TOLSTAIA KAPORTA



by VANECHKA

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Tulubaikaporia

Episode 23: not a word about it

nova-nevedoma.com/not-a-word-about-it/

> "The feelings that hurt most, the emotions that sting most, are those that are absurd: the longing for impossible things, precisely because they are impossible; nostalgia for what never was; the desire for what could have been; regret over not being someone else; dissatisfaction with the world's existence. All these half-tones of the soul's consciousness create in us a painful landscape, an eternal sunset of what we are."
> — "The Book of Disquiet" by Bernardo Soares

It was symbolic that the day when everything was supposed to end fell on the day of their next meeting. It was ironic that talking about it was essentially forbidden. Strange, or rather wounding — the feeling that our heroine alone was bothered by it, and she, being gnawed clean by anxiety in real time, refreshed her news feed all day: during breakfast, which was flavourless, during work, which wasn't working, on the underground, where, it must be said, there was nothing else to do anyway, as if it had been created specifically to give yawning crowds time to perform at least some collective rituals, like refreshing their feeds. The rain, it seemed to our heroine, was falling right above her as if

she were in a film and it was raining only to enhance the dramatic effect: both outside, drumming on her raincoat, and in the office, drumming on the keyboard instead of her. It would be brilliant if along with the rain they'd assigned her a pianist whom the filmmakers would cart around on rails behind her everywhere along the preplanned routes, and he'd play something emptying by Shostakovich. The only problem with the rain — wet fingers would make it difficult to tap a phone screen.

The meeting took place once a month, on the last Friday, at eight in the evening in some small local library, where besides them no one else was present at this time. Our heroine always arrived last and left first, because in that case the chances that she would be left alone with someone, and would have to strike up awkward small talk about how the rain was incredibly wet, and the wind, the bastard, constantly strove to steal her umbrella and turned it inside out, and how she herself was turned inside out every Monday but somehow folded back in, were significantly lower. The group was good because it was a group, not a pair, not a trio. In a group, she could be both a mouse grise and an éminence grise simultaneously, steering the course of discussion without ever being at its centre. She also arrived late because she absolutely hated rushing somewhere; she much preferred rushing away from somewhere. In the "somewhere-to's," something was always happening, whereas in the "somewhere-from's," the opposite of happening was happening — unhappening and nonhappening. Thus it had been her whole life — the only lesson she had somewhat learned.

At the entrance, she was met by the ever-energetic Mnemozina (or

simply “Zina”), a pre-retirement-age woman with an enormous mane of hair and elegant round glasses, looking witchily young, sometimes even younger than our heroine. She had both organised the group and initiated the ban that followed.

— Darling! All soaking wet, how dreadful, — said Mnemozina and helped pull the raincoat off our heroine. — You still haven’t bought an umbrella.

— Well, it keeps turning inside out. With this wind, what’s the use of an umbrella?

Sitting at the table, waiting, were two people: Phenomen Noumenovich (or simply “Phenya”), a man about ten years older than our heroine, with sleepless darkness under his eyes, trim, clean-shaven, closely cropped and seemingly just moments away from full-scale baldness, and Anchutka (just “Anchutka”)[1], a boy who had aged too early and shrivelled, looking like a discontented elder.

In the corner stood three umbrellas with a puddle of water accumulated beneath them. They would later forget to wipe it up and get an earful from the cleaner.

— And we’ve already brewed some chai. Have a look, — Mnemozina pointed to a steaming samovar surrounded by a flowery chai set.

— We were waiting for you, — said Phenya.

— Late again, — added Anchutka.

— , — our heroine wanted to be ironic, but wasn't ironic and added, with a shrug, — the rain, sorry.

— It's been coming down every day lately, hasn't it? — Zina said with a smirk.

— Every day, — confirmed Phenya.

— Doesn't stop, — added Zina.

— Doesn't stop! — exclaimed Anchutka, feigning joy. — Pouring and pouring, pouring and pouring.

— Goodness me, absolutely bucketing down.

— And the wind turns your umbrella inside out.

— Doesn't it just? That's what I'm saying.

— I'd love to go mushroom picking right about now... — said Phenya.

— Mushroom-picking, mushroom-picking!

— , — our heroine almost said.

— I remember once... In September, I think. And we didn't even need to go anywhere — they came right up to the house. The mushrooms, that is. Woke up in the morning, and everything around was covered in mushrooms. Just like that. Surrounded. That's some village life for you.

— Phenya, — Mnemozina chided, wagging her little finger. — You're

treading a slippery slope here.

— I apologise, Zinochka. I still can't get used to the rules. It won't happen again. I'll try.

— Oh, stop it. No need to apologise. Just keep in mind that the most important thing in this matter is control. Without self-control who are you?

— Who?

— An uncontrolled element! — Anchutka chimed in. — An uncontrollable personality!

— Think about it, Phenya. Ponder. Tell me.

— To be honest, I don't even want to think or ponder this, — Phenomen Noumenovich hunched his shoulders.

— Oh, Phenomen Noumenovich... An animal. Without self-control, ergo, without will, you are nothing but an animal.

— , — our heroine almost joked but somehow didn't feel like joking even though it would have been appropriate. She had jokes up her sleeve for every occasion.

— So be it, — replied Phenomen Noumenovich without relaxing his hunched shoulders. — What's wrong with that? We're all animals one way or another, if, as they say, you dig deep enough. All of us were

there, all of us will be there.

— A weak-willed creature! — Anchutka added.

— Would a weak-willed creature find a samovar in this city? — said Phenomen Noumenovich, patting the hot samovar on its side. — Oh... Do you think that's easily done?

