suspicious...”). For hours, she could wait, listen and re-listen, all while drifting somewhere else. Always this “somewhere else”; there’s no escaping it. It’s celestial, visible yet untouchable, impossible even to give it a proper name, for words are never enough to describe what you’ll never see. Some things have no name at all and cannot have one, so we call them names foreign to them to give them some semblance of form. — Are you here? — Alyona smirked and sat beside her. Me? Oh, if only I knew, she thought. Seems I’m here — here I sit, getting by without a sigh, nothing but skin and bones. How are things? As white as soot, no offspring to report⁴, watching the stars, warming myself by the mangal, listening to Kolya’s mediocre yet rather sweet guitar playing, but am I here? Perhaps. I’m just all dreamy, mysterious, unapproachable, with a special aura of alt girlie⁵, quiet but with volumes of Nietzsche and Machiavelli in my little black rucksack (“The straight-A student aura has long become boring to cultivate; straight-A students aren’t interesting to anyone and possess no mystery, except perhaps the ability to irritate those around them”). — Uh-huh. — Not cold? — Nope. — Want a throw? — Won’t say no to a throw. — Back in a sec, — Alyona smiled and vanished into the dacha house. From there, laughter could be heard, loud music was playing, something

from the charts, some nameless, thoughtless, worthless, mechanical repetition of three notes (“Sometimes fewer”) and lyrics about nothing of substance. It didn’t let her think, yanked her out of “somewhere else”, so she couldn’t hear anything but the music, neither others’ voices nor her outer voice nor her inner voice. A waste of time and eardrums — only pure, imbecilic decibels, or in other words, music for dimwits. Even Kolya’s guitar, though imperfectly tuned, had some soul and sincerity. Alyona returned with a throw and draped it over our heroine’s shoulders. She also brought a bottle of wine and plastic cups with her. — Beautiful, isn’t it? — she said, looking at the sky. Our heroine nodded. They sat, silent. Silence is pleasant; you can observe it meditatively, like fire, the only difference being it doesn’t crackle. — Well then... Ripe for some⁶? — asked Alyona, shaking the wine bottle. I’m not an apricot, thought our heroine. “Ripe...” Why does everyone use this phrase? Ripe for what? Ripe for wine? Ripe for a husband? Ripe for children? Being a ripening apricot would be far more interesting, for you can extract cyanide from its core. “Ripe” indeed... This phrase in another context would seem like an attack, but from Alyona it sounded soft and unobtrusive (“No cyanide for her”). She probably wouldn’t have suggested wine to our heroine at all if she herself hadn’t already been “ripe” for four glasses (“No, I’m not keeping track. The girl’s grown up”). Everything from Alyona always sounded soft and unobtrusive. Suspicious, as it seemed to our heroine at first (“Truly suspicious”). Usually, if someone were that kind and courteous, friendly and glowing with interest, it meant they wanted something from her. — Maybe we could go somewhere? — they would say. —

Looking good today, you. Nice skirt, — they would say. — May I borrow your essay? No, I won't copy. It's for inspiration. I'm having writer's block or such, — they would say. — I know it's about personal feelings, but isn't personal universal? — It's five minutes to midnight on the doomsday clock, — they would say. — The geopolitical situation is complicated. Our predicament isn't predetermined. — You're the smartest girl in the class, — they would say. — Did you know that? — Oh, we were born on the same day! — they would say. — I'm a foreign businessman with a very, very big black Lamborghini and hair transplanted from my arse. Pleasure to meet you. Want to see my cock? Though why am I even asking... here you go! — Massive, indeed, like your mum, — our heroine would answer. — I'm just a simple guy, you know? Not like those other guys. Want to come over and watch me play Counter-Strike while I drink beer from the can? I've got frozen pizza, — a skufidon⁷ would say. — I'm honest, I'm always honest with you, — they would say. — No, my sincerity isn't ephemeral. It actually exists. No, why are you saying it? No, I don't have "an ulterior motive". That's your "motif", that thinking. I just want to be friends. — Oh, please, — she would say. — Spare me, won't you? With Alyona, with Kolya, and the others gathered at the dacha, there was none of that. They needed so little from her that it became suspicious. They, like her, enjoyed sharing the moment, gossiping about professors falling asleep during lectures, deans running corruption schemes, discussing anything but studies, laughing at her politically incorrect jokes, except those about comrade Yehoshua ("May his memory be blessed"), for Alyona took her baptism too seriously ("The girl's grown up"). Our heroine didn't notice how all

