TOLSTAIA KAPORTA



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Tulubaikaporia

Episode 17: about helices of all kinds

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> "Where once a solid house stood,
> now a conceptual structure is forming,
> made of images, pure invention,
> as if it had survived in the mind, unscathed..."
> — "The Seventh Elegy" by Rainer Maria Rilke

Airports smell of time in the same manner as the smoke from smouldering sawdust — bittersweet. The waiting room for the flight departing from Tulubaika is well ventilated (unlike my head). Still steeped in samogón, my thoughts and memories, puffing at each other with hangovers, are on a philosophical rave.

An old sofa with familiar faces around.

— Drink, grandson, — my Grandad says and pats me on the shoulder.

I approach the shot with caution.

— What's in it?

— Alcohol, grandson, alcohol. What do you think? Milk?

It does look like milk. I seek the shot's bottom. None is found due to the sheer turbidity of the liquid.

— What are you? Twelve?

Not that it would make a difference.

— Just wondering. I will wake up tomorrow, won't I?

— That's up to luck. When's the last time you were to church?

— I have a flight tomorrow. Early in the morning.

— Well, good you aren't a bloody pilot, are you?

— I still have to get to the airport.

— Good you aren't a taxi driver either.

— Someone has to wake me up.

— I will, don't you worry, lad.

— What if you don't wake up?

— Burying me already, aye?

Stalling, I am. He puts on reading glasses, picks up his phone and shows me the alarm clock app.

— Here: one, two, three of them, bastards. Technologia.

— I don't know... It just doesn't feel like my thing.

— It's a family thing — means it's your thing. Don't you respect tradition?

— I do, wholeheartedly. But...

— Don't you respect your grandfather?

— There's no limit to my respect, of course.

— I see no problem then. Or do they cut your balls in your rotting West?

I roll my eyes at him. Grandad, in turn, prepares for a knockout.

— You're still a man or what? — he says and moves the shot closer. — Drink.

Reddened faces with burst capillaries around me chant "drink!" bumping their fists on the table, bottles shaking, shots clinking.

— Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink!

Dishes aplenty huddle together, leaving not an inch of space: boiled and butter-drenched potatoes with tons of dill, infernally smoked sterlet in illegal quantities[1], pickled vegetables drowning in brine, fresh vegetables drowning in mayonnaise, a fly drowning in mayonnaise, too.[2] Drops of mayonnaise fly from my niece's plate onto my red cashmere jumper (I have no idea how to wash it) as she expresses dislike towards the soup's

surface and slaps it with her spoon. A five-litre bottle of samogón with a cork left in its neck authoritatively reigns over the table. Grandad uses corks to seal his samogón bottles. He fancies himself an artisanal distiller and, to his good luck, is friends with the coppers.

— Drink! Drink! Drink!

Mustering up my guts, I take a whiff of the shot. Squirming, I am, ready to pass out.

— No, I'm not drinking that. Smells terrifying.

— "Terrrific" you wanted to say, lad. Drink!

— Drink! Drink! Drink! — chant they non-stop.

Eyes shut, box breathing engaged, I lift the shot glass.

— Wait! — screams Grandad. — Forgot the clouds!

I'm confused, or rather befuddled. Grandad grabs a pack of mayo and with jeweller's precision layers it on top of the samogón. My family's favourite lemma: everything's better with mayonnaise.

— I've drunk worse, — he says, grinning proudly in anticipation.

— Never doubted your abilities.

— It's like baptism, you know. You do it once, and then comrade Major Yehoshua (may his memory be blessed) will handle the rest, — he adds

as he crosses the shot glass. — One for him, one for the Tsar, one for your grandfather. Now you go. Drink.

— Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink!

In an instant, the liquid blazes a trail from my tongue all the way down to my stomach. Welcome, dear regret, I haven't had enough of you.

— I won't go blind, will I?

— Blind? No. Dead? Mayhap!

I know what happens next. We'll finish the bottles (plural) and commence a swimming contest in the river Tulubaika, cold in temperature, clayey in colour, and cunning in current, covered with layers of lemna and fallen birch leaves.

My Grandad is tempered. He loves swimming, loves it so much that he has always wanted to teach me how to—

— Just fucking swim already!

— **tortured murloc sounds**[3]... I can't... **mrgrgl** I think, I think I'm...

— You think? You have time to think, aye? Swim! Use your hands, Aristotle!

— **mrgrgl** I'm drowning. I'm drowning.

Water gurgles in my throat, echoing through the skull bone.

— You what, aye?

— Drowninnnn...

— Cannot hear it!

— Drownnmnlnmin...

— No, you're not!

— I am, though.

— I'll tell you when you are. Don't you worry!

Delays, queues, security checks, more queues, people sleeping on the ceiling, my luggage lost with my Nurofen, sour grimaces, coffa and croissants costing like a jet's wing, timeless, untameable roads of travelators and escalators — all are trifles, dummies, nothing. Time is the real enemy. You wanted to save time on a few train journeys, but now look at you, wasting it. But how can you waste time? Isn't the whole point of time to be unremittingly wasted?

— I think it flows in multiple directions at once, — I say to Grandad.

— What, Tulubaika? — he asks, frowning.

Grandad peeks deep into my eyes, his fingers ready to dial the mental asylum's number, while my sister with her daughter giggle beside him.

— No, the time!

— Bollocks!

— Bollocks! — adds my niece.

— Indeed it is! Proper bollocks, I must say. But let him speak. He's a smart lad. Excellent student. Good genetics. Exemplary, I'd even say. I was driving him to school every day. In the front seat, like a bloody prince. All lasses were like, "Oh my God, look at him, that distinguished gentleman has a chauffeur!"

— They thought I was lazy.

— Who?

— They thought.

— They thought what?

— That I was lazy.

— They thought you were lazy? You? Lazy?

— They did, I'm afraid.

— Why would they think that?

— I have a childhood trauma now.

— You what?

— Everyone was taking the piss.

— A piss? On you?

— No, the piss, out of me.

— Well, it's not that bad then, is it? Where's trauma? Degenerates, they were. Why would you listen to degenerates? Who taught you to listen to degenerates? Me? I didn't. Listen to idiots, become an idiot.

— Everyone was walking or taking a bus.

— That bloody jalopy would never arrive! Were you ever late for a class?