— We are absolutely confident in your abilities, Phenya, and in your will, and in you in principle. You're a wonderful person.

— Wonderful-wonderful.

— Let's just be a bit more careful, if possible. It's possible, isn't it? You can go home and talk about whatever you want there. And about... ahem-ahem... about any locations, generally speaking. But here, please, let's do without all that. At home, Phenya, at home.

— Zina-Zina-Mnemozina... But who needs it there, at home, this "whatever"?...

— There you have it, Phenya. And why should we be any different? Do you think we don't understand which mushroom spots you're talking about?

— We all understand everything here. Our understanding is perfectly fine!

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— Last time, what happened?

— And what happened last time?

— Tul—

Everyone and each one even flinched. Mnemozina lowered her volume.

— Toulouse. You made up France. Decided to become French. Bonjour! I'm from Toulouse, he says, and that's it now, live with that.

— Well, what? In France, the croissants are top-notch. Have you been to Toulouse?

With each mention of "Toulouse," our heroine felt as if a tractor was driving down her spine and wanted to scrunch up, to roll herself into a golden ratio. She took her phone out of her pocket, which, the bugger, didn't recognise her, and, in order to get the feed to update, she had to enter her password.

— I've never been to no Toulouse.

— Do you have something against Toulouse? — asked Anchutka.

— I hold no grudge against Toulouse. I'm sure Toulouse is a beautiful city. But we're not gathered here to discuss Toulouse. Let's better drink chai. Getting cold, it is.

— It isn't. It's in the samovar. The entire existence of this machine is about keeping chai warm.

— Some croissants with the chai would be nice.

— And what's chai without croissants, right?

— Oh, the croissants in Toulouse... Magnifique! — added Phenomen Noumenovich. — When I was just a lad, just like Anchutka here, — he said, pointing at the old boy, — we used to help our baker during summer holidays, to earn at least a kopek or two. We'd go to the field, harvest the wheat, take it to the miller, he would dry it, grind it and all that, and we would take the flour to the baker. That's what he made our croissants from. That's how it all was. And now what? One generation and everyone's glued to their phones.

— What's wrong with phones again? — asked our heroine.

— Nothing's wrong with the phones, but nothing's right either.

— Of course...

— Of course, yes, when I was a little lad I had no phone whatsoever.

— Is that jealousy I hear?

— I'm not, in fact, at all jealous. I'd better watch grass grow and chase chickens.

— ... ... Because there's nothing else to do there, — she retorted.

— "There" where? — asked Mnemozina.

With a sufficient degree of theatricality, Anchutka let out a sigh full of bitterness and sadness and looked guiltily at our heroine. She, not at all guiltily, pulled the feed down. It wasn't bringing any news. Not all was lost yet, still not lost, nothing had happened, but it was supposed to happen any moment now, any moment.

— Here we have rain, but there, snow has probably already fallen...

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— Where again?

Phenomen Noumenovich recognised the hint.

— Well... I don't know... in damn Oslo, Zina, where else?

— Phenomen Noumenovich.

— What?

— Why are you so bitter?

— Me, bitter? Why am I bitter? What do you think?

— Phenomen Noumenovich, everyone is already tired of Toulouse with its croissants and Oslo with its snow and everything else — the mushrooms and the grass and the chickens — nobody can stomach it anymore, and these... I don't even know how to say it... These... These...

These... These... Well, what are they called? I've forgotten the word.

— Which ones?

— Well, these. Those. The ones that... chort. Well, what? Bojemoi, what a life.

— Euphemisms, — our heroine suggested.

— Euphemisms! That's right, thank you, dear. Woman to woman — thank you.

It's nothing, thought our heroine. This is how one forgets one's native language and language at large... First you can't remember "euphemism," then "croissant," then "tea," then "arboretum," then "rhododendron," then even your own name, and so you'll live without a name, remaining in history simply as a heroine.

— ...

— I can't bear those rain talks of yours. Your rain is—

— The rain isn't ours. The rain is for everyone! — concluded Anchutka. — Égalité!

— What difference does it make! I'm already sick to death of it, and the snow and the wind and even the sun — I'm sick of it all. This abysmal weather thing. I hate it here, any kind, whatever it might be. But there, in...

— Shhhhhh! — Mnemozina hissed. — Have some conscience, Phenomen Noumenovich. You're not alone here after all. Think of us. Why do we come here all together?

— Being honest, I don't even know anymore why I go anywhere...

— To chat! — answered Anchutka for him. — About this, about that, about the fifth, about the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth...

— Stop it, Anchutka!

— How are you, Phenomen Noumenovich?

— Splendid, Anchutka. Jolly good. Couldn't be better!

— Phenya, but Anchutka is right, why are you silencing him? Why did you come here today?

— I have no other choice. I go wherever my eyes lead me. Tell me to go to A, I go to A, tell me to go to B, I go you'll never guess where. I'm a weak-willed creature, apparently!

— On the contrary, Phenya. Your visit today, like all previous ones, is a demonstration of nothing other than your will.

— Oh yes... A volitional exhibitionist.

— Oh!

— Come now, Phenomen Noumenovich. If you didn't want to rid yourself of your burden (and ours, by the way, too, which is important), you wouldn't have come anywhere.

— I don't want anything, Zina. Or rather, I want one thing, you know yourself what.

— Quieter, Phenya, you calm down. We'll drink some chai now and you'll feel better right away. Put four sugars.

— With croissants! With croissants! With croissants! With croissants! — Anchutka began to jump.

