

Last Drops of Rain

1.

Everything is black around and full of flickering stars. You are alone in this fantasy world, dissolving in it, can touch the stars – you just need to stretch your arm... There is no plane, there is only you and music. It sounds in your heart, makes you recollect, dream, think of the Eternal... Only when you fall in an air pit, the hysterical sound of the booming engine reminds you of reality. In the places where the little “Cessna” falls, the dark silhouettes of mountain tops appear, like in photo paper. The light scattering in passages and highlands looked stationary a second ago but now are rushing towards you and you can comprehend and sense with each of your cells they are not the stars.

The night will go away soon and the sharp contours of Mont Blanc will appear over the morning mist. Every turn and descent here become a risk. The landing runway is short and narrow, it is inclined and starts near by the cliff. In order not to hit the cliff you have got to discern and cut it fine. Nothing can be seen down below. Powerful air flows are ripping snow dust off the slopes. The snow dust is covering the aerodrome, shining, reflecting the sun rays and trembling. It is stirring as if someone invisible got under that gigantic white blanket, has been sleeping peacefully but has woken up now and is trying to get out.

Every flight like that gives joy. You can see the snowy mountain tops on the background of green meadows,

dark blue woods, foothills and endless blue sky! But it is not just the beauty that draws you into the clouds. The main thing is a contrast between the delight of nature and acute sense of danger.

The Alps with a landing in Courchevel, a flight over the Pyrenees and at last Malaga are all left behind. You can relax in some town nearby today.

The winter in Marbella is cloudy and boring but the air remains warm and humid. Among the loose inflorescences of white heather, which have not been burnt in the summer heat, in many places there are high stems of *Strelitzia*. Its flowers look like magic birds with long beaks, they stick their heads with bright feathers out and anxiously look into the distance, protecting the peace of the seaside town.

Suddenly it starts raining and an air flow comes off the mountains. It is dashing down, making its way between the high buildings of the hotels. The embankment becomes empty, flower scents disappear and the people who have just been walking along the sea line hide in a wind-proof cafe. Waiting for the weather to change, they watch the fountain jets with an interest. The jets suddenly disappear and a gigantic cloud of water sprays flows in the air.

For the past year Anton had fallen in love with this town and was happy to suddenly wake up here after a stressful week of everyday flights from Switzerland to Spain and back. He was walking along a narrow lane of the Old town and peering at the ancient building of the Santiago Chapel or staring indifferently at colourful hats, cardigans and scarves hanging outside numerous shops. The ripe oranges ripped off the trees with the wind were now rolling disorderly down the patterned tiles to the avenue, under the wheels of the passing cars. Anton was going up, towards the thin streamlets, shining in silver from the shop window lights, and was fearing to slip if he trod on an orange fruit.

Suddenly something made him stop outside a big window. There was a coffee-shop in front of him. Anton could feel a delight spreading through his veins, a delight from the smell of slightly bitter coffee, vanilla, almond and marzipan batter, from plenty of goodies decorated with cream, from churros, bursting with heat. Looking forward to the sin of gluttony, he went into the confectionery heaven and saw a group of people at a big table near the window on the right.

Two men of respectable age were proving something busily to each other, three young women with the same checked shawls on their shoulders were sitting, talking and smiling placidly. One of them adjusted something in the clothes of the little boy – the playful little one was around five – then she waved her arm lightly... Anton would have recognized the gesture from thousands...

That was Katya.

2.

They met for the first time around ten years ago, on New Year's eve, in a chalet of mutual friends. Anton fancied her straight away, even though she was there with her boyfriend, a businessman, who tried to follow her everywhere. Slim, with regular features and big light-brown eyes, she looked like a mischievous and careless daydreamer. However, Anton was attracted to her by something unexplainable, not her beauty. It could have been her arm movement, light and hardly noticeable, as if she was brushing off someone's molestation, or some low notes in her voice, like smokers, affected by cold, with a pleasant velvet hoarseness. He liked her eye look, which sparkled from under her eyelashes and was playful, gentle and indiscreet at the same time.

The visitors were introduced to each other, they drank to the old year, had a dance but didn't manage to open

champagne to the chime of bells. First the cork broke. The second bottle that the host got straight away must have been too cold and wouldn't open at all. Then, forgetting to make a wish, the company clinked their glasses of plain red wine and ran out of the lounge with a chimney into the porch, decorated with twinkling lights. The hosts called their visitors to the shore of the frozen gulf where they could enjoy the festive fireworks and an icy castle made by a local handyman.

It had been raining the whole of New Year's eve, the temperature dropped only in the evening and at night it started snowing. The icy castle had started melting but was now even more beautiful and looked like Gaudi's constructions. The fireworks to celebrate the New Year didn't surprise anyone. There were sparkles, noise, coloured flame, then a few red and green stars shot up, lightened the ice, then slowly died out and loudly sizzled having fallen into the snow. The performance seemed to have finished. The floating clouds covered the full moon and it got dark. Someone inflamed the sparklers and handed them over to the guests. Then everyone rushed to look for the unburned sleeves of squibs.