— They thought I was a privileged boy. Nothing's worse than being a privileged boy when you're not really a privileged boy.

— Well, they were right.

— But you just said they were degenerates.

— Grandfather like me is a privilege. You should remember that, lad. Write that above my grave: "A revered fella he was, a true privilege."

— What is a childhood trauma? — asks my niece.

— It's a family thing.

— Can I have it too?

— You won't have it, my heroine.

— But uncle has it.

— No, he doesn’t.

— She’ll have it.

— No, she won’t.

— She will. Don’t you respect tradition?

— Uncle’s taking the piss. Don’t listen to him.

— Is he a degenerate?

— On certain occasions.

— Like when?

— Let’s talk about the time, shall we?

— Right.

— Tell us everything.

— I was gonna talk about it, yes.

— You were?

— I was.

— Ah yess. You should have more confidence and persistence, though, shouldn’t you? Why didn’t you stop me rambling?

— Grandad...

— Right, right, tell us.

I stand up and begin the theoretical part with the first page of the flipchart. A pointer taps on the board, the same pointer that I might get hit with if I get a B. Soldier's buckle[4], a pointer — those are my upbringers. The picture, expressed in pastel crayons kindly provided by my little niece, depicts a winding spiral.

— Imagine a helical structure...

— A what?

— A helical structure. A helix. A spiral.

— Here, drink this.

I empty another shot, it burns my tongue, I don't feel and don't care if it twists anymore. Grandad was right. The second, the third, and the fourth, are a smooth ride. Comrade Major Yehoshua is doing his job (may his memory be blessed **crosses himself**). I clear my throat and, before I forget the word, spew it all out:

— Consider a helical manifold in ^{3} where temporal perception coils like a spring such that psychologically proximate events need not be linearly adjacent in time but rather align through geodesic proximity on the helix itself much like points on different coils might touch despite their temporal separation allowing simultaneous experience and modification of memory-states through continuous recursive revision in non-orientable topology where each remembered point endlessly

reshapes its neighbours until what-was and what-we-remember-was become indistinguishable singularities in the manifold.

The reaction is rather underwhelming.

— Huh? — Grandad asks, finally.

— What's that "huh"?

— I don't understand, that's what "huh" means.

— What is it that you don't understand exactly?

— Well, not a single bloody bit of it.

— Bollocks! — my niece's contribution is always immeasurable.

Grandad looks at her, smiles, ruffles her hair, looks at me, frowns.

— Proper bollocks. Say it again.

— Bollocks!

— No, not you, love.

— **inhales** Being at any given point, **exhales** we feel that certain points in the past and future are closer to us than others. Two diametrically opposed points on the circumference of one ring of the spring are further apart than many points on the other rings down below its curvature.

He shakes his head.

— Drink this.

More samogón is being kindly provided to me, hand-to-hand.

— Now, look at me.

I look at him.

— I'm looking.

— Tell me, what do you see?

— My beloved grandfather. A true privilege.

— Right, what else? In a general sense. Who am I?

— Erm, a human?

— Right... — he says and leans closer to me. — But I'm not a fucking dictionary, am I?

— You don't look like one, no.

— Speak in normal words, then. What university did you graduate from? What did they teach you there?

— Sciences.

— "Sciences." Of course, sciences. Should've gone to Moscow, told you

all. Moscow's better. All roads lead to Moscow. Moscow is the Third Rome. "Two Romes have fallen, the third stands, and there will never be a fourth."[5]

— Bollocks! Bollocks! Bollocks! — they chant.

He shakes his head.

— Drink this.

He hands me another shot. For a couple of seconds I let the clouds settle and consume the concoction. So does he.

— Sit, — he says, his hand on my shoulder.

I follow.

— Now, explain it to me. Man to man.

— Man to man?

— Yes, man to man.

— Okay, I will.

I pause to gather my wits, untwist my tongue I don't feel anymore.

— Imagine. **hiccups** Simultaneously you experience the past, the present, and the future, and not only experience but affect them.

— Uh-huh.

— You're here... **waves around** in the present, you're between two layers of time: the past and the future. **hiccups** Memories shape you and you, in return, review and reshape them, until there's nothing left of what really happened and instead only what the present you have created for yourself, **hiccups** the time never been—

Grandad's samogón tastes like a kitten has pissed into a basket of strawberries. Plus mayonnaise.

— Same with the future. **hiccups** You plan, scheme, ponder, become excited, hopeful, anxious, all that, experience some sort of eschatological dread even. Thus you live in all three times simultaneously while not being in any of them! **hiccups**

— I've always reckoned you were a smart lad. But I still don't get it.

— It's a spiral, Grandad!

— What is a spiral? The river? Tulubaika?

— No, Grandad, time! We're not talking about Tulubaika!

— Oh, we're not? I thought we were.

— No, Grandad, we're not...

— You know, you won't become a president if you speak like that.

— Of course I won't become a president.

— Why won't you become a president?

— I don't want to be a president.

— My grandson doesn't want to be a president?

— No.

He examines me with a look of an ex-KGB officer, who he perhaps was.

— What?

— My grandson doesn't want to be a president! What's the point of even having a grandson then!

— Well, she can be a president! If you teach her well.

— Nah, she can't.

— Do you want to be a president? — I turn to my niece.

— I do.

— See? She wants to be a president. It doesn't have to be me.

— Well, I won't see that, will I? I'm old, laddie. Flesh and bones, mind you. Not immortal.

— Oh, you are not?

— I want to say to everyone "I'm the president's grandfather, I'm the

president's grandfather". How am I gonna do that from the other side?

— Too bad because I have no aspiration to be a president.

— You did though.

— Me? You did.

I wait for his reaction while he's reading my mind.

— **sighs** Well, good for the guy to be humble. Helps in life, helps a lot. Not bragging or anything. The chaps up there... So dishonest, them, degenerates. "We'll do that, we'll do second, all won't be topsy-turvy, promise." You're not like that, aren't you? I taught you well, haven't I?

— You have. I suppose.

Grandad smacks my back, an intense attempt to pat.

— He supposes! You'll do good up there in the highest echelons, uh-huh. Drink this.

He hands me another shot. I drink, no questions asked. He makes one for himself, drinks, no questions asked either.

— You could start with being a governor.

— Governor of what?

— Governor of Tulubaika, of course. Our little village.

— I can't be a governor of Tulubaika.