— Anchutka! Stop that right now! — Mnemozina barked at him. — Adults are talking, understand?

— , — our heroine wanted to interject, but was distracted by her phone. The feed remained silent. The update animation was spinning at the top of the screen but wasn't birthing any news. Not all was lost yet, still not lost, nothing had happened, but it was supposed to happen at any moment, any moment now.

Mnemozina sat down next to Phenomen Noumenovich and placed her hand on his shoulder.

— We will cure your melancholy, your toska, everything — we cure all, don't we, Phenya? We're here to heal. All together.

— Heal-heal, but do we need to? I don't even know anymore.

— Darling, do sit down, — Mnemozina nodded to our heroine. — No need to stand like an idol. You must be tired. Were you standing all the way on the underground?

— Oh, by the way, I brought bubliks, — our heroine remembered and reached into her bag, took out a package with bubliks on a string and put them on a plate, promptly organised by Mnemozina.

— Heroine! — Phenomen Noumenovich sang out. — Isn't she a heroine?

— Heroine-heroine!

Hardly much of a heroine, thought our heroine. Nothing special, just bubliks.

— Did you bake them yourself?

— No, of course not. Bought them on the way. I don't bake.

— Where?

— , — our heroine almost said and took out her phone, updated the feed — nothing — opened the maps and showed Phenomen Noumenovich the address. — Here.

— Oooh, I know, I've been there. They sell all sorts of things. You can find everything. Everything we ate in childhood.

— Phenomen Noumenovich... Are you doing this on purpose? Where

exactly did you eat what in childhood? Where?

— The whole cosmos provokes me, Zinochka. I won't tell you "where."

— Then don't tell. Good that you won't say. To fight a malady, it's important to strike directly at the root cause, at what causes it, not smooth over the symptoms. If you constantly babble about this toska of yours, it won't go anywhere, this toska, Phenya.

— Chronic, — whispered Anchutka.

— Exactly, Anchutka, chronic. Well done. And we're always bad-mouthing the younger generation. See what a bright mind is growing?

— I'm not growing at all! Forgot how to grow, wasn't taught.

The gloomy Phenomen Noumenovich only nodded.

— Let's drink chai already. Everything's gone cold, — said Mnemozina, clapping her hands gently.

— Samovar, Zina, it's in a samovar...

— Make it boil!

— It's not supposed to boil... No one boils chai, we're not in prison.[2]

— At times easy to forget, that.

— And I almost forgot about the pills! — Mnemozina became agitated.

— Everyone stand up. Up-up. You, and you, and you — everyone up.

Everyone stood up. Just sat down, thought our heroine, have to get up again — unbelievable! But she decided to stand up anyway, because she couldn't be bothered to argue. Better to stand than to sit and listen to reprimands, although standing was also pointless. But still she argued.

— Can we not? — she groaned.

— Come on, come on, up you get, up you get.

Everyone stood around the table next to their chairs. Phenomen Noumenovich opened the lid of the samovar slightly, releasing clouds of steam, like a genie from a bottle. The smell of black chai had already been present and now filled the entire room. Mnemozina walked around the table and gave everyone a pill of nostalghin, tiny ones, microscopic, almost invisible in the palm, and to take them, you need to open your mouth wide, tilt your head back and with a sharp movement of your hand toss the pill in there. It's better, as the instructions stated, to do this standing. Why? thought our heroine. It doesn't work anyway. Not one pill, not two, not three. Even if you overdose on them — nothing. The overdose, rather, would be a formal condition, a chronic one, too.

— I went to the doctor, — our heroine said quietly, having gathered her courage.

— To the doctor? — asked Mnemozina, alert.

— What doctor? We don't need your healers here, — Anchutka protested. — Our own doctors are ten a penny!

— , — our heroine couldn't find what to say.

— Well, well... Let's hear it, tell us, which doctors have you been visiting? — Mnemozina asked irritably.

— Zina, why are you picking on her like this? And I'm the mean one...

I should have said nothing, thought our heroine, and said nothing:

— ...

But, after stirring it a bit, she did say:

— A doctor for chronic toska, with a moustache, in poisonous-blue gloves. You know him, his name is So-and-So Such-and-Such.

— Strange fellow.

— Strange name. Hard to remember.

— Very strange, I agree.

— Strange-strange.

— He says that everything we do here, including the pills, is complete drebbeden.

— Drebbeden?! — Mnemozina nearly fainted, although perhaps she

did faint, but in pretence, metaphorically, as if her spirit and her entire being leaned back, tilted, began to fall slowly (very-very).

— I'm sorry, I didn't express myself correctly. He only told me that in their professional community no one does it this way anymore. The latest research shows that actually nothing works at all, and you don't even need to take nostalghin because everyone has already developed collective resistance.

— Developed what? — asked Mnemozina, still in total confusion.

— Resistance, — repeated our heroine. — We're all immune to this pill. The malady has grown stronger. Alas.

— I actually read about that too. But to believe it... I didn't want to believe such a thing. I wasn't ready to give up hope.

— As if there's any left for us!

— What was it again? The thing we developed.

— Collective resistance.

— And do you believe it yourself?

— Me? Believe the doctor?

— Do you believe that nothing works?

— I do.

— And do you believe in Good and Evil? — asked Anchutka.

Our heroine looked at him and meaningfully remained silent:

— ...

— And what does So-and-So Such-and-Such suggest doing then? — asked Phenomen Noumenovich.

— He was medically honest and said it straight. He says, there's nothing more to be done with chronic toska, the only thing left is to start shrugging your shoulders. Like this, — said our heroine and theatrically shrugged her shoulders.