slow rationality abandoned her, and something inside her decided that she was ripe and grown up, too. — Really? — Alyona couldn't believe it. Our heroine and alcohol were supposed neither to be mixed nor to be shaken, not invited to the same party, kept apart in every way possible; even putting them in the same sentence wasn't recommended, or else one might receive a witch's wrathful glare, a disgruntled feline hiss, accompanied by "I've already said I don't drink", "Well, maybe you've changed your mind?", "Maybe I haven't changed my mind?", "Well who knows, maybe you have changed your mind after all", **threatening screech of rolling eyes**. — Pour before I change my mind. She felt coldness on her neck. The wine appeared winely; she knew well what it looked and smelled like. At every family feast, there was always cheap cardboard box wine for the ladies and vodka for the gentlemen. In respectable company, the type of alcohol wasn't important, for everyone got sloshed in the same manner and practised the same disgusting behaviour each in their own way and did and said things they wouldn't do or say otherwise. — She can drink already. She's here at the table with us grown-ups. It's just a spoon anyway, isn't it? No more than a spoonful of cough syrup. — No, she can't, she's only a girl. — Oi! Look at him, ha-ha. Face in a salad. — I wash my rug every week. They say so in the news. — Capital punishment is what we need. — You, uncle? — Well, not we, the country. — Why would you wash your rug every week? What's the point? — Look at her, grown up everywhere, in every way, a fine girl, I must say. Can't believe she's only fifteen, can you? — Wasn't your grandfather executed by the KGB? — There was no KGB back then. — There was, has always been. — I just

use washing powder, there's no secret. — You blink, and she's married, just wait. The girls are nasty these days. You'll babysit your grandkids soon, I'm telling you. Look at her. — Do you know Galina, a friend of mine? Her son, Denis, they spent a week with us when you were three, got all As. — I heard he's also grown up everywhere, in every way. Back from the army, he is. — No, mum, he and his brother have one brain between them. — Don't say that. Why would you say that? — He's an idiot, mum, it's no secret to anyone, is it? — Listen to her. Young but already cunty. — Language! She's a teenager. — Should it be whitening washing powder? — I heard they just use soot because why not? — Why not indeed. She would crawl into the wardrobe in her room, plug her ears, wait for it all to end. If there were no wardrobe, she would just sit, ignore everyone and everything around her, and be “somewhere else”, somewhere where she had all the bitterest remarks to every dimwitted dialogue. — Well, how's the wine? — asked Alyona. — Like wine, I suppose. — Tasty? — Strange. Sweet. — Georgian. — Thought it would be bitter. — There's bitter wine too. Probably. — Like what? — Like bitter wine, I suppose. Ha. — Like wallpaper paste? — Wallpaper paste??? What does wallpaper paste taste like? — Very, very, very bitter. — Did you taste wallpaper paste? — Accidentally. I was bored when everyone was putting up wallpaper. I was five. — What was the wallpaper? — Like in a hospital. White. Alyona smiled. She had a beautiful smile. She could sing too, did ballet, had fair hair, but was no friend to mathematics, wouldn't have managed without our heroine — in other words, her complete opposite. — Really never drank before? — Alyona asked. Our heroine shook her head. — Nope. — You're having