— Why can't you? You're an heir.

— I'm heading back tomorrow, for a start.

— Nobody's pulling you, are they? Stay, you're a governor, I'm your advisor. Vice-governor, vice grip, huge success. Rule in tandem like bloody Siamese twins — two brains are better than one, aren't they?

— I'd very much love that, but I'm heading back tomorrow.

— You're drunk. You don't know what you're saying. But I hear you: Tulubaika, Tulubaika, Tulubaika, nothing else. Goes on like an echo.

— I said no word about Tulubaika.

— Tulubaika, Tulubaika, Tulubaika.

— You're saying it. Not me.

— Between the lines, all that. I still hear it. Look at me — 80 years, still good hearing. Good genetics for a governor. You could rule for decades.

— I don't want to rule for decades, and I can't be a governor of Tulubaika.

— Pray tell why not.

— Well, I don't live here, do I?

— Where are you then? Am I hallucinating you?

— Well, maybe. You're drunk. You don't know what you're seeing. I'm but your delusion.

Silent, I sit. The ongoing exchange of glances intensifies. While Grandad looks at her, I gesture a hush to my niece. We don't say a word. We know he can't stand it.

— Eh? Say something, you hooligans.

He grabs my cheeks and pulls them. Frowning, he pours himself more of his artisanal alcohol (no clouds) and knocks it down.

When I was a little boy, my sister and I used to prank our beloved drunk grandfather all the time. In his deliriums, we'd give him a slotted spoon when he was eating soup, wear deer antlers and chase him until he had an (improvised) panic attack, pull his trousers down and watch him clumsily pull them back up, or hide under the table and pretend we're invisible.

He rubs his eyes and — **poof!** — we're not his grandchildren but figments of his imagination.

— I'm calling the shrinks, — he says, takes his phone, stands up and, wobbling, paces across the room. — Doctor, doctor! I'm hallucinating... No, no, it's voices of my grandchildren. Two of them, lovely little rascals. A lad and a lass. Exemplary students... I don't know how old they are. I don't know anything... No, they had antlers, they did, I

swear. Yes, yes... No, no, I haven't been drinking. It's the medication. It is, doctor... Did you order it from the West?... Big mistake, that, huge even... Oh no, doctor... You reckon I'm a goner?... I haven't even saved up enough for a funeral... Poor me, — he says and falls on the floor. — Love 'em, lil'bastards... But what one can do in the face of death? No, I need no straitjacket no more, doctor... I'm... I'm seeing the light... and, my, my, it's bloody bright and beautiful.

As in the finest, most artsy Moscow theatres, he goes quiet, his hand falls and drops the phone. We, little psyop enthusiasts, stiffen, jump out from under the table and run to him.

— Grandad, Grandad! — we scream. — Don't die, Grandad. The circus's tomorrow! You promised! Mom and dad are working. Who's going to drive us there? Grandad, please! There'll never be a circus in Tulubaika any more! They come once every twenty years. We'll be old and won't be interested in the circus when they come next. Pleaaaaaaaase!

We cry in Greek-tragedic. Life's so fragile; his — an ancient vase, not to be meddled with, belongs to the one and only Tulubaikan museum. No kintsugi will ever heal its cracks.

— Wake up, Grandad! Please!

Blaring like a siren, my little sister runs away to fetch help. I shake Grandad by his shoulders:

— Wake up! It's a spiral! Don't die!

He's not breathing. He's not breathing. He's not breathing!

— The time is a spiral!

A fraction of a second of silence, then: with a rasp, he siphons in all the surrounding air and, in a hoarse, ancient voice, utters:

— You know what the duck's dick looks like, don't you?

Mallards occupy birchleaf-ridden Tulubaika and swim in uneven spirals, quacking, feasting on food provided by the audience or on lemna if the audience is absent. A baguette half my height warms my palm scratched by our cat, warms my nostrils scratched from sniffing snot, and warms my brain scratched by an unsuccessful chess class. The pawn is Grandad's favourite piece.

— One has to learn some compassion for 'em lumpens. "Everybody should be free" — bollocks. They ought to learn to be pawns first before getting too big for their boots. "Everyone is equal" — perhaps. Only if everyone's a pawn, otherwise — nah. But of course, not true for the players...

I sniff snot again and tear off a piece from the baguette, separate the crumb from the browned crust, munch the crust, and roll the crumb into a tiny ball. If the talentlessness has an image, it probably looks like this.

— I don't think it was my fault really. I played well. The teacher told me that was one of my best, that I'm getting better...

No, I'm not. I don't really think so. I'm not getting better at anything. In fact, I might be getting worse. According to Grandad, there are two noble pursuits for a prodigy in our country: chess and ballet. Them two is what really wins both cold wars and hot ones, for they assert an artistic and intellectual dominance over the pawns of capitalism. I went to chess, my sister went to ballet. No, he doesn't demarcate them by sex, so he said — my legs were just not straight enough, unlike, he thought, my convolutions, which, though invisible to him, seemed to present a higher potential to make me an asset in the arms race. Factory settings of consciousness are a clean slate, unpolluted by choices made by you and for you, hence, getting worse isn't to be ruled out.

— What do pawns do? — he says, shaking his head. — Go straight, no questions asked, they do. They just go straight. Easy task, "soul of the game", go straight, do your diagonal attacks, don't come back.

— A pawn can become a queen.

— Freedom is only for the elite. A pawn can only pretend to be a queen.

— I'm a good player. Everyone says that... well, everyone says that to everyone. I guess, everyone's just a better player than me or everyone's lying to each other and the game is fake. I did the opening you taught me, by the way. It did work at first but then it didn't.

— Look around: give everyone freedom, what do they do, degenerates?...

The breadball of my talentlessness is almost perfect now. The ducks have noticed us, their heads tilting in anticipation. I sniff more, so loudly that the mallards twitch.

— Maybe the boy was just more experienced than me.

— First thing they do is nothing, second thing they do is complain. Why? Freedom is too difficult for their spongy brains. It should be beaten into one with a rod from early childhood, so that his arse burns, and then he remembers and thinks — free... free... But for morons, it's a burden. They don't understand it.

— I think I'm getting sick... I have a runny nose. And my throat, it's itchy, a tiny bit itchy, but still. It always begins like that. And temperature, I think it's rising as well.