— You must be joking! — Mnemozina exclaimed in surprise and also shrugged her shoulders. — Like this?

— Quite decent, but the technique is lacking.

— How about this?

— , — she was about to say, but held back.

— Better?

— Well...

Phenomen Noumenovich and Anchutka joined the exercise. Something creaked in someone.

— Is this alright?

— It is better, yes.

— Show us again.

— Anchutka, you're not doing it right. You need to shrug your shoulders first. Like this, — our heroine demonstrated.

— The shrugger hasn't grown yet!

— You can also make a face like... sort of "oops."

— Like this?

— I think so. Good face, that, fitting.

— Oops!

— You don't have to say it out loud, though... That's better.

— I give up, — said Mnemozina. — Nothing's happening.

— Absolutely nothing.

— Try a few more times.

The collective shoulder-shrugging took on an aggressive manner. Everyone was no longer just shrugging but literally waving their arms, chasing air around the room.

— How many times do you need to shrug your shoulders for it to feel good? — Phenomen Noumenovich asked confusedly.

— The doctor said that in this matter, the main things are regularity and the social element.

— And will this really cure us?

— It can't be cured, Phenya. I said that.

— But will we feel good?

— And it won't become completely good, of course, but cosy or at least a bit cosy — that's entirely possible.

— Even a bit cosy would be better, if I'm honest...

— I've read about this too... — Mnemozina said thoughtfully. — Good is something you get used to but cosy... well, cosy is always cosy. But, I must say, I didn't believe it. I am, if you want to know, this... What's it called? Well...

— Sceptic, — our heroine suggested.

— Exactly, I'm a sceptic. I need to be convinced first. I'm very cautious about any information. Especially these days. Especially on the internet.

— How primitive, this alternative medicine of yours, — added Phenomen Noumenovich. — Shrugging...

— , — our heroine wanted to say, but sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

— Tea, chai, tea! — howled Anchutka.

With creaking chairs, everyone sat down at the table, sad. To the clinking of the chai set, chai poured from the samovar cup by cup.

— It seems like it's only got worse, — mumbled Phenomen Noumenovich.

— How could it be any worse? — asked Anchutka.

— Unlike with "better," the range here is wider, Anchutka. There's no sense in here; sense is only in there, — said Phenomen Noumenovich, cutting himself short.

— In what "there"? There is no "there," — Mnemozina looked at him suspiciously.

— And there wasn't, — continued Anchutka.

— And there won't be... — added our heroine.

— Can I have a bublik?

Our heroine pushed the plate with bubliks toward Phenomen Noumenovich. He took a bublik in his fist and bit off a third of the circumference, leaving the horns sticking out to the sides. Everyone else also took a bublik, poured chai and began to eat. Mnemozina bit off small pieces and immediately washed them down, slurping. Anchutka first ate a whole bublik, seemingly without chewing, then immediately

washed it down with a cup of chai, in one gulp, asking for more, since he could only reach the samovar by standing on the chair. Our heroine simply ate without any special characteristics and glanced at her phone, which lay on the table next to her cup. You can shrug your shoulders all you want, but as long as you remember what causes the toska, the toska won't go anywhere. , she thought, , exactly
. And there was a time when everything was different, not at all like now. Just one and and nothing more, or
— the outcome is the same. In other words, , complete
. Such a situation, eternally ...

They were silent, munching on bubliks, draining the samovar, silent again, silent a lot. So — , so — , and even so — (unimaginable). It was strange to gather to discuss anything except the thing they could actually discuss. This "anything" occupied much less mental space than "the thing," even despite the fact that "thing" was one object, and that "anything" was all other objects. So, for example, if we take one atom as an illustration and contrast it with the rest of the universe, the atom will be quite tiny, and the universe will be quite universal, and it would seem silly to even compare them, but, alas, for the clinical condition in which they collectively found themselves, there couldn't be a better comparison — "anything" was the atom, and "the thing" was the rest of the universe, the collection of all other waves and particles and everything in general. Come, the invitation to the compatriots' meeting said, let's chat, rub shoulders, collectively wallow in melancholy. There everyone is "just like you." Isn't that absurd? No?

There shouldn't be enough people "like her" in the world to organise them into a group. The fact that there could be more than zero of them frightened and drove her crazy from the moment she first saw them and even after, for example, at that moment, that is throughout her entire experience since she started thinking about it. For some, if you stay silent, incomprehensible holes form in the brain, and for others, these holes from silence begin to fill with incomprehensible things, and it's unknown which is worse, because no single person throughout their life can have both conditions to compare them.

— Phenya, where did you get the samovar, by the way? — our heroine suddenly asked.

— Well, — he perked up, — in a Turkish shop.

— A samovar in a Turkish shop! What irony, — Zina giggled.

— The main thing is the first two letters. If you understand what I mean.

— Everyone understands everything, — added Anchutka.

Mnemozina looked sternly at Phenya.

— No, we don't understand. Phenomen Noumenovich, explain it to us.

— You know, in Turkey they call it a samovar, too. They've mangled it a bit — semaver or something like that, but it's fine, since the word still means the same. They don't have bubliks, though. And they drink chai,

too. That's their favourite, drinking chai. Just as we were back there — real chai drinkers. What chai-drinking sessions we used to have... For days, for weeks sometimes. When I remember, oh...

— My, my...

— Yes indeed. Just imagine.

— I'm afraid to imagine.

— But you should imagine.

— I have no need for imaginings, Phenya.

— He-he-he.

— There's your "he-he-he", Anchutka.

