

Simply Maria

1.

“Br-r-ezhnev! Br-rezhnev! Br-rezhnev,” an elderly woman was saying quietly but energetically. She was sitting in a chair on the first row of an old bus, looking out of the window and repeating the name of the General secretary. She didn’t just say it, but every time she was pronouncing it with a different intonation followed with the same arm movement with her index finger stretched out. It looked like she was piercing someone with a needle. She wasn’t looking at the other passengers and they were trying to turn away and pretend they couldn’t hear anything.

Five minutes before the final bus stop, the bus usually slowed down, the driver opened the door and let the woman out. Still staying on the snowy pavement and waiting for something from the dark, frosty, winter morning, she would carry on with her convincing monologue. And the passengers, clinging to the windows, would watch her with fright.

This happened every day. The bus was not Hungarian, but from Lvov. So in winter it was warm inside except that it always smelt of petrol. From five o’clock in the morning it was travelling round the town and picking up the poultry farm workers. The cranky woman would get on the bus in the same place with a load of other passengers and in twenty minutes she would confidently get off her seat and direct her steps to the exit. Everyone

was used to her, as if she was a factory whistle. When the morning shift began people forgot about her.

The head of the killing room of the poultry farm was Yekaterina Pavlovna Nelidova. In the year of the one hundredth anniversary of Lenin's birth, in December, she had a baby girl. She called her Maria. At the presence of men the mother liked to say it was her present to Ilyich' jubilee. She was pretending to be uncertain which exactly Ilyich she meant. At the time they talked a lot about another Ilyich on the telly and radio. Yekaterina Pavlovna didn't have a husband so the little girl was brought up without a father.

The mother and daughter lived very poorly, in a wooden two-storey house for five families outside Lenin-grad, in the village of Gorelovo. Masha used to wake herself up every morning, get ready and go to school. After her lessons she would come home and cook dinner. Her mother would get home late at night. After her shift she had to get some shopping. Tired and nervous, she hardly had the strength to eat her food, look through her daughter's books and planner, read her a lecture, after which she would immediately fall asleep.

There was always a shortage of workers at the poultry farm. To fill the gaps in the production of seven thousand chickens a shift and to get extra money, the head of the killing room took Masha and her friends with her in the school holidays. First they were sneakily watching the cranky woman on the bus. Then, in the killing room they would put bright green plastic hats on, white backwraps, plastic aprons, the same colour as the hats, then rubber gloves. They would take forks for chicken gutting and start execution. They cut off chicken heads and took giblets out.

The only practical thing the daughter learned from her mother was sewing skills. Masha could sew trousers, dresses, shirts. Besides, she enjoyed it. After all,

it was not a duralumin tub filled with dead chickens' giblets.

After school Maria Nelidova went to the Leningrad "Badge of Honour" Order College of Light Industry and two years later she could design different garments. She was really good at sewing patterns and could use different home and foreign sewing machines. Straight after college Masha was invited to work in a co-operative shop. There she didn't lose any time and got a lot of clients. She started getting decent money. Maria glammed up and often went to the pictures with her friends. She liked to watch films about travelling, somewhere far away, to South America. She used to sing the same song to herself, "Will I ever see Brazil, Brazil, will I ever see Brazil before I die?"

When Masha was eighteen, her mother died of cancer. The company housing was taken away of course.

Having arranged with her friends, Nelidova stayed in a new place nearly every night and kept saying "I am like a young Caiman lizard. It lives at the Amazon but doesn't stay in the same place." At first she liked that romantic life. "I could live in a tent," she would say to her friends. "Why not? No parents, no home. But I have a passport so I can vote. Freedom!"

In fact, she couldn't get a ballot paper because she didn't have an official residential registration. She was signed out from the old place and she didn't have a new one.

In 1990, she got fed up with that and being despaired she decided to get together with a beginning businessman Ignat. The lad was plain-looking, with short hair, nearly bald, but he had money. At school he had not been bright but he had been doing black marketing – he used to get chewing gum from foreigners and then sell it to his school friends, a rouble for one stick. So he had been taught business since childhood.

2.