— Everyone starts from the same position. Proper clean slate it is. Never interrupt your enemy when he's making a mistake. Napoleon said that...

I nibble on the baguette. Crispy, soft, perfect combination of taste and texture. Tulubaika does have some French vibes in this time of the year, almost Toulouse. Ubiquitous romanticism of melancholy.

— I can't play well when I'm sick. Maybe that's why. It's for real. I'm not faking it... Not this time...

— Still lost, he, bastard, ran away like a dog.

— I just want to stay home and play games. You said games are stupid but isn't chess a game, too? Is chess stupid? It's easy to learn, hard to master, they say. Mario is actually hard to play from the start. You should see me playing. I'm good at it. Maybe a lot better than at chess.

I throw the rolled breadball to Tulubaika. Circles of startled water scurry away from a bready pebble, quaquaversally, in the same fashion time does from a person. Mad quacking shakes the surrounding space of the river's quay, and the ducks pounce on a piece of bread, scattering fallen leaves aside. A flock of pigeons that have been pleading with me for food is horrified and blown apart all over the quay.

— Look at 'em green-headed bastards. They should've flown off by now for winter. We don't need weapons. They can't ever win winter, pussies. They don't have winter like ours... Though I reckon we shouldn't've burnt Moscow, eh...

You burn Moscow to scare the dragon away, then win the princess, she falls in love with you for your strategic prodiginess, then you play Mario all day, together, forever and ever.

My cheeks are flushing and melting from joy, snot is dripping from my nose. I demonstrate my braces to "the green-headed bastards", stuff my mouth with more baguette, share another scrap with them, and in a second, Grandad smacks me on the back of my head.

— Who feeds ‘em birds with bread, eh? They’ll be as good as gone.

— ...

— And put your hat on, won’t you?

— ...

It is going outwards from the centre. It is a spiral, a spring that someone once squeezed and released. It is a spiralling staircase that you climb. Spiral is a helix. Time is a spiral. Therefore, time is a helix. La logique! Everything is a helix if you look at it from the right dimension. Apparently, the duck’s penis is a helix, too. Male ducks have corkscrew-shaped penises, and forced copulation is common among ducks. In response, female ducks have evolved complex vaginal structures, including spiralling and labyrinthine vaginas, to prevent full insertion of the male’s penis and control fertilisation. This co-evolution, where each sex evolves reproductive traits to outcompete the other in the battle for reproductive control, is described as an escalating sexual arms race in ducks.

— They’re gonna bomb us, grandson.

— They’re not gonna bomb you, Grandad. Nobody cares about bombing Tulubaika. Nobody cares about Tulubaika.

— Aye, they will. I feel it in my bones. Oh, they ache, they ache! Deep inside them, they ache, my bones. I’m not young anymore; I’m old. We’re losing that bloody arms race. We’re losing it, I’ve always said that.

The pathos of the situation, though.

— Yes, you've been saying that for as long as I can remember.

— Because we've been losing it as long as I can remember! You know the difference between the battle and a war, don't you? Winning a match and winning a championship, aye? Didn't I teach you that? They bomb everyone! Pigeons with diarrhoea! Ducks eating bread!

— We bomb everyone, too, to be honest. Every few years, there's war. We're like, you know, bombing left and right. Not that we're a peaceful country.

— Who told you that?

— Everyone says that. It's a fact.

— "Everyone says that." Listen to degenerates, become a degenerate. Facts? I know facts. Simple formula, no need to be an academic. They're gonna bomb us, this is the fact. It's ridiculous! "Everyone says that." Bomb us, they will.

— Why would they bomb us?

— We have nukes, they have nukes. It's going nowhere. Unless we have better nukes. We do have better nukes, wonderful nukes. Our nukes are incredible, absolutely incredible. We should nuke them out of this planet. Boom! Gone! No more problem.

— They would nuke us, too, then…

— Isn't this what I'm trying to tell you?

— This is how nuking works, yes. In the end, everyone nukes everyone.

— They're gonna bomb us — us, you and me, the country, everything, absolutely bloody everything. I know bombing, I served. Moscow — gone. Tulubaika — gone. All in a matter of minutes. Tulubaika — in seconds. Or less. Every city, every village, every child. One button — BOOM! Another button — BOOM! They smile at you today — "oh, peace, peace, United Nations" — but tomorrow? And I'll tell you — we won't allow it, never allow it. We have such weapons, saw them myself! I served! Such weapons — mmm, beautiful! Shiny rockets. We should nuke them first.

As if on a trampoline, I bounce on our old sofa trimmed in what's now called vegan leather, listening to how the rusty springs are creaking in agony under the pressure of my weight and how Grandad's swearing at the telly in the next room. Someone is bombing someone, a common state of affairs.

— Unbelievable! Unbe-bloody-lievable… They are actually doing it! Fine country, great people… It's ridiculous, it's bloody ridiculous… Fucking 'ell, bastards… Can you imagine? We should've nuked them.

My brain cells at this age are still in a mode of looking for meaningful connections with each other, so I continue bouncing and each of my

landings resonates through the whole room. The floorboards creak, the windows shake, dangles the chandelier, and rings the crystal set behind the glass doors of the cupboard. There, in the dark, covertly ferments Grandad's blackcurrant tincture, artisanally produced. It's a tightly corked five-litre jar, looking like a barrel with a narrow neck. The vibrations from the sofa creep towards the bottle, disturbing the peace of its cushy chamber, envelop the bottle and call the pressure to come out, and the pressure, in turn, being quite claustrophobic (as pressures tend to be), acquires a strong desire to see the light, yet it cannot, for the cork wouldn't allow that, so the pressure, pissed with such a state of affairs, decides to exit sideways, quaquaversally. All I hear is an explosion, a rapid expansion in volume of a given amount of matter associated with an extreme outward release of energy and compressed gases from inside the blackcurrant tincture bottle. Shatters the crystal set, shatters the glass door, shake the windows and chandelier. The door of the cupboard blasts open, and from there, riverly, the black-red mass spills over the old Persian carpet, flowing between the floorboards, silencing their creaks, and under the sofa, surrounding me, leaving no escape route. The floor is lava now.

— Bombing! They're fucking bombing us! I've always said that! Fucking 'ell! A disaster, a complete disaster!

Grandad rushes into the room, ducking down, glaring around, at me, at his favourite black-red liquid that has pooled over his favourite carpet, at his favourite cupboard filled with pieces of his favourite crystal. I already know he's angry, and I already know what's coming for me.