— Bubliks are certainly tougher than croissants, but that's where it lies, our secret, in toughness, in the huge round hole in our soul. Would you like me to show you how to properly eat bubliks?

— Do show us, Phenomen Noumenovich. We, uneducated people, didn't know. Show us, don't be shy.

Phenomen Noumenovich wasn't shy and showed.

— Like this.

Mnemozina approved, though playfully.

— Good, Phenomen Noumenovich. You're doing very well. This is a very impressive technique.

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— You know how to ruin a conversation, Zina.

— ... I won't even comment on this.

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— Well, let's talk about the weather at least. It's unbearable, — howled Phenomen Noumenovich. — The only thing worse than the weather are these looks and these euphemistic exercises.

For our heroine it was quite bearable, rather even preferable; the only

unbearable thing was that nothing happened when she refreshed the feed. She sat rocking on her chair, pressing her lips between her teeth more and more tightly. The thought that any place could just cease to exist sent her into hysteria, a deep internal one that is like a drill bit broken off inside a piece of wood, a tumour in the nostalghic organ. What happens to a place when its last inhabitant dies? How and where does it disappear? Does it disappear immediately? Is there paperwork to be done? Do they use nukes? They call in a special squad, level the place to the ground, plant it with trees, bushes, moss and everything else, give the signal to the mapmakers, who, in fact, do the same thing with special erasers, and voilà! Both the map and the territory are gone without a trace.

, thought our heroine, and at that very second Mnemozina uttered exactly the same words:

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Amazing, just wonderful. Anchutka seemed about to giggle, although from his wrinkled face and eyes as round as bubliks, it was difficult to tell at what point the muscles on his face transition into readiness to laugh. He was silent, loudly slurping his chai, and watching the adults with interest. Phenomen Noumenovich was staring at one point, while Mnemozina was looking around, that is, at different points, but very pointedly, trying to ensure that the set of these points did not, under any circumstances, include the point in Phenomen Noumenovich's eyes. It felt like he was about to protest. ” ! ! ! !”
could be read on his face.

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— Would you like to hear a joke, an anekdot[3]? — asked Phenomen Noumenovich with hope in his voice.

Everyone looked at him wearily, as if saying "no," while saying nothing. Silence is often considered a sign of agreement, but in their case, to avoid confusion, it would have been logical to agree that silence would be a sign of silence and would not mean anything else and each person would decide for themselves what its meaning was.

— Well no, let's not do this, — said Mnemozina. — We know your anekdots.

— What's wrong with them? Is it better to be silent?

— It is. Sometimes it is better. We're sitting, drinking chai from a samovar with bubliks — this doesn't happen every day. This is

unbelievable even, happens only when the stars align and Mercury is in retrograde.

— Anekdot-anekdot! I want an anekdot! — shouted Anchutka.

— I don't mind an anekdot, — our heroine shrugged, looking at the feed with one eye (still nothing, but any moment now, literally any moment). — I sort of agree.

— Sort of?

— Just tell it already! Bojemoi...

Phenomen Noumenovich took a sip of chai, gargled his throat and began to tell:

— Three people meet, each with a suitcase. The first one says: "In my suitcase is everything I remember." The second one says: "In my suitcase is everything I've forgotten." The third looks at his suitcase and says: "I've forgotten what's in my suitcase... and that's why I always carry it with me."

You could hear water dripping onto the floor from the three umbrellas standing in the corner. The skin at the corners of Phenomen Noumenovich's lips was stretching and also seemed to be making its characteristic sound.

— , — our heroine wanted to say, but didn't.

— Is that all? — said Mnemozina.

— Yes, what, isn't it funny?

— Not funny at all.

— Was that an anekdot? — asked Anchutka.

— It was, Anchutka.

— Not funny!

— , — our heroine was about to add, but held back.

— An anekdot is when it's funny, isn't it?

— You know, anekdots weren't funny at all and weren't meant to be funny.

— Really? Then what was an anekdot?

— Just these kinds of entertaining stories. It was only later that they suddenly became funny and everyone started thinking that an anekdot is something funny, but no. Aristotle didn't have setups and punchlines — these are all modern inventions.

Our heroine smiled.

— Phenya, you're wrong, — Mnemozina challenged, to which Phenomen Noumenovich only shrugged his shoulders.

— Anekdot! Another anekdot!

— Maybe let's not do this performance? Let's talk about our real stuff?

— Shhhh! Phenomen Noumenovich, sometimes I think these meetings only make me feel worse. I want something simple, human — to sit with good people, drink soulsaving chai, chat about something at least slightly abstract. Don't you want that? Do you want more from life?

Phenomen Noumenovich shrugged his shoulders and was about to spread his arms, but changed his mind halfway.

— Zina, in this life I don't want anything anymore, do you know what I mean?

— Phenya, how dreadful!

— No, not because I'm in despair or life has become repugnant to me but because I have everything and I don't know what else to want, except for "the thing."

Mnemozina shook her head.

— Phenya, do you love your life?

— I love loving life, dear Zina. I try.

— If you loved it, you wouldn't want something that can't be obtained.

— I don't see a problem, Zina — you can't obtain it, but you can still

want it.

— An anekdot! Please tell us an anekdot, dear friends!

— .

— And what's the point of such wanting?

— The pleasure of wanting itself. We're creatures without will, homo wanting, if you will. Or desiring. Homo deodorant, or what's it called?

— Desiderans, — interjected our heroine. — Not deodorant. Deodorant is for the scent.

— It's all homo anyway.

— Please! Uncles, aunties, dear adults, this isn't funny either!