The next volley of petards was unexpected and loud. The dogs of the hosts, running and chasing a ball in the snowy ice, wagged their tails and snuggled up to Katya, for some reason choosing her out of all the people. They were spinning and pushing their snouts into her knees and Katya lost her balance, stumbled, slipped over and fell into the soft snow. She screamed, her fur hat fell off her head, her hair scattered around her face. The sparkler fell off her hand spilling cold sparks and the dogs got frightened even more, and ran home.

A moment later in the bustle someone leaned over Katya. Playing, she raised herself with her elbow and stretched her arm forward. Anton was standing in front of her. Trying to help her, he bent down, put his arms

around Katya's waist and set her on her legs. At that very moment he slipped over, fell and dropped her over himself. Surprised, they were lying without moving for a few seconds. Her long hair smelt of lavender and touched Anton's face pleasantly. Her wide open eyes with a sparkle of slyness were looking at him expectantly. He heard her breathe deeply and with his body he felt Katya's attracting intimacy. Suddenly he started kissing her. Dreading for this accidental sweet moment to end, he was quickly kissing her neck, cheeks, eyes... At last his hot kisses met Katya's responsive lips.

A bright flash of the volley lightened everything around and immediately separated them. Some time later, after having shouted and groaned of dramatic or sincere delight, the party returned inside to continue the interrupted feast. Anton and Katya didn't talk to each other. Watching her, her every gesture and smile, Anton was looking for and could find a sign or signal that only he could understand.

3.

He had been interested in sport, an air club and an urge to take risks since his childhood and she had always loved music, singing, family harmony and peace of mind. They both had graduated from different universities two years ago, but they both had a Diploma in Economics. They had a scientific career ahead and the future was clear and pre-determined. Then suddenly there was a fall! The country didn't exist any more. Everything was spinning like in a kaleidoscope: science was disappearing, business was starting and falling apart straight away, money was arising and vanishing, partners were betraying, friends were scattering away. Only dollars were needed and only success interested people.

From nowhere there appeared a well-known music producer who pulled Katya into a different life: music,

songs in English, fans, decent money from expensive parties, tours abroad. Her viewers were going crazy from her flexibility and appeal. Everyone was dazzled in her warm, deep voice similar to Tanita Tikaram's. Katya was listened to, admired and it gave her pleasure. She could certainly understand her career was a lottery, it depended on her relationship with the producer. It was show business – one wrong glance could end everything.

Anton could also feel he was losing something really important in his life. He noticed in time and threw himself into a whirlpool of poetry, started learning French and then was sucked down with the sky. Soon his parents died in a car crash and he was left on his own. Anton needed money and he started making business plans, like a true economist. Some of them were carried on successfully and the businessmen would give their savior second hand cars or holidays abroad. From that manna from heaven he managed to save a large sum and went to Austria. There he was hired to work in a small airline. They hired him because he had a certificate of Vilnius international air school, around two hundred flight hours on a single-engined aircraft and – the main thing – he knew the company president's son.

4.

Katya and Anton lived separate lives and often were far away from each other. In spite of the fact their meeting ended unexpectedly strangely, they met second and third times... They tried to protect themselves from thousands of fine points of tasteless everyday life, from everything burdensome and risky in order to experience the strong feeling, similar to love at first sight, again and again.

Every time Anton came to his home city after months of being away, he used to walk along the

morning downtown streets, pass by Kuznechny market, still closed, enjoy the newly reconstructed chapel with a burning lamp in it and go to the yard he already knew well. In the old block of flats among the narrow windows in the second floor there were two Katya's. Hiding behind the slide in the playground, he would be watching her windows for a long time, vainly trying to see her silhouette. He could have gone upstairs and rung her bell of course! But Anton didn't want to. Katya was always patronized by men from show business: musicians, poets, producers. He knew that, he saw her fellows but he never was jealous. He also had similar connections. So, when he was standing outside Katya's flat, he was always waiting. In case she turned the light off and came out.

If she came out on her own, he used to hide and follow her. Now and again some trees or a clumsy trolleybus hid her from him. Fearing she would disappear or turn into a lane, he would hurry to pass the obstruction and when he saw her again he would stop to take a sigh of relief. It would carry on for a long time until he got a chance to overrun her discreetly and come to close quarters with her, representing a very busy man, and ask her confusedly, "Katya?! Is it you? Hi..."

She would leave everything and they would take a train outside the city, to a quietly babbling river hidden by the lilac bushes. Sometimes they would wander around the woods.

Once behind the bright scattering of the wild-flowers they saw a huge yellowish-grey field. Katya and Anton went into the middle of it and lay there for a long time on the warm ground. There was nothing better for Katya than his gentle hands, just as there was nothing better for him than Katya's soft hair next to his face.