— Sit tight, lad. Get your thighs—

Ready for your old soldier's buckle, I know, I know...

Buckle up! Our ultra low-cost airline plane finally reestablishes contact with terra firma in Tulubaika's international ten-terminal airport after forty minutes of spiralling over the area like a leaf chastised by gravity as if the land didn't want to accept her prodigal sons and daughters back. Either she suffered from amnesia or deliberately erased all memory of us, probably out of great offence. I sit in business class, a privileged boy, nodding off, my eyes refusing to unpeel themselves. The cabin atmosphere is noisy with irritation from waiting, excitement from anticipation, screams of awakened pipsqueaks. The flight attendant gives a hand signal, everyone freezes. The stewards roll out a red carpet down the aisle. The captain emerges from the cockpit, his presence commands complete silence. He adjusts his cap, curves his smile, gliding along, strides down the cabin. An explosion (though, on a plane, better say "pop") of applause, people reach out their hands to him, whistle, shout something, the pipsqueaks squeal the loudest, and he, our revered one, just walks, waves his hand, beaming, blinding with his grin. May comrade Major Yehoshua, whose memory is blessed, bless him, too.

— Thanks for not killing us!

— THANK YOU, THANK YOU!

— I thought I was gonna die, me and my lil'pipsqueak, I thought that was all, and we'd never see Tulubaika again.

— He did it! He did it! What a pilot! We're alive!

Given her ever-intensifying excitement, a woman next to me faints.

— A saviour no less!

— You're a hero! Landing in Tulubaika — oh, what an achievement! Nobody had done that! Ever!

— THANK YOU!

— DA! DA! DA! DA! DA!

— I LOVE YOU! Take me with you back to the foreign lands! The whole me, from top to bottom!

The gods are pissing freezing rain over our heads protected with nothing but duty-free bags. Everyone flees the plane, sloshing through puddles and splashing dirty rainwater all over each other. There's one measly runway in this airport; beyond the curtains of rain — the birch forest; only the terminal building, a tiny brutalist cave, glimmers with lights in the distance. No sign of that stinking rustbucket — word is the bus broke down, no one to shuttle you lot about. I'm not all wet, for I have a coat. Others... well, they don't all have coats.

We take shelter in the terminal and head to the border control. A nerve-wracking moment, this. As you approach you always get that sinking feeling in your gut, feeling guilty as if you've got contraband drugs stashed in your soles or the depths of your posterior. Fingers

atremble, I hand my battle-scarred passport over to a woman wearing a quasi-military uniform and a quasi-expression on her face. My red cashmere jumper has no stains of mayonnaise on it yet. Fear is foreign to me — like I am now to this land — for only recklessness fuels my bravery.

— Purpose of your visit? — she asks and looks straight into my eyes.

— Seeing family, — I answer.

— Whose family?

— Well, mine... I was born here.

She writes something down on an A4 lying around.

— Tell me who exactly are you going to see.

— My grandfather...

— Are you travelling alone?

— I am....

— Where are you going to stay?

— At my grandfather's.....

— Address?

— Well, it's in Tulubaika.....

— I'm well aware of that, am I not?

— Almost "to the village, to Grandfather"..... he-he.....

Pauses, she does, and looks at me, in the most rigorous manner.

— Sorry, it's, erm, from Chekhov. "Konstantin Makarych", you know?

— ...

Keeps staring.

— It's, erm, Tulubaika, 8.....

— What street?

— There's no street.

— ...

— It's just a house, a single house, no street. He's privileged, that old man.

— Does your grandfather live in a field?

— He lives in a house. Well, he has a bunker in a field, though. So he says, he-he.....

— A bunker?

— Probably, dementia.....

Her eyes are eating my face. I see little teethful maws grow from them.

— Why are you smiling? — she asks. — Is it a good idea to smile?

I forgot it's not customary here — my bad. I come from where people smile sometimes. A habit, nothing more. Mimicry, yes, pure mimesis, assimilation.

— ... a smile without a reason is a sign of a fool, you probably heard that...

— Everyone says it, yes. I knew a guy who had a tattoo with this phrase. Don't ask where.

And my red jumper is a clown outfit, that I know, too.

— ...

She examines the picture on my passport, rubs it, frowns.

— Hm... Looks nothing like you. You're way thinner.

— Thank you.

— It's not a compliment... Is it you on this picture?

— I'm a different person now.....

— Wrong answer.

— I know. Sorry.

— Have you been in the army?

— No.

— ...

— Thankfully.

— Wrong answer.

— ...

— Are you a draft dodger?

— No, no, I'm not. I've been away, studying, is all.

— Don't you support the present politics of our country and its wonderful course into the future? Don't make wrong answers.

— I... I'm... I'm worried about the future.....

She tries to deduce something from the copious stamps in my passport, shakes her head, writes something down.

— Where've you been for eleven years?

— Erm... Studying, working, paying taxes, boring stuff.

— Do you have foreign friends?

— I... maybe... yes?

I see something surfacing on her retinas.

— Why are you coming back?

On the retinas, I read a fresh inscription that I'm not welcome, and a thought that has been fermenting in the back of my mind cupboard for years now enters the labyrinthine structure of my brain like a corkscrew. What if the village, on some subtle energetic level, would refuse to accept me and reject me like a transplanted organ? What if during one of the walks along the famous Tulubaikan wide avenues guarded on both sides by tall birches raining down their golden leaves, along narrow streets among old shrivelled wooden houses, mothballed under eternal restoration, as if that is what they are condemned for by time, or on the high hills, from which the whole village could be seen, sunken in the sea of trees, and the river Tulubaika, which goes around the village, shallow but still deep enough to take a boat or to swim, what if among all that I would feel myself a stranger? What if I meet my first love with whom I have long since lost contact, and, even out of common courtesy, have no choice but to talk? Terrifying prospect, that.

She's a cashier in a shop called "SHOP", has a husband with an orc face and five kids with semi-orc faces. I'm about to pay for everything.

— Hi! Is it really you?

Who? Me? Even I don't know that. What a question!

— Apparently, yeah. Nice to meet you. Erm, again. Nice to see you

again.

— You're looking good!

Not the best I can manage.

— You too. Looking good, I mean.

— How many years? Ten, fifteen?