Anchutka lightly hit the table with his fist, the cups clinked in the saucers.

— Sometimes I can't even understand what I'm yearning for? After all, only the echo reaches me. Like, tell me, why yearn for a ghost?

— Worse, they say, is only with ghosts of ghosts, Phenya. The situation there is completely hopeless. Such toska makes you cosmically despondent; you correctly noted about the spectrum. Yes, it can grow much worse. You think I made it all up, but believe me, I know how it is. I know a lot, I've lived a long life, next year I'll retire. Since I left, not once... Well, you understand what I mean.

Mnemozina's last sentence seemed to revive Phenomen Noumenovich's faith in the conversation.

— Tell an anekdot! I want an anekdot, a funny one, — pleaded Anchutka.

The hot temperatures of the chai had finally warmed our heroine to a sufficient level. At first it seemed too strong to her, almost like chifeer, or not even almost, but actually — the product of Phenya's efforts, but then, after a couple of sips, among the bitterness she began to discover notes of bergamot and something stimulating, or rather something she wanted to classify as such.

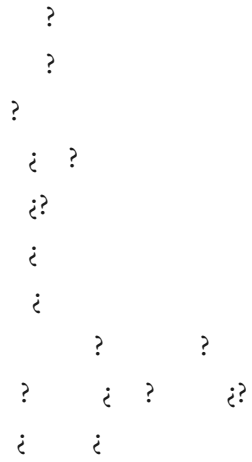
— I can read one, — said our heroine, scrolling through the notes on her phone, full of random phrases, quotes, links, saved memes (the most exquisite ones).

— Read it! Read it! Please!

Mnemozina and Phenomen Noumenovich looked at our heroine with a silence that seemed (to her at least) to mean agreement.

— Ahem, so... Once upon a time — winter, holodrigue — three hares took a birch log and rode it down the hill. Thus they ride and ride, and then bang! A cliff, and they haven't noticed it before. So they keep rushing down at full speed. They fly, fly, the log bouncing on bumps, and the hill seems never to end and the cliff is still somewhere far away, and they decide to start a dialogue. One hare asks another: "Guys-s-s,

where are we heading?" The second replies: "Towards a collective clouding of reason." And the third, not being a fool, adds: "Into the abyss of obscurantism and self-deception." Well, and what, one might ask, they should do in such a situation? And the first hare says: "Oh, for a second I thought we're heading back!"



— Not funny! Not funny! I want funny! — Anchutka got furious and climbed onto the chair. — Not funny! Let's have something funny! I'm going to cry! Why are you all so unfunny? Why is everything so unfunny?

Mnemozina giggled and almost choked on her chai. Anchutka froze, bulged his eyes and stared at her. Mnemozina giggled again and seemed to choke again. Anchutka bulged his eyes even more so they took the entirety of his little face. The anekdot wasn't particularly funny for her and she had probably already forgotten about it but the sight of the frowning Anchutka who didn't find it funny at all, rather the opposite,

caused in her some unprecedented seizure, a kind of post-ironic attack. In a word, Mnemozina cracked up. Anchutka, like everyone else, didn't know what to do and carefully sat back down on the chair, tucking in his legs and occupying his mouth with a cup of chai. Zina laughed for a long time, laughed and laughed, laughed and laughed, didn't stop laughing, chuckling, snickering, tittering, guffawing, cackling, giggling, until it became so funny to her that she simply fell silent, not slowly, like a singing plush toy with dying batteries, but abruptly, like a telly when the electricity is cut off. Well, that's something, thought our heroine, I didn't know , , and even so
that . I wish I could too, flashed through her head,
and she took another sip of chai. Zina's mane had maned more in all directions and covered half her face, so she had to fix it before helping herself to more chai.

— The brew is excellent, Phenomen Noumenovich.

— Astringent, — confirmed our heroine, distracted from her phone. — In a good way, chifeerier sense, of course.

He nodded thankfully. All this time he had been sitting embarrassed and was probably pondering what had made Zina laugh so much.

— The taste is like... like this... mmm... Damn...

— Like grandmother's? — Phenomen Noumenovich helped.

— Yes, like grandmother's, — confirmed Mnemozina and looked at

him gratefully.

— Many grandmothers have a similar taste, — said Anchutka.

— , — almost slipped out of our heroine.

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— So, what has everyone watched recently? — asked our heroine, without raising her eyes.

Everyone, even Phenomen Noumenovich, Mnemozina and Anchutka, sighed heavily.

— Cartoons, — said Anchutka. — Lots of cartoons. I only love cartoons.

— Which ones?

— Different ones, all sorts of cartoons. The main thing is that they're funny.

— For example?

— I watch cartoons too, — said Phenomen Noumenovich, — with my son.

— I don't watch television. I get migraines from screens, — said Mnemozina.

— What do you do then? Don't tell me about the park, not in this weather. And you don't have a dog.

— Me? I go to the theatre.

— I just realised that I don't know anything about you except that you don't have a dog.

— There you are, what have I been telling you? All we care about is "there," and not about each other or even ourselves. Do you see now?

Phenomen Noumenovich perked up.

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— I didn't watch as many cartoons in childhood as I do now with my son. Same with books.

— Is the lad growing up smart? And the chai really is good.

— You bet.

— Takes after his father.

— I think so too.

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— ... — our heroine figured out.

— ...

— What's your son's name?

— Phenya, also Phenya, like me.

— Phenomen Phenomenovich?

— That's right. Named after my grandfather.

— So your father was Noumen Phenomenovich then?