me on. — Nope. — Everyone drinks. — I don't. — Never? — Not in my memory. — Why? — First it wasn't allowed, then didn't want to, by inertia, then read "Brave New World", and well... you know me, — she finished the phrase and took a few sips. Besides sweetness and the taste of surrounding smoke, she felt little else. It burnt her throat slightly, like cough syrup. That was all. How much does one need to drink to get drunk? — What would a female Savage do? I mean, what if the Savage were a woman? — asked Alyona. — Anything but suicide. Why all that drama? She'd fly off to a retreat on a quiet island in the Pacific, get into numerology, write a book, "How I Escaped Toxic Consumer Society and Found Myself". Or just marry some City trader and open a yoga studio. Alyona laughed with her mouth full, spraying wine on the throw. — What? — Our heroine smiled. — A bit cynical, that. — You know I'm cynical. — You're not, though you want to be. Not everyone's an influencer these days. — Not everyone, but even Tolstoy would have a TikTok about life in the village and shagging peasant women. Alyona's laughter was ringing, almost childlike, unlike our heroine's. — Crudish. — Prudish. — A toast. We need to drink to that. This one's on you. — My first glass, and you want a "toast". I've no experience in the matter. I don't play games I cannot win. — Well, learn first, then win. — People probably spend years learning before winning. — You're clever. You can learn quickly. That our heroine couldn't deny — she was at a dead end. She didn't want to think about anything, for thinking meant being "somewhere else". To think means to immerse oneself in one fantasy, which leads one to another fantasy, and then to a third fantasy, and so on, spiralling down or up through that fantasy

helix. Yes, respected teacher? Where am I? I'm here ("Actually, I'm somewhere there"). I'm not distracted at all. No, I'm not thinking about boys. Cross yourself!⁸ Do you think I'm a stupid girl? A nymphomaniac? I think about great things, Tamara Alekseevna. If you think about men, it doesn't mean everyone's like you. How dare I? Well, I'm a student — you asked, I answered. You won't give me a failing grade anyway, even for bad behaviour; I behave well, or rather "not at all" — behaviour interests me little, and you can't reproach me for unfinished homework, unlearned verse, failed test. I know everything, sometimes even more than you ("Right, what was I... ah yes, toast!") — To all this fuckery! — Ha. Straight off like that? — Well, why not? I don't know what people usually drink to. To health? To love? To peace? To friendship amongst nations? To a bright future after dictatorship? — Sometimes you can drink to "all this fuckery", I suppose. — Well then, to all this fuckery. They raised their glasses and clinked, though plastic against plastic doesn't create an authentic experience. Our heroine emptied her cup in an instant. — Well, you're going for it, girl. This was purely intellectual interest and pathological curiosity. The expected sensations of intoxication weren't there for some reason, and our heroine wanted to understand what was wrong with her again and what would happen when/if suddenly these sensations appeared, what they were like, what would become of her, and what of her "somewhere else". The cat sits on the mat, mother sees Spot run⁹, father drinks beer, mother scolds, father hits, mother cries, our heroine hides, first in the wardrobe, and then, when the streams of spirits reach it and begin to seep inside through the gap between its

doors — in “somewhere else”. Advanced problem: when she starts drowning in wine, how will Gandalf come to the rescue: on eagles, on a blue helicopter, on a yellow submarine, or on an ark? — Want more? — Don’t know yet. — Who knows, maybe you’re wild. — Me? Wild? — Maybe you’re wild and we never knew. — Anything but wild. — Shy and quiet, but then, all of a sudden, wild — your real personality revealed. — People better not see it, my real personality. — We don’t know that yet. Maybe she’s nice and not wild at all. Tell me, what do you feel? — Nothing, — she said with a shrug. — Stand up, walk around. Get your blood moving. Stand up, it’ll go straight to your head. Wrapped in the throw, our heroine rose and began taking big steps along the garden paths laid with blackened boards, to the fence, around the mangal and back (“Hmm... Not even wobbling a bit”). The sky was clouding over and the celestial bodies started fading. — Nope. Nothing. — And nothing in your head? — Nope. — And your mood? Happy? — I wouldn’t know — I’m always happy. — Oh, sure... — Well yes. — Comédienne. — Secret happy personality. — That’s for sure. — Pour more. I reckon I’d be more drunk from kefir¹⁰. — Truth is in wine. — In vino veritas. — Lush. Why do people always dissolve into ethereal substrates over time? **Poof!** — and gone as soon as you stop reminding each other of your existence. — We must see each other, — they would say. — Let’s keep in touch, — they would say. — If you’re in Tulubaika ever again, write to me, — they would say. — At least post them stories from your Europes, — they would say. — You know I post nothing. Well, good riddance, but where do they go? Were school friends even real? Some managed to drink themselves to death, get hooked on drugs,