— Eleven, actually.

— Ah, yes! Time flies! Since school, right, right.

— Yeah, doesn't it indeed? Flowing weirdly, that thing. Spirals, he-he...

— Oh yes, indeed. How are you? As white as soot?

— I'm good, alright, not too bad, coping, he-he. How's your life?

— Better than yours!

— And mine is better than yours, too!

— Of course, it's not a zero-sum game, is it?

— It is indeed not. I know what that is, my eldest's in the sixth grade.

— Oh is he indeed?

— Yes, a smart lad, exemplary student.

— Good genetics.

— Right, yes. It's all the air, the air's special here, clean and all.

— Oh is it indeed?

— Indeed. Nature.

— Naturally, yes.

— What do you do? Ah wait, I remember. You program clouds. Your grandfather told me. We always talk about you when he comes by.

— Do you indeed?

— Charming fellow. Back then he thought we were a couple, imagine that.

— Weren't we?

— Oh you had those plump cheeks, very cute.

— Indeed.

— Indeed.

— Indeed indeed.

— Oh yes, indeedly indeed.

— Indeedest of indeeds!

— Indeed, uh-huh...

— Indeed indeed...

— ...

— ...

— Are you married?

— As a matter of fact, I am, actually.

— Do you have kids?

This is everyone's favourite question. I wonder why the border control lady didn't ask me it. "Do you have kids?" "No, I do not." "Have you had kids?" "No I have not." "Will you have kids?" "... maybe?" "When will you have kids?" But I am prepared.

— I have a niece, yes. She's cute. Look at these stains.

— You look like a mushroom!

— I know, right? She's quite an artist, little chortess.

I would wager she's in cahoots with them chorts, even though she has an angelic face. All children are like this. She looks at me — no, inspects me — like I'm some unknown species. That odd abroaded uncle who is rumoured to share some of his grandfather's outstanding genetic material, a wise and knowledgeable man who studied "sciences". Some

things pass through birth, some by birthright, some only through words. So be it, hither and yon, I shall act as an adult and teach her our family's arcane knowledge of how to separate a head and a tail and bones and eat the river fish properly.

— But I don't like fish.

— Why don't you like fish?

— I don't know.

— Have you eaten fish?

— I have not.

— Will you eat fish?

— ... maybe?

— Maybe?

— I don't like how it smells. It smells fishy.

— You know, we used to fish all the time when we were like you. In Tulubaika. Grandad made me a fishing rod. He was driving us to the river as well. I caught a lot of fish once and fed it all to our cat. She liked it, I reckoned she was happy. She was old. Once we found her caught between the fence boards. Oh, well...

— I'm almost six and I'm not a cat. Although I wouldn't mind being a

cat at all. I might as well become a cat later because why not, right? GG says I can be whoever I want.

— Oh does he indeed? “GG”... I’ve never heard “GG” saying something of that sort. Was he drunk?

— Isn’t it so interesting being a cat? They have paws and they’re fluffy. I’m not fluffy at all, I feel like a snake now.

— Cats eat fish, though.

— I know! I’m not a degenerate. They do but I’m not yet a cat, you see? It’s so simple, really. Those things take time. So I’ll wait until I am.

— Well, that’s a shame. I’m not here often, as you might’ve noticed. Fish have plenty of useful things, for example, omega-3 for brain development.

— Has the fish helped you at all?

— ... What do you reckon?

— I don’t reckon it did, if I’m honest. If I’m completely honest, you’re odd.

— Am I indeed?

— Not very odd, don’t you worry. Just a little odd, a tiny bit odd. It’s not too bad, right? Being odd? I’d advise you shouldn’t worry.

— Oh, I shouldn't?

— No, you shouldn't. You're not a degenerate, right? Because THAT would be really really bad.

— I hope I'm not.

— GG would say you're fine then. You shouldn't worry.

— Okay. I won't. If "GG" says so.

— You look sad.

— No, I'm not.

— Yes, you do. Why do you look sad?

Oh how painful it is to return to that homeland, that home, that street (or a house), after so many years of being away. One who is not who he was comes to a place that is not what it was, and two entities, the character and the place, meet each other again, as if for the first time, a complete and total jamais vu but with a hint of déjà vu, a bit toxic déjà vu — two either idealised or despised images sprouted from the imperfection of memory. All everything does is seeming. It's never a full circle. It cannot be. One never comes back to the same point. One doesn't have to disguise oneself as a beggar or someone else to do the nostos, for one is already disguised by time.

— I want a great great-grandchild, grandson. More of 'em, lil'bastards.

— What for? I wonder.

Once upon a time, Grandad's archnemesis from the house next door spread a rumour that he, Grandad, eats them, infants.

— The line, our beautiful line, should remain intact, shouldn't it?

— You have one already, — I point to my niece.

— YOUR little child, when will you bring me YOUR little child?

— Well, I can't. Because I don't have any, Grandad.

— You have my name. Look at us! — he grabs me by a resemblance of my biceps. — I and you, you and I — Olympians! Bloody good helixes, exemplary genetic material. You don't waste exemplary genetic material. New gold, new oil it is these days. Precious, absolutely precious. Look at all those aborted degenerates running around!

— Grandad...

— They abort them, then nurse them in test tubes and release them on the streets, IQ of a pumpkin — many people are saying this, lots of very smart people. Western influence, terrible influence, absolutely the worst. Priest told me once — every Sunday I go to church, every Sunday, I still do — he told me this. A woman, a damn fanny-for-sale — everybody knows who she is, I'm not pointing fingers — aborted fifteen, bloody fifteen (!) little degenerates, a world record. Then what? What did Comrade Major Yehoshua do (may his memory be blessed

crosses himself)... He told the priest that he wouldn't send her to hell, no, hell no, hell no. He would send her to heaven instead so she would spend all her eternal life nursing her abortlings there. Isn't it just incredible? Nobody does divine punishment like He does, nobody. This is why I go to church, to hear stories like that. He's a great guy, we've got a new one, fantastic guy, smart, drives a fucking G-Wagon, has a beard, exemplary priest. I fucking hate beards but does he look serious? Oh indeed he does. You should shave your fucking thing, though.

He grabs me by the resemblance of a beard, rather lovingly, and jerks it.

— ... they were not baptised, though, were they?

— Of course they weren't. Who would baptise an abortling. Bonkers!