— That's right. That's how it turned out. You've never heard it? A popular name in our parts.

— Phenya... In which parts, may I ask?

— I don't know any more whether to apologise or not.

— Please do.

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— Any conversation is properly organised nonsense, — Anchutka interjected. — I hate conversations because they're nonsense. I love cartoons. And anekdots and jokes. Funny ones, and not nonsense ones. But you're all unfunny. I hate both "that" and "there" and "anything" and "everything" and things like them. I'm too old for all this and I'll never see "that" or "there" or "anything" or "everything" again. Mother, do you hear? I'm too old!

Everyone looked at Anchutka, even our heroine.

— At the first meeting, we should have banned talking about the weather, — said Phenomen Noumenovich. — People shouldn't talk about such things at all. It's harmful for your brain to talk about the obvious.

— Phenya, I've already told you everything. If you don't want to come to our meetings — don't come.

— I've already told you everything in regards to what I want.

— What have you told me, Phenya?

— That I don't know what I want. Leave me alone, let me be a person, an animal, a creature without will — whoever, just for a second...

— The foundation of personality is a mighty, brilliantly persistent will!

— I don't need your will. If you want, I'll fold it all up entirely in a supermarket bag, just like that, and bring it to you at the next meeting, and you can take it for yourself, since you need it so much. I've already suffered enough with it, now I'd like to suffer without it for a change. Would you like that?

— Bring it, Phenya. We'll gobble it up with chai, — said our heroine, to which Phenya smiled in response.

— You, Phenomen Noumenovich, drink your chai and think about your behaviour.

Phenomen Noumenovich followed the instructions and began to think.

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— Phenomen Noumenovich! Stop this immediately!

— You know... Now I can't even think about that, the dearest thing. And do you know what I'll do?

Mnemozina shrugged her shoulders and demonstratively slurped her chai.

— This! — at this, Phenomen Noumenovich took out of his pocket a metal flask of decent to indecent size, opened the lid of the samovar and poured in some transparent liquid.

Mnemozina looked with interest at what was happening.

— At least turn off the device, all the good stuff will evaporate... What's it called? Starts with "A", I think... Good grief, what's happening... — she muttered.

— Alcohol, — our heroine helped.

— Precisely, that's the one, "the green serpent," they say.

Our heroine smiled. Getting drunk wasn't in her plans, but neither was not getting drunk. You can't say she had no plans, just as you can't say that the absence of plans wasn't in her plans. Everything was rather "as far as" and "however it goes." The only thing that was perhaps in her plans was to wait for news since everything was already hanging by a thread ready to snap any moment (it's almost there actually, just a few minutes left).

— What's this, what's this? — Anchutka pranced about.

— This, Anchutka, is for adults, and you're already too old. You're not drinking any more chai.

— Why's that?

— Because, Anchutka, because.

— Don't because me again! Everyone's becausing me all the time!

— Just because, without any other special reasons. That's why. Some things require no explanation.

— Boo! — Anchutka booed and crossed his arms with a sulk. — Boo! A pox on you all.

Phenomen Noumenovich turned off the samovar and filled three mugs. Our heroine took a sip from her mug. Yes, the chai had indeed become different; its bitterness acquired some justification at last.

— You should have thrown in some nostalghin too. You know, for good measure, — joked our heroine, adding, — .

Mnemozina was always in favour of nostalghin, so she immediately took out a small jar, counted out three microscopic pills and began to distribute them among those gathered.

— Go ahead and sprinkle them in, milady, — Phenomen Noumenovich grinned.

— It doesn't work anyway, — our heroine supported. — We're hardly going to die.

— And if we die, well, that's no great tragedy!

— True that.

Mnemozina shuddered and generously sprinkled a handful of pills into everyone's mug from the jar.

— Stir it, what are you sitting there for?

They stuck their little fingers into the newly invented chai drink and

stirred, almost synchronously. The drink, it must be said, was hot.

Thus they sat, drank, slurped.

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... our heroine thought.

— I would dare to say it's not bad, — said Mnemozina.

— Very not bad, — added our heroine.

— We need to create a group chat, — suggested Phenomen Noumenovich.

— Do what? — Mnemozina clarified.

— Create a chat.

— What for?

— We'll send each other stuff. News. Photos.

— What do you call them? Mmm... You know... Funny pictures.

— Anekdots, — suggested Anchutka.

— Memes, — prompted our heroine.

— Memes, that's it.

— Memes, memes, memes, memes!

— We get it already.

— Memes, memes, memes!

— As they say, funny on the surface, dire underneath![4]

— We'll text each other, — Phenomen Noumenovich continued. — Why not? A group of compatriots.

— Excuse me, a group of what, Phenya?

— Have you lost it completely? Now we can't say even that?

— We can't say anything of that sort, Phenomen Noumenovich. No slippery slopes. Rules are rules.

— "Rules are rules," — he mimicked and shook his head. — Well, then just a group, a chat, whatever. We won't name it. We'll leave it without a name. That's what we'll call it: "Nameless." Or "The Unmoored."

— "Lovers of Toulouse..."

— Anchutka! Can't you live without a "chat"?

— We'll stay connected, we could do shashlik or something else. I'm sure you like shashlik. Everyone likes shashlik.

— We're already connected, Phenya. I don't eat meat.

Phenomen Noumenovich waved his hand, emptied his cup, poured more "tea".