Later on they were looking into the sky and the bright autumn blue colours were peeping through the clouds.

The blue was being crossed with a thin white stripe, it was a jet plane trail. Suddenly the trail ended and high up in the sky a bang could be heard. Katya flinched, looked at Anton anxiously and squeezed his hand... Around them there was a continuous wood of the yellow wheat stems, reeling in the light wind ripe spikes and thin cornflowers... In the sky, dropping its usual white trail, the shiny dot continued to move.

5.

They had not seen each other for nearly a year. Katya came to Vancouver with her company for Christmas week. They were having three days of concerts, then three days of rest, then Calgary, Toronto and Montreal. By then Anton had been flying along the Atlantic coast from California to Vancouver for six months, serving charter flights. Now he had a week off in snowy British Columbia.

Having glanced at a poster by chance, Anton saw the name of a Russian music group and the familiar singer's name. The incomparable feelings suddenly came back to life, filled him and wouldn't go. Obeying the call of his heart, he walked through the town to the Theatre of Queen Elizabeth.

The tour was finishing, it was the last day. Anton got off-stage, wandered behind the curtains, among the storage rooms, side stage with sceneries lying carelessly until he found himself in a narrow corridor with dressing rooms where he could find Katya at last. She was sitting on a chair opposite a big mirror in a wooden patterned frame and taking off her make-up with wet wipes, her arms moving as if she was brushing something off. On the table, on the floor, on the sofa near the wall there were flowers...

"Katya!? Is it you? Hi!" Anton said quietly, like a password. She was startled.

Then there was a night. It was like their first night...

The dawn was barely breaking through. Katya glanced at Anton. An unruly lock on the top of his head made him look childish and his face looked so dear that she wanted to stroke his closed eyes, touch his unshaven cheeks and muscled shoulders...

Yes, she fell in love with Anton the moment she saw his grey eyes reminding her of the autumn rain. And those long eyelashes! They tickled her when they first kissed! How shy he was then! When Anton fell on the snow near Katya, he was lying and waiting for something. It only lasted a second but Katya thought it was an eternity. How strange she had forgotten about that. She could remember it now. She remembered the tiny scar on his cheek. He said it was caused by broken glass in the poor landing. Katya noticed the scar straight away and wanted to touch it with her lips...But the fireworks! Everything started with them and finished with them, too.

Katya emerged from the stream of her memories, she got up, wrapped herself in the duvet and went up to the window. Big thick snowflakes were falling on the ground. The street lamps were still on and their yellow light reminded her of the passionate last night. The dawn was special and hopeful. Tiptoeing, Katya cracked the window open and tried to catch the snowflakes in her palm. She wanted to make a wish while they had not melted. But the snowflakes were melting in her warm palm and turned into drops of water... "How fast everything's going!" Katya suddenly thought and unexpected tears rolled out of her eyes. Anton woke up, came up to her and tried to look in Katya's face kissing her, but she was turning away - she didn't want him to see her tears. Then Anton took Katya by her shoulders, turned her around and started kissing her. His lips were gently taking the tears off her cheeks and eyelashes. The light cover slowly fell down showing her fragile shoul-

der, white boobs and the tanned velvet skin of her attractive thigh... His strong arms held Katya's waist and he whispered, "I will always be with you..." Every cell of her body was shivering from his warm words and she felt like freezing and stopped breathing in order to prolong the moment... In her imagination that was how heaven looked - snowy, with a huge moon shining in the gloomy morning sky, she would be standing near the window for ever and watching the snow.

They didn't go outside for two days staying in the place Anton was renting when he came there. They hardly ate anything for two days, didn't think of anything but she was dreaming...

Their last morning came. Katya was flying in a cockpit for the first time in her life. She wanted to plunge into the endless blue which could watch her Anton so often! She wanted to touch the clouds with her hands, see the sun closer! The toy Cessna was going into the sky smoothly. Below them there were thin black strings of roads on the ground covered with snow and multicoloured houses looking like toys.

And the sky! His sky had become now so dear to her... Another air-pocket - and her pulse and heartbeat were fastening unconsciously. Was it scary? Not at all! She knew there was something bigger than engines and aerodynamic laws. That was her love to Anton, to his sky, his plane, to life itself. She understood the joy she saw in Anton was not just hiding in him, it was living around him everywhere and their love was not just a succession of casual meetings.

For the first time Anton felt that morning he would not be able to live without Katya, without being next to her every day. He would not be able to fly, dream, feel... His only possession - the endless sky he had been dreaming of since his childhood - was gradually disappearing and leaving him face to face with Katya. He knew their

love was special, although it was like a pulsating spring, coming and going, it was as fresh as spring.

Today he saw their happiness being interfered by some other forces leading them apart. For Katya, he thought, an actress career was just a temporary ambition and a background for their fleeting meetings. His passion was the affair he was busy with. It gave him money, let him keep his usual way of life, travel and love Katya... For Anton