Now Masha's life turned into a wild and uncontrolled flow. One day they had a lot of money, the next day they had none. The people around her were cheering and enjoying themselves or hiding from creditors and wandering around, pale and dejected. They would keep silent and get their bags ready with the necessary things - underwear, a tracksuit and trainers. They were ready for jail, if their friendship with the state failed, or for "immersion", if they had to hide from bandits and creditors.

In the early summer of 1992 they got a cargo transporter with instant coffee from Israel. Big blue tins, a little dented, with red letters in Hebrew, were sold quickly. People bought them without asking why the tins were dented, and they liked the letters. Ignat had got them half-price. They raised at once, glammed up and decided to go on holiday abroad, to Paris. Where else? They visited a travel agency, booked a flight and two rooms in a cheap two-star hotel in Monmartre. One room for Ignat and Maria, the other for their friends. They were also persuaded to buy tickets for three tours around Paris.

So now they were wandering around the streets of Paris, the city everyone was crazy about at the time. They didn't know the language, didn't get any education, their faces said they were ordinary and simple-minded. How could they run a business? It was mind-boggling!

Having filled their bags with little things from the shop Tati, which was in Republic Square, they got on a boat tour, looked at the sights and listened to the guide. On their right they saw City Island and Notre-Dame de Paris. They recalled an old French film - Quasimodo, Gina Lollobrigida... Then the Seine turned left and they could see Place de la Concorde. Behind it there were the Champs Elysees up to the Place de l'Etoile. However, the Champs Elysees were stretching in an opposite direction

to their ship. Before the Alexander the Third Bridge they could see Hotel des Invalides – house for disabled.. Why disabled? Masha didn't get it. Napoleon was buried there but he wasn't disabled. There, as if on purpose, they put the heart of Marshal Grouchy, who had not arrived to help Napoleon and let him get defeated. Everyone knew that from the film "Waterloo". They also saw Champ de Mars, the building of UNESCO behind it and high round towers of Conciergerie where Marie Antoinette had been imprisoned whilst waiting to be beheaded...

Pretty soon they forgot everything they had heard. They got out of the boat near the Jena Bridge. Not far from it there was the really high Eiffel Tower, lit by the lights. They say it's the most expensive property in the world. Near the bridge they were shown a place in the river where a beautiful barge used to boat at rest, in which someone famous lived, either Pierre Richard or Alain Delon. The guide didn't really know. Everyone remembered Alain, of course, and loved him so they livened immediately. Masha was not an exception. She liked brunets with delicate features and blue eyes. Sure thing!

Maria and Ignat didn't climb the Eiffel Tower, they were hungry. They got away from their friends and without thinking long popped into a cafe. They sat at the table, took a menu and stared at the foreign words. They didn't understand a thing. The first two days they had been to cafes where in the menu there was a picture next to the name of a dish. But here there was nothing. What could they do? What was more – they had also missed the tour to the Eiffel Tower, which cost at least twenty bucks. They got upset. The waiter passed by their table a few times trying to figure out if they had chosen their dishes or were still thinking.

The young businessman from Russia could wait no longer and when the waiter in the red-and-white uniform came up to them, he proudly lifted his head, strictly

looked at him and staring at his mouth, started repeating the same word, "Yum-yum!" Not to look a complete idiot, he was pronouncing it every time with different intonation and bowing his head. To do justice to the cafe staff, they were ready for anything and knew the tastes of the Russian tourists. They brought them onion soup in small bowls, then lamb ribs with sauce and peas and in the end a pot of black hot shells. There were mussels inside them. Delicious and worth remembering! They didn't get any bread. Oh, well! They thought about wine, but it was too late. The people from their group had come back from the Eiffel Tower. They all had to go on their last tour, to the Sacrae Coeur, appearing white on one side of Paris.

They were tired. Tired to hang about the museums, listen to the guide with his stories of the French history, Napoleon, Danton and Mirabeau... Tired to eat a lot every day, eat the same food. Ignat was getting homesick. He felt like going to the countryside, making a shish kebab, having cold vodka and herring with onions. There would be friends around him, a guitar, playing cards...

On the contrary, Masha, who had never been to any museums before, was taking everything in, absorbing everything, like a sponge. She wanted to know if the dead French pilot had been found. She even remembered the full name of the author of "The Little Prince" - Antoine Marie Jean-Baptiste Roger de Saint-Exupéry! She would really like to stay longer in the Louvre where she saw a painting of a woman enjoying the babies playing in the garden. "How I would like a life like that!" Maria thought in her dreams and stopped.