— Well, how do they go to heaven then?

Speechless, he is, in awe at my theological apparatus. He makes an expression of a person going blind or about to have a stroke.

— You don't understand anything, do you? This is such a stupid question, incredibly stupid. What is your wife doing?

— She's busy.

— That's a shame. I thought you lied to me, though, when you said that. Aren't you busy, too? Your lady's not supposed to be busy. I hoped to see her. I've always reckoned you were a good-looking lad and a bit of a wily bastard, husband material, no less. A father material, too,

do you know what I mean?

— Unfortunately.

— Have pity, you two. I'm old, incredibly old. I'm healthy and all but you know how that happens — very rapid. Someone's up there presses a button and — **poof!** — gone. Might not see your little duckling running around this house. You should father a child or two. Or fifteen if you're good at that in and out thing. A world record, you know — fifteen! You're an adult, you should know how that works.

— I do know how it works, yes.

— Then what's the fucking problem?

— I want to see the world. I'm too young, Grandad.

— No you're not! You're fucking old! You're growing downwards already! What do you mean "young"? You have this bastardly beard. You should move back here and bring your wife. We'll build you two a house. I'll do it myself, hands of gold and all, still. Good carpenter. Like comrade Major Yehoshua (may his memory be blessed), mayhap better. You won't know how to build a house, will you? Sitting at your computers all day, must've gotten haemorrhoids already programming your clouds. You used to be a sporty lad, whizzed around the village like a wound-up toy...

— I was fat. You don't whizz around when you're fat.

— ... you did fishing, all the man things. Chess, too. You were incredible at chess, very incredible. Best player I've ever known.

— Uh-huh... Was I?

— In the West, they don't have such players. They have their computers play chess for them. Complete and utter degeneracy, absolutely the worst.

— I don't have time to plant a tree, build a house, and father a child in Tulubaika. I have life, I have to work.

— Pawn to your Western masters, you are. Fifth column.[6]

— I'm heading back soon, my puppet masters are calling.

— I'll be dead next time you come here.

— Don't say it. Why you keep saying it?

— I'll be fucking dead, that's why. Dead as a corpse.

— No you won't.

— Of course I will. Will do my best. I'll have a funeral like a Caucasian wedding[7]. Everyone will come to see me dead. Will you come to see me dead?

— I would like to say "I'd be happy to" but it's not the right thing to say, is it?

— This is a perfect thing to say. You have good sense of humour, too. Opposite of deadpan, I'd even say.

— Let's talk about something else other than death.

— Show me pictures of your lady.

— You've seen them already.

— I have bad memory, terrible, like a drunkard.

— I'm sure it's not alcohol.

— As if I don't know that!

I take my phone and show him the pictures of my wife. He frowns and squints, his bushy eyebrows spread like an albino peacock's tail.

— Good genetics, — he nods. — I wish she was from Tulubaika, though. You should move here. Not too late. The air, the land, nature — good for a woman. Take your mother, your sister, your niece — my heroines. You can paint them, everyone will marvel. Good to raise children here.

— Uh-huh...

— Take your Grandma, my orchid — goddess, pure natural beauty, Greek statue, incredible woman... oh... incredible woman she was. The one that makes you do great things.

Iconographical idiosyncrasy of Grandad's house makes one stagger: comrade Yehoshua, comrade Joseph, comrade Felix, and comrade Wife — figures of absolute power, each in separate rooms. It wasn't customary to talk about her, and I knew her only as a beautiful woman from that portrait in his bedroom.

— Did you know Grandma?

— Of course I did know Grandma, — he told me once, wasted. — We knew each other very well, very well. How do you think you exist? Divine intervention?

— What was she like?

— She was a bad swimmer, very bad swimmer. I built her a boat, very beautiful, good boat. You could go fishing in the ocean on it. I can row for you, I said, not a problem, my orchid, I have strong hands. We don't even need a boat, why would we need it? I can carry you through Tulubaika myself. It's not that deep, very shallow river. But she wouldn't dip a toe in Tulubaika, said it was too cold.

— It is too cold.

— No, it's not. It's a perfectly fine river.

I can't imagine her as old as him, just as I can't imagine her with him. I can't imagine her baking pastry, I can't imagine her gossiping with other old women in the village and calling everyone around degenerate. I can't imagine her voice and what colour her eyes were, though, likely, they

would've lost some of their colour by now. I can't imagine her telling me grotesque folk tales or asking me to wear a hat not to freeze my brain out. Sometimes, it's rather lovely to think that she'll remain a mystical creature of eternal youth, younger than me now, almost like my sister, and won't hear and won't see all the things I myself would eagerly forget. I can imagine how she would argue with him and how she wouldn't stand him. It is, in fact, easy to imagine.

— Why do you watch this? Nothing but lies, bare-faced lies! They're not even trying anymore.

Red like a beetroot, I shout into my phone at someone who's a thousand kilometres away. Another red beetroot is yelling back at me. Sometimes I wish telephone and internet weren't invented and we didn't have to call each other once in a while to discuss death, the weather, or the news.

— It's you who's brainwashed here!

— Who? Who brainwashed me?

— That fascist scum you allied with!

— What fascist scum, Grandad? Who?

— Those very ones who execute our people right and left. The ones who bomb our people!

— But it's us bombing them!

— They are bombing themselves.

— How can you believe that? How can you believe that someone can just bomb themselves? Why? What for?

— Because their rulers are fascist scum, that's why. They swore to wipe us all from the face of the earth, swore to Hitler, that fucking bastard himself. Now their rotten genes are showing their true colours again. It's just incredible. I know people, people who serve there, they told me everything face to face. They would tell you everything to turn you against your own country. I can't believe it — my grandson, my own grandson.

— What? What can't you believe?

— You want them to bomb your own people. Traitors breeding like rats, and you're falling in with them.

— You're being lied to.

— Nobody's lying to me.

— They do.

— You're a wise, knowledgeable one now, aren't you?

— Our soldiers kill and rape people.

— Whom? Fascists? So be it.

— Are you serious?

— Never thought you'd turn your back on the motherland, on your own grandfather.

— I'm ashamed to be related to this country anyhow.

— We protect our country, don't we have a right to protect our country? You smartarse think we should just give up, don't you?

— It's impossible to argue with you.

— If your country and I mean nothing to you, at least think of your mother. She would be happy to learn her son supports fascists, wouldn't she?