go to prison, become family people (“Not sure which is worse...”), a rare few flew abroad, even rarer were those found hanging from an old birch in Victory Park after what was presumably an unsuccessful escape either from fascists or from antifa or both of them, or who were simply marathon runners. Got carried away, you know, ended up in the wrong area, stumbled with a neck on a rope, hanged themselves, didn’t even bother to soap it, didn’t even invite me to the funeral... What kind of person does that? Eh... Friendship is tested in troubles, unless it’s troubles in the head¹¹. (“Oh, seems like the fingers on my hands are starting to pulse!”) — I’ll step out. — Go ahead. In the mirror above the sink, she still saw a familiar face: no red eyes or red swollen nose, only ears... ears slightly reddened and a bit of a blush on her cheeks. She ran her fingers through her hair to push it back. The skin on her head was tense, a tad less sensitive than usual, yet more pleasant to touch. The experiment was going steadily; the subject was normal: no sudden desire to dance, nor to pour out her soul to those around or punch someone in the face; neither a straitjacket nor an adrenaline shot was required; quite the opposite — mental activity was bubbling. She wanted to think, think more, think about everything, think about the past, about the future, about thinking itself — to metathink, if you will — about the best moments, about the worst moments, about the best moments that became the worst, about the worst moments that turned out to be quite all right. Should have thought earlier, now you can’t think it all in a couple of hours, girl. Think, think, think, think, or you’ll drown. Weave a raft from thoughts, or you’ll drown. Think, think, think. No, don’t think, don’t think, don’t think, or think about how to stop thinking,

think yourself out of this thinking somewhere far away. Enough thinking for you, you've thought enough, philosophe¹². Rain began drumming on the toilet window. How frightening, how frightening to be under control, and oh how frightening, how frightening to lose that control, but how terrible is the desire to act uncontrollably, having seized chaos. No, she wouldn't lose these friends as she had lost childhood ones — they weren't just ignorant infants seated together at the same desk by the whim of planida¹² but adults who had consciously chosen each other's company. That's different. The rain drove everyone to the table. They settled inside on old wooden benches covered with throws to avoid catching splinters. — Are you all right? — asked Alyona. — Yeah. The bottom of the hot three-litre teapot inadvertently stuck to the plastic tablecloth, making it shrink and crease. The perpetrator of this mishap couldn't be identified. — Want some wine? Our heroine's face wrinkled. She shook her head and nodded at the teapot. Into a gigantic cup with a heavy bottom poured the so-called world-famous "fragrant dacha ambrosia", a sweetened chai¹³ drink made from mint, gooseberry and blackcurrant leaves. She wanted to remember this taste. Soon, in a few days, she'll have views of the Mediterranean Sea from the office on the twentieth floor, unlimited espresso, seagulls crying in unknown languages, perfectly paved and treed streets, galleries, museums, theatres, and all such cultural things ("And the sun will shine more than once a year..."). In foreign lands, over the hill, over the border, in strange parts, in the West, there will be no muddy pavements, no road potholes, no stinking buses that momentarily transform ordinary street puddles into Hokusai waves and

drench you head to toe. It won't still be dark at eight in the morning and already dark by three in the afternoon. But they won't be there either, those very people, across whose faces her gaze jumped, to and fro, to and fro, as if recording how they distribute under- and over-grilled meat onto plates, serve improvised salads, cut and pass home-baked bread, wave forks, knives, napkins, make toasts, "clink" glasses, drink, laugh, make toasts again, "clink" glasses, drink, laugh, play guitar, sing, make toasts, drink, laugh, laugh, laugh, chat, take pictures, drink, laugh, chat, chat, chat, chat, chat, chat, take pictures. Cosy, strangely cosy, but at the same time suspenseful, as if she needed to be on guard, as if everything were unreal and out of time, not an event, not an occasion that was in her calendar and was about to end, but simply a non-phenomenal phenomenon, a fragment of life into which she had stumbled by accident, and where she shouldn't have been, for she had always wanted to be somewhere else, but now, for some reason, did not.