Ignat grabbed her hand and pulled her away from Raphael's painting. They had to catch up with the rest of the group and Masha came back to sour reality. One of their friends threw up on the floor in the room with the Mona Lisa. They had had too much to drink the night before when they had been playing cards. They were not

like other people! So what if they were drunk, or, let's say, they were not sober! They had paid for the tickets, they were walking trying not to move a lot, only glancing everywhere. But that idiot! He was not like other people!

Immediately a woman in a pure white gown, rubber gloves and a special trolley appeared. She poured sawdust from a box onto the floor and without taking notice of the tourists around her gathered the breakfast of Ignat's mate into a shiny nickel dustpan with a mop, put everything into a small red plastic bucket and disappeared.

Masha tried to persuade her boyfriend to go out the remaining three days but he stayed in the hotel and didn't let her out so that she didn't waste money. Of course, she got upset. She knew that in some time she would have to drag Ignat to Brazil. That was for sure. She saw in a film giant lizards in the Amazon swallow big shells, which could even contain a pearl.

The woman sitting next to her on a coach said, "You are stupid! What do you need a lizard for? Let your boyfriend just give you pearls without any lizards. What would you do with a lizard? How would you get a pearl out? Are you mad? That's a big problem!"

In the hotel room where Masha and Ignat stayed all their business friends gathered in the evening. One night they were drinking and playing cards and the room was filled with smoke. Suddenly they saw smoke creeping over the fine sofa. Someone was hurrying to return to the card game and threw a hopper on the sofa. Now there was a hole the size of a saucer. They all drooped and sobered up immediately. They would need to pay for the sofa and their money was running out. One of them suggested they put a cushion on that place, another said they could buy a throw and cover the hole. Maria surprised them all with her quickwittedness and confidence.

"Listen! Listen to me! Go to a shop and get a hand-saw and big plastic bags. We will put the telly with rock

music on really loudly, saw the sofa into small pieces and take them all out as if there was nothing in here." The businessmen were listening to her instructions and standing in a row with their drunk heads sticking out, cigarettes in their mouths. "You will find the most convenient rubbish skip," she said to Ignat, "there you will only leave the contents of the rubbish bags, bring the bags back to the hotel room," Masha was instructing the card players eagerly.

A whirlwind started. The sacks were filled with clothes and taken out of the hotel or on another floor so that the maids could see clothes in them. Between the blank journeys they were taking out the pieces of the sofa in the same sacks.

The next day a cleaning lady came. She looked around and started yelling. In French, of course. A receptionist came and started talking nearly in Russian in her fright. Asking them where the sofa was. They had already got used to their guests from Russia taking towels, slippers, shampoo bottles or sewing kits. But the sofa!

Ignat couldn't help scoffing. He came up to the cleaning lady, turned his back on her, stuck his back and slapped his buttocks.

The gesture was deadly expressive. Both French women fell into a muse and left the room.

That's how Maria's meeting with Paris, European art and travelling finished. Maybe, her last meeting. Ignat was completely out of his mind. He thought, "Just a waste of time. I should have done some buy-sell business while watching all those graves and houses."

3.

The Leningrad flat that Ignat bought after his luck with Israeli coffee was at the same time his home, office and a conference hall. In the hallway there sat a young

secretary who had graduated from the philological faculty of the university. She answered the phone with a lot of enthusiasm. "Yes, Denikin's headquarter's speaking. Who? One second..."

"Stop yacking on the phone," Ignat would interrupt her. "No one is in. Did you get it? Just write down all the messages and don't say anything. But if they ring from Hungary, call me straight away."

But the secretary couldn't help it and the next time someone rang she answered, "Headquarter of the Horse Guards speaking", or "Business-centre Strawberry Meadow named after comrade Bergman speaking".

The New Year was coming but the Hungarian champagne hadn't arrived yet. They spent nearly all their money on it, that "Madame Pompadour". Luckily they hired a refrigerator for two thousand dollars. Other people used usual trucks with canvas tops cheaply. So they didn't mind now. When the lorries drove down the Tatra, all the cargo had it because of the pressure fall – the tops of the bottles were cut off. But they were still waiting for the champagne. The following day would be New Year. After receiving it they had to clear entry customs, unload and deliver to shops.