— You're a fascist here, not me.

— What a gift in my twilight years... Nothing left but to mourn the grandson I once had.

— You're just drunk, you don't know what you're saying. You're delirious.

— You hate your own grandfather. This is who you are now, grown-up man!

— I don't hate anyone, I just want peace.

— Why didn't you serve, huh? "Oh, peace, peace"—now look at our

country! Our village will be bombed tomorrow. Never thought I would raise a pussy. Just like your father, you are. Your sister got more balls than you, by a margin. Yours haven't even dropped yet, no they haven't, fucking "scientist"! She's a fucking ballerina and you can't write ballet without "balls".

— You know, I hoped you'd be dead without seeing what our country has been turning into.

— Never come to my house, my village, you little piece of shite! Genes, great genes, you'll get the same dementia as myself, fascist degenerate.

Down the winding staircase, I descend and emerge into the airport's hall. In front of me, right above the airport exit, a plain cement bas-relief with the Tulubaika coat of arms features a mallard sitting in front of a birch. I reckon that's why we're screwed from birth. There's nothing to see in the village. It's nothing like Babylon, with no skyscrapers, no hanging gardens, no temples, nor epics written on ancient tablets, and everyone speaks the same language. It exists by inertia; everything in it happens by inertia. Entering the village, one feels as if provided with free shackles and here and now one's life is over, so all one has left to do is to ferment memories in small bottles until they explode one day. There are no foreigners, no tourists, no strangers, except one. The squares and streets are empty, old kioskers sleep in their undisturbed dens. People stroll through the streets, tapping their canes on the pavement. Nobody smiles at you, except when they think you're a clown in your red cashmere jumper. Rare cars breathe at you with eye-scorching fumes,

growl, and fly past, splashing mud from non-drainable puddles, an irreplaceable part of the village's landscape design. Black cats wait for you to cross the road. Ducks swear at you behind your back. Squirrels... well, I don't know what they do, they are just on the trees somewhere. Yet, there is something peaceful, soothing to the soul both in the silence and in the constant quacking of ducks, something lovingly engulfing you whole in its bog.

— Oi! Stand where you are! Don't move!

I'm sixish. My feet are drowning in a muddy spring field. The snow has melted and turned the field into a brown swamp ready to suck me into the abyss and conserve me alive. My body is already up to my waist in filthy viscous goo and the soil keeps engulfing me.

— I can't move!

Grandad rushes towards me, shuffling his feet in knee-high rubber boots that are also bogged down in mud. At that time, I don't fear being buried in soil, for I don't have that emotion yet, or perhaps I already know that's what happens to all of us asymptotically, but when I see a horror in his eyes as he's approaching me and I become scared too, scared that he's scared, for I've never seen that in him, at least not because of me.

— Bloody hell, why did you go in there, lad, tell me. You're not supposed to play here, are you?

He wraps his heavy arms around me and pulls me out of the mud.

— Thank you, — says I and hands over the cash to the taxi driver who takes no cards, only banknotes and, not looking back at me, nods stoically in response to my gratitude, man to man.

The car rockets off down the last metres of the asphalted street and dives into a tunnel of golden birches, leaving a cloud of smoke and quaking drone in its wake.

I stand in front of Grandad's old shabby brick house with my backpack and a small hand luggage, darting glances at the neighbour's windows, yet nobody hides behind white, patterned curtains. I wonder, with an electric tremble of uncertainty, what if we don't find common ground with him, and he really doesn't want to see me ever again?

I walk past the windows and from his room through an open vent I hear music playing, Shostakovich's Waltz No. 2, accordion rendition. My eyes find a slit between the curtains and I see him: he is dancing with his eyes closed, stepping lightly from foot to foot, with a portrait in his hands, not of comrade Joseph, not of comrade Felix, not even of comrade Yehoshua, but of comrade Wife (may her memory be blessed). Thus, in stasis, I hide for a minute, then creep to the door, gently push a familiar doorbell button and wait until I hear his footsteps and his raspy and low voice:

— If it's one of you door-to-door brain donors and your pyramid schemes again, I swear I'll cut your bloody fingers off and screw 'em up

your arse, you bloody degenerates.

Airports, for some reason, always feel like that — duty-free.

Notes

1. Sterlet (from German “Störling”), a torpedo-shaped freshwater fish from the sturgeon family, native to the river systems of Russia and Eastern Europe. Historically it was one of the top status dishes which brought it to the wrong side of conservation efforts in the late 20th century. Now it has a protected status. The sterlet possesses neither the international celebrity of its caviar-producing relatives nor their imposing size, making it perfect for provincial Russian grandeur.
2. Dill, garlic, and mayonnaise are crucial parts of Eastern European cuisine. They are used in atrocious quantities in main dishes, appetisers, salads, soups, etm. There’s no such thing as “enough” with them. Saying “enough garlic” is the same as saying “enough love” — ridiculous.
3. In the Warcraft universe, murlocs are an amphibious humanoid with fish-like head, bulging eyes and gurgling voice, infamous for their distinctive “mrglglglgl” vocalisations.
4. The default belt buckle of the Soviet military was a weighty brass object with the Red Star or hammer and sickle insignia. Once a soldier came home, the belt buckle was used in domestic pedagogy as an instrument of corporal punishment: state-supplied, ideologically sanctioned, and efficiently painful.
5. A foundational myth of Russian exceptionalism that goes back to the 16th century when monk Philotheus of Pskov declared Moscow the spiritual successor to Rome and Constantinople, the third and final Rome. This proposition conveniently justified Moscow’s imperial ambitions, positioning Russia as Christianity’s last bastion and rightful heir to classical civilisation, sustaining Russian grandiosity through tsarist absolutism and beyond.
6. A loaded political epithet, originating from Spanish Civil War General Emilio Mola’s boast that while four columns of troops advanced on Madrid, his clandestine supporters inside constituted a “fifth column.” In Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, the term became the ultimate patriotic slur that implies ideological contamination

and conscious service to foreign powers.

7. A reference to famously extravagant wedding traditions of the Caucasus regions, where celebrations typically feature hundreds of guests, multi-day feasting, lavish displays of wealth, spectacular displays of dancing and horsemanship, and (allegedly) firing AK-47s into the air.

Read next part

Episode 18: about planes cancelled due to abysmal weather conditions

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