Notes

1. A mangal is a type of metal barbecue grill popular throughout post-Soviet and Central Asian countries, typically designed for skewered meat (shashlik). The ritual of gathering around a mangal is a must for any respectable outdoor social occasion from May to September (but not limited to), with some inevitably arguing about the proper way to arrange the coals while others prepare the actual food.
2. A Soviet and post-Soviet phenomenon of a small summer house outside of the city with a garden to grow vegetables and fruits, hang out, have shashlik, and "enjoy" the summer weeding the seedbeds.
3. The original Russian phrase "светила науки" (svetila nauki) literally translates as "luminaries of science." While English has similar terms, the Russian expression carries distinct connotations of official

academic prestige, often used with a touch of irony to describe those enshrined in the scientific establishment.

4. The original Russian phrase “как сажа бела, пока не родила” (kak sazha bela, poka ne rodila) literally translates to “as white as soot, haven’t given birth yet.” It combines two very idiomatic ways of responding to “how are you?” into one contradictory expression paired with that timeless reminder that a woman’s “ultimate achievement” apparently involves producing miniature humans.
5. Original uses “альтушка” (altushka). Even though it’s borrowed from English “alt girl”, the Russian metamorphosis of the term carries a distinctive sonic quality by adding an affectionate-yet-mocking diminutive suffix “-ушка”, hence “girlie” instead of “girl” in the translation as an attempt to convey the same tone. The “alt girlie” phenomenon became a meme around 2020-2021 in Russia and was nominated for “Word of the Year.” “Alt girlie” isn’t just any girl with “dyed hair and combat boots”, but a specific social archetype. In internet culture, the “alt girlie” became the object of desire for a particular type of man called a “скуф” (skuf), thusly creating one of Russia’s most widespread memes of 2024. The “skuf” represents men around or over 35 with unkempt appearances, dead-end jobs, and a lifestyle revolving around beer, TV, and video games — essentially the polar opposite of the aesthetically conscious alt girlie. The apogee of the meme was the appearance of the advertised possibility of finding your “alt girlie” on government websites, as well as a visual novel game called “Альтушка для скуфа” (“An alt girlie for a skuf”) that became a Steam bestseller.
6. Common idiomatic expression in Russian, used in any context to indicate “readiness” for whatever it might be. The translator took the liberty to retain it as-is, given it’s used throughout the story, even in a meta-way.
7. See also: footnote on “alt girlie.” “Skufidon” (скуфидон) is the final form of “skuf.” It’s a portmanteau of “skuf” and “Cupidon”, the Russian word for Cupid.
8. The original “окститесь” (okstites’) literally means “cross yourself” in the Orthodox tradition, but is used idiomatically to tell someone to come to their senses or get a grip, often ironically.
9. The original is “мама мыла раму” (mama myla ramu) that literally means “Mother washed the window frame” and is an example from Russian primers used to teach children to read.
10. A fermented milk drink, tangy and slightly effervescent, with a negligible alcohol content, typically less than 1%.

11. An Internet-Russian idiom. There's the Orthodox TV show "Беседы с батюшкой" (lit. "Conversations with the Priest"). If we modify the original title by removing a few letters, from "conversations with the priest" we get to "troubles in the head". Thus it became a meme. It is often accompanied by the modified title image of the TV show overlaid with semi-transparent images of psychiatric hospital employees. It gained popularity in 2020 as a response to unhinged online rants.
12. "Planida" (планида) is an archaic / folkloristic Russian term for fate or destiny. It carries overtones of inescapable, often burdensome predetermined destiny, and is etymologically derived from Greek "πλανήτης" (planētēs) meaning "wanderer" or "planet", reflecting ancient beliefs that planetary movements determined human fate. The word entered Russian through Church Slavonic and maintained its association with cosmic predetermination.
13. "Chai" in Russia and in many other countries literally means "tea" as a category, not necessarily a specific spiced version of it. The translator for some reason decided to use "chai" over "tea".

Read next part

Episode 4: about microcosmos & microchaos

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