By now they all knew they had run into bucks with the champagne. The peculiarity of that product was that after the 31st of December nobody wanted it. Apart from aristocrats and degenerates as the honoured artist said in the film "The Diamond Arm". There were no aristocrats yet in the country, but there was the second type. They were the only hope!

The carbonated potion came on New Year's Eve. The shops didn't take it so they had to send it to the warehouse. As they didn't have any more money, they hired a warehouse without central heating. It was nearly empty – some wood and building materials and their boxes of champagne. Now they had to wait until the 8th of March!

What an awful thing to happen – in February the temperature fell to minus twenty five degrees! The security guard rang “the headquarters of Denikin” and asked them to listen – in the receiver there were frequent cracks, similar to the radiation reading tool.

“These are the bottles bursting... Hello! Can you hear? Hello! What shall I do?” the security guard was shouting.

Maria was the first to respond. She grabbed the phone from her unlucky hubby and started her distinct instructions, “Burn the wood. There is also some polyethylene there, big rolls of it. Pull it over the top. Get a fan from somewhere or blow the smoke under the polyethylene...

She was a decisive woman. They all learned it. Firstly, she was the boss’ girlfriend. Secondly, she usually knew what she was talking about.

A third of the products burst. In the rest of the bottles there was settling, they would not be able to sell them. So Mashka had an idea! She was a genius! She suggested they sell those bottles to restaurants and cafes for half price. “That’s right. When they serve champagne there,” the secretary grasped, “they usually cover the bottle with a white tea towel not to leave marks and not to freeze their hands or the champagne not to get warm and also to take the drops off the neck of the bottle.”

Everyone turned their heads at the same time and stared at the “staff philologist”. The businessmen’s eyes were shining with surprise and respect. They used to think the tea towel was to wipe the table... or hands with.

One of those days of February frost Ignat came home gloomy and anxious. “That’s it, Mashka!”

Looking at his white face, Maria decided that her boyfriend’s business had gone out of the window and they had to escape urgently not to be killed. However, Ignat was mumbling something, impossible to understand. Masha told him to start from the very beginning, “My heart is pumping blood to the right half of the body and

not to the left side," Ignat, being white from fright, said distinctly but with difficulty."

"How is that?"

"I went to the warehouse today... So cold! I put on a sheepskin coat and winter boots. So, most of my body feels warm, but the left side is cold."

"Are you telling me this? You are such an idiot, Ignat, even after you bought the diploma! I did tell you not to buy a coat in the Arab quarter. You didn't listen, decided to save the money, so here you are now! There is nothing wrong with your heart! Where is your coat?" Masha took the new brown sheepskin coat Ignat had bought in Paris, turned it inside out and burst out laughing. The left sleeve was without real fur. Just faux fur, that was it.

The time passed, but their material wealth did not change for the better. Maria was often recalling the Louvre, the wonderful painting with babies which radiated peacefulness. She had to do something. She had to look for a way to make money if silly Ignat couldn't. Her feelings for the young and successful at first businessman were fading. In a month they were in debt and had to sell their flat and move to a room in a communal flat. The secretary from the business-centre "Strawberry meadow" resigned. Instead of the beds they had folding beds, and unpacked bags with clothes. Ignat would turn up for a couple of minutes, slave-like, he was trying to escape from creditors and it could finish him off. "I am not in if anyone asks. I am transporting metal to Belgium," That was what Maria heard from him. Then he would disappear for another week. Then again...

"Well, that's it," Maria told herself confidently, "I've had enough. I need to disappear now. Or they will claim his debts from me. He doesn't want a baby, he can't go to Brazil with me, he owes everyone all the time..." She felt really down and she left.

4.

The train "Saint Petersburg – Warsaw" arrived strictly on schedule. Around forty people with bags, sacks and suitcases came out of the compartment carriage. Four young girls had met on the train and were now standing aside. They were here to work outside Warsaw as housemaids or nannies and were waiting for someone to meet them.

Soon they saw an elderly woman in an old long grey coat. Under it they could see several multicoloured silk skirts. Her shiny brown boots were tight on her plump clumsy legs. She was holding a stick with a white notice. They could hardly see the name of the firm, written in Russian in a thick blue felt-tip pen.

"Is everyone here from this carriage?" were the first words she said. She had a harsh voice of chronic rhinitis. However, the old woman was talking Russian without any accent. "There must be two more girls. Have you lost them? Where will I find them now?" the old woman was obviously not happy. "The minibus won't wait long. It won't."

She said something in Polish, fussed, then waved her arm and slowly walked towards the exit of the station with her brood. The girls kept quiet, looking at each other and shrugging their shoulders, thinking they had not seen any other girls.

Maria Nelidova had earned a good reputation on their way to Poland. They would have got hot boiled water and tea in tumblers and glass-holders. The tea was without soda and with fresh teabags. They all had come here in the same compartment. The tickets had been paid for by the agent. Before the last stop Masha had a chat with the stewardess trying to find out any useful information. She learned that every week there were groups of girls going to work in Poland. The latest two months they had

been travelling more often. The stewardess hadn't seen anyone going back. Maybe, they travelled one by one? She hadn't seen any groups.

Near the station in a side lane there was a minibus. The girls took their seats cheerfully and the bus drove off. They didn't ride long. In half an hour they got off, took their bags and went to a big wagon, or to be exact, a cold storage truck. Maria felt something was wrong, she grabbed one of the girls and pulled her. There were about fifteen steps to a forest. But that was a strange forest. It could end in a hundred metres...

Right there six husky blokes jumped out of the truck. They threw the girls on the ground, tied their hands behind their backs, gagged them, then pulled them into the truck, threw them on the floor and piled mattresses on top of them. The iron crimped door shut down. There was no light or fresh air inside. The blokes sealed the door and got into two cars, and the truck slowly gathered speed. There was a long way ahead.

They went through Poland, a part of Germany and Holland. They stopped at customs. There they checked the seal on the door, signed some papers and the cold storage truck with "frozen meat" continued driving according to the delivery note. They finally stopped after twenty four hours, on a bank of a canal, five kilometres from Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

There was an open forest around them, no houses or roads. On the bank there was a moored barge with a closed top. There were armed guards in black jumpsuits with truncheons. There were two minibuses nearby, the same as in Warsaw.

"They wet the mattresses again, the bitches! Can't have enough!" one of the guards shouted in Russian, he climbed inside the wagon through the opened door. He kicked the tied-up helpless women checking if they were alive, then he called another guard for help. Togeth-

er they picked up one "bitch" by her arms and legs and threw her on the ground. The body fell, the girl moved and groaned. Two other blokes came up and carried her inside the barge. Then another body was thrown from the wagon, and another one...

The girls regained conscience in the hold. They were naked, tied up by one arm to the bed. Beside them, there were ten other girls who had hoped to earn easy money. Near each bed there was a bowl and a jug of canal water. For drinking, washing or weeing, whatever they wanted. As soon as they came to their senses, twenty blokes stumbled in the hold. They were not guards and dressed differently. They must have been local workers or emigrants. Many of them spoke some Russian. All hell broke loose...

It was impossible and useless to fight them back. All the positions were thought through, the tied-up arm was changed every three hours, the bowls were taken out and the water was topped-up into the jugs. Sometimes the women were given dirty sheets to cover themselves with at night. In the morning everything would start again. There were four or five "goes" a day. It gave the owners of the "company" a profit of five thousand dollars a day. Or a hundred and fifty thousand a month – just from one barge which didn't even move. How many were there around – Arabs, Blacks, Asians? There were enough women for everybody.

Masha had understood everything in Poland when she saw the wagon. She had to find out where they were. What would happen to them later? It was clear they were alive witnesses of abduction and slavery in the middle of civilized Europe. They would get rid of them. But how? Masha couldn't think of any happy ending. She had to wait. Suffer and wait.

If someone tried to struggle and prevent to satisfy natural needs, they would severely beat them up. The

first time in front of everyone, next time they would carry them outside. The girls would hear the screams of the victim but in the end they would disappear. A new girl would be brought to the vacant space. After the first beating some girls were eager to report of any escape attempts to the guards.

Maria had always had a habit of wearing a thin piece of cloth around her neck, like a decoration. They hadn't ripped it off. They hadn't even noticed it. Inside that cloth there was a tiny pocket with a needle and cotton, and the cotton was marked by knots twenty centimetres a piece.

A whole month of suffering was coming to its end. She already knew what they did with the girls after that. After a month no one survived, they fell ill. To avoid infections, the girls were taken away and must have been drowned in the canal. Maria learned to pull the cleanest bloke from each party. It lessened the chance of falling ill. So long everything went smoothly if this word was suitable for her situation.

Once she asked yet another man to carry her over to another bed, next to the porthole. It took him a long time to untie her, then tie her up again, but now Masha was next to the light and could see what was happening outside. At night she measured the diameter of the porthole. Excellent! She would definitely get through it. She needed to know what was on the other side of the window. Where would she go and what would she wear?

She had to do everything immediately. She didn't know what the local guards would do when they found out she had been carried to another bed. Masha started to rip the rope on the left hand with the needle. Carefully, thread after thread. Two hours later she just had to pull her hand and the rope fell apart. She used the needle again to rip up the mattress and sew a vest and knickers. The cotton finished on the last stitch.

It was dark inside the barge. The guard came out of the hold to the toilet. Masha slowly, without saying a word to anyone, stretched her arm to the porthole, turned the catch and the window opened. She stood on her tiptoes, then stepped on the edge of the cable tomb and climbed out of the window waist-high. Now she had to slip down clinging onto the rough unpainted barge board.

5.

May Day was beginning. The day of solidarity of all people on the planet. Crickets were rattling and frogs were croaking. There were lots of mosquitoes. She had not noticed them inside the barge. Now that she was free, they were in her way, they were buzzing, stinging and following her.

Maria Nelidova was trying to find a police station, walking through a park, along the paths of fine gravel. Here and there she would see dull street lamps. Her bare feet were pricked by sharp gravels. There was no blood but her feet were covered with scratches. All her body was aching. In the park she would meet men and women wandering in some crazy clothes or capes made out of tropical bird feathers. They were carrying paper orange windmills. Their painted faces were indifferent. They were either drunk or junked up. Some of them were easing themselves. Masha, barefoot, uncombed, in her striped knickers and vest, looking like a concentration camp prisoner, didn't stand out among the other people on May Day. Tall Dutch, like clowns on stilts, looked down upon her. No one cared about anyone.

By the morning, behind the edge of the park, Masha could see stone houses with high roofs and rare cars. Just near the park there was a one-storey building. Its windows were shining with yellow light, around it there were a lot of cars with long flashing lights across the

vehicle body and with the word "Politie" on the doors. Masha stopped. She felt like storming into the building, falling on the floor and screaming. She would shout as loudly as she could. The last trees of the park were still separating her from the police station. She was about to leave her hiding-place when a familiar scuffed minibus pulled up near the entrance. Three guards in black got out of it. Confidently they went into the police station. Masha strained herself and backed up, then she turned around and bolted.

The day before they celebrated the Queen's birthday in the Netherlands, today it was May Day. What would be tomorrow? Maria could only think of running up to people and falling on the floor... In a shop. Anywhere...

In May mornings were quickly becoming light in Amsterdam. Early in the morning there were hardly any people outside the town. A rare car would drive through the flashing traffic lights, an empty tram would quietly ride or a cyclist with a bag on the back of his bike would ride along the cycle lane. Small shop owners were lifting the heavy metal shutters and opening beautiful window-sills with food, clothes, equipment on the lit shelves.

After her bad luck with the local police Maria Neludova couldn't recover herself for a long time. She locked herself in a mobile toilet, turned the light off and shivering of cold or fear felt her helplessness for the first time. What could she do now? Where would she go? She knew that if she came to a shop or someone's house she would be taking a big risk. She didn't know the language, she had no documents and no clothes. People wouldn't understand her or think she was begging. If she went to a police station they would keep her there and probably put her in a cell. They would sort her through later or they might chuck her out so they didn't have to deal with an illegal immigrant. What if they were all connected, like the police station near the park?

The worst thing was she was wasting precious time. The scumbags and the barge could disappear any time. The people she had seen near the police station were certainly raising the alarm and looking for her.

Maria understood that night, going through the park, that she was not in Poland or even Germany, she was in Holland. She didn't even know how to speak English... In this country they sounded like swans – it was impossible to understand them. She had done the right thing not going into someone's house. She had been told that people in Holland didn't stand any variations from the norm. Everything standing out was contraindicative. Everywhere and always. In behaviour, work and even windows of all houses.

But the main thing was she had to quench her desire to punish her offenders immediately. It couldn't be done so fast. Especially in a strange country. She couldn't relax! Nothing had ended yet. Any moment she could be found and caught. What could she do? Wait out! Get lost somewhere... Get some clothes and only after that set off to search for justice! She needed to get dressed... and have a wash! A wash? Exactly! Do they have a bathhouse anywhere?

She picked up an empty orange bottle and broke into a run. She was running fast and waving an empty fanta bottle trying to look like those men and women she had seen in the park.

6.

In two or three sections of blocks she saw a familiar word on a house wall "Sauna". She could recognize it in any language.

It was early. However, the loud-voiced Dutch were different from all other people, Maria remembered. They probably went to saunas any time of the day.

Climbing over a high hedge of prickly bushes of barberries, she found herself on an open-air ground with water barrels hanging on a long crossbar. They would turn over as soon as you pulled the string. There were bushes of juniper everywhere. Paths covered with flat stone were running from the hedge into the hall where she could see white clouds of steams moving into the fresh morning air. She had to get warm and look around, see what was where. She had to understand where the sauna opened to know when to belt off. The steam-rooms were separated with a glass door. She couldn't see anything inside, just steam. Maria took off her striped clothes at last, entered one of the rooms and found herself in a Turkish bath.

Five naked men and women were silently sitting on the warm marble seats. On the ceiling there were small blue lights looking like the starry sky. At the entrance on the wooden hooks there hung white sheets and coloured robes. Maria felt like taking one of them, a warm terry robe... To put something on for the first time in a month, apart from those knickers and vest that she had made herself. No, she shouldn't. It wasn't time yet. She wrapped someone's sheet around her body and went to another room with a fireplace in the middle of it. Around it there were deck-chairs with wooly soft blankets on them. Along the wall she saw glass shelves with fruits, juices and salads. You could eat as much as you wanted. Maria stuffed herself and lay down to sleep. The wood was nicely crackling in the fireplace and pleasant warmth was filling the room. She fell asleep straight away.

In a couple of hours, when her inflamed brain cooled down and she could reason calmly, Maria woke up and quickly decided what to do. To steal someone's clothes and find... legal rivals of that lousy barge.

Taking someone's clothes was not that easy. Metal lockers where the visitors of the sauna kept their

belongings, were closed with a magnet key. The key looked like a small watch on everyone's wrist. She would need to take the key off someone's wrist and scan it at the exit. There they would identify whether you had used any facilities, for instance, the restaurant or the massage room. If you had, you would have to pay. Not knowing all the tricks against thieves, she could be caught easily without even starting the war for justice. If she broke a locker she would have to leave the same way she came in, through the hedge... Maria didn't want that. She must have feminized in the warm and clean place. It was not worth it to attract attention.

She walked through the corridors, looked inside the massage room and the hairdresser's, then she went into a room with no sign on the door. Masha was in a big room with shelves along the walls and one bulb in the ceiling. It was a Klondike! There were shampoos, gels, eau de toilette, make-up, terry robes of any colour... In the corners, on plain metal hooks there hung someone's clothes, probably belonging to the people who worked there. Behind the baskets with sheets and robes she saw another door. Masha carefully opened it and saw the lobby of the sauna where the visitors paid entrance fees and scanned their magnet tickets, where there were boutiques with underwear and sportswear. Here she could mix with the idle Dutch who decided to wash off the orange paints covering their bodies from the night before.

Maria Nelidova put on some strangers' clothes, took bottles of shampoo and shower gel and headed for the exit. She left the sauna and set off to find the Red Light District. She didn't have any doubts that she would be able to tell everything and persuade people to go to a police station with her, even though she knew neither the local language, nor English.

7.

Masha found the biggest brothel in Amsterdam. It was not difficult. All foreign tourists were going there. So she found herself in De Wallen Street. There, along the ground floor, several hundred red windows were shining. But there was no one in the windows. In the back of the district, on massive wooden doors under an arch there hung a piece of paper with one word in English "Administration". Maria went in. The stairs were so steep she had to lean on the steps in front when walking up them. There was only one door upstairs and it was wide open. She saw three men in the fuggy room. Two of them were snoring on the sofas in their clothes and one man in glasses and with long black hair was sitting at the table and making notes in a magazine. On a plate next to him there was sweet suet cut into pieces and a loaf of fresh brown bread.

A lot of women came to that "office" every day so the men were used to all sorts of aberration. But what the bloke saw this time made him burst out laughing, which interrupted the sweet dreams of the other two men. They stirred once or twice, shouted something incomprehensible and fell asleep again.

In the doorway there was a pretty young woman in very wide black trousers turned up to her knees and with a wide belt. She was also wearing a green t-shirt with some crooked orange letters on it and a men's broad-shouldered pink jacket without buttons. On her feet she had shoes with thick high heels. A big brown cocked cap was sitting on a pretty head with long fair hair. She would have looked like a clown if she didn't have a pretty face, bright blue eyes and shiny wavy hair. The woman smelt of expensive eau de toilette. She confidently entered the room, made an arm gesture for him not to stand up - he wasn't going to, anyway - looked around, saw a ragged

leather armchair in the corner and sat and crossed her legs.

"Hello," Maria said proudly and seriously, then added, "Bonjour."

The black-haired man turned to the plump man lying on the sofa and pushed him, "Hey, Nickolay, maishka!"

Maria didn't expect to hear her name, she was surprised and pointing at herself, she chattered, "Yes! I am Mashka! I am Masha!.."

The man in glasses was from Yugoslavia and by one word he figured out the girl was from the former USSR so he decided to wake his partner who had come from the Ukraine to Holland two months before. He said "Wake up" in Serbian but Maria thought it was her name.

Nickola stretched, opened his eyes and burst into laughing when he saw the girl sitting opposite him.

"It's a clown from the Ukraine," the man sitting at the table explained.

When he calmed down, the Ukrainian asked, "Who are you?"

His voice was so hoarse that at first Maria didn't understand him.

"I am Masha. I am from Petersburg," she chattered again pointing at the man in glasses and being surprised, "He knows who I am."

"OK, you are from Petersburg, so what? Who are you from?"

"No one. I am on my own. Don't think I am looking for a job..."

"Well, be quick!"

"Will you listen to me? Promise you will."

"Damn! Who are you talking to? Are you mad, woman?"

"Can't you see?" the third man said, he must have been from the Ukraine, too. He woke up and now tried to

understand what this friend had in common with that...
"She's stoned or high."

Nickola suddenly remembered the rules of the market economy, figured out the woman was not from the Ukraine and added, "What will I get for that?"

"First listen, then we'll decide. All you need to do is to listen."

"You are stubborn! OK, come on! But you'll have to work for me for a week. How about that?"

"Easy! Why a week? I could do longer than a week."

Stroking her blonde hair with her hands, Maria thought how monotonous that world was but she tried to let him see she was no stranger to what Nickola was asking from her.

Two days later the illegal rivals of the "Red lights" were found. The women were sent to a hospital, the barge was towed off and its owners, both nominal and real, were arrested. The guards opened fire on police out of Chinese pump-action shotguns and they were shot. Two minibus drivers and three policemen tied to the bandits were soon found and thrown into prison. Two girls who had been on the train with Maria agreed to become witnesses. The third girl had been pulled somewhere by the guards before.

As Nelidova was the first to inform of the crime, she was in the Witness Protection Programme. She got a residence permit and was offered to be hidden. Maria refused, she was healthy and could hide herself. Where was the best place not to be found? Here, at Nickola's... in the "Red lights". Very nice! As if nothing had changed. Just more comfortable and she was given money.

The trials lasted longer than a year. The two witnesses the government helped to hide were not lucky. One disappeared. The law-enforcement authorities tried to find her in vain. Bandits found the other girl and tried

to kill her. She survived but her thighs and arms would remember the blows with a rusty metal pipe.

All that time Maria was working by the ancient profession she had acquired in civilized Europe. She paid the rent of her window for three months ahead, rented a flat, married a young local artist who was selling his Amsterdam sketches near the museum of Van Gogh. Then everything span as fast as a kaleidoscope: she got a citizenship, had a baby boy, got divorced, got all benefits as a single mother and got a council flat outside Amsterdam, according to the Decree of Queen Beatrix.