Our heroine suddenly realised that she had no internet connection all this time. Generally when something like this happens, when you lose connection with something, be it the real world or the past one, you find yourself as if at sea in a calm on a sailing vessel, possibly even with lowered sails, or with sails torn to shreds, when it no longer matters whether there's a calm or a storm. The absence of internet was similar to the absence of oxygen and always caused her a certain indescribable paroxysm, especially in a situation when this "oxygen" was so necessary to her. Because what if without her observation, what if and had transitioned to the status of that very ghost of a ghost, inaccessible to our heroine's perception. How would the world change? Would she notice the difference? For most people, can disappear only once but for her and those around this would be the second disappearance. What is truly absent is absent twice. What would happen to her at that moment? What would she feel? Our heroine knew she'd have no answers whatsoever until it actually happened, and yet she couldn't stop asking them. It seemed to her she had gone through all possible scenarios, predominantly catastrophic, but most of all she feared when , yes , just like that, without warning, imperceptibly. and , and then and everything , absolutely everything.

The Wi-Fi deigned to connect and the internet slowly appeared. Chaotically, our heroine pulled down the feed. And then, after another wave across the screen, the feed condescended to update to that very state in which the promised and inevitable finally happened. Our heroine froze.

— It's gone, — said our heroine in her normal voice.

— How gone?

— Gone.

— How gone?

— Completely gone.

— Gone?

— What do you mean "gone"?!

— That's it. Gone. Completely.

— Do you mean "gone"?

— I'm afraid so.

— Really? — Anchutka whispered. — All kirdyk?

— Total kirdyk.

— I don't believe it! Already? So early? Ah...

— Not early at all!

— Not in time either!

Pause. Everyone was afraid to look at each other. Our heroine stood up from her chair. Her hands weren't trembling, her breathing was steady, her tear glands weren't working because they refused to work overtime due to the new rules demanded by the tear gland workers' union. In her thoughts, she had already seen it, this exact degree of "goneness".

— Well, here, look... — said our heroine and placed the phone in the centre of the table.

Everyone crowded around the screen. Someone frowned with worry, someone with curiosity.

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— It can't be.

— Unbelievable...

— Finally, — whispered Anchutka. — I have already grown old!

— Gone, — our heroine affirmed.

— Apparently, it's gone, — Mnemozina whispered.

— But how... — Phenomen Noumenovich moaned. — It must be some other "it".

— There's only one "it", Phenya. Or rather there was.

— "Let bygones be bygones."

— But what bygones, though?

— What are we even talking about?

— Tu... tu...

— Not "tu," but "ta."

— "Ta"?

— Oh, here we go again...

— Maybe there was nothing at all.

— Maybe there wasn't.

— But there was! There definitely was... Tu... Ta... maybe... what was

the name?

— Better if there wasn't.

— Was or wasn't, no point remembering.

— It's fine without "was," and good with "wasn't." No point complaining.

— But wait... No, no! Differently. Bu... bai... There definitely was something.

— Was, wasn't! What's the difference?

— Why even wonder about it!

— When choosing between two supposedly exclusive hypotheses, both turn out to be utter tosh.

— Exactly.

— Let's hug each other. Hands, hands, give me your hands. — Mnemozina suggested.

Reluctantly, looking around, everyone extended their nearest arms to each other and thus formed a circle, in the centre of which the samovar towered.

Little could be heard, almost nothing, except, perhaps, breathing, and even that was quieter than the silence.

— You know, the weather is nasty after all, — Phenomen Noumenovich declared.

— Nastier than anywhere else.

— Disgusting, — Mnemozina agreed. — What do they call such weather?

— , — our heroine suggested.

— Exactly, “ “.

— Oh, don’t say it, it’s not that bad.

— “ ” through and through.

— Yes, that’s the one. Of spectacular proportions.

— All woe and nothing but wickedness.

Notes

1. Anchutka (Анчутка) is a character from Russian demonology referring to a minor devil or imp, such as a water-dwelling one in northern Russian folklore, merely troublesome rather than malevolent. He entered Russian children’s folklore as a cautionary device. Parents would warn, “Anchutka will take you away if you don’t behave”. The diminutive form “-utka” adds an element of sardonic affection and ironic familiarity, typical in Russian nicknaming traditions.
2. Refers to the culture of making chifeer (чифир), a beverage produced by brewing an unconscionable quantity of black chai in a minimal volume of water, traditionally in conditions where access to more sophisticated stimulants is limited by architecture, law, or economy. The resulting tar-black decoction delivers approximately the caffeine content of a small espresso machine, compressed into a single cup, along with tannins sufficient to strip the enamel from one’s teeth and, some claim, the illusions from one’s soul. The practice of brewing chifeer started in prisons but became popular amongst all folk who have concluded that sleep and taste are a bougie drebbeden.

3. In Russian culture, anekdot (анекдот) is different from the English "anecdote." Both words derive from the Greek for "unpublished accounts" and used to mean the same thing, a brief personal story, but Russian anekdotes are closer to short jokes or tales with punch lines, typically shared orally and passed along through social networks, like proto-memes, in a way. They're characterised by brevity and often feature stock characters (like a mischievous boy "Vovochka", Chapaev, or ethnic stereotypes, amongst many-many other things).
4. "Funny on the surface, dire underneath" (Картинка смешная, ситуация страшная) is a Russian internet meme that emerged around 2017 as a comment on Odnoklassniki (a social network popular among the older generations) before it was picked up as a meme by the wider Russian internet by 2018. The phrase serves as a universal comment for content that appears amusing but reveals troubling underlying realities, a cognitive dissonance of sorts, pretty much like everything in Russia. Memers deploy it to acknowledge that while something may provoke laughter, the situation it represents is genuinely concerning or tragic, though generally one can do nothing about it and does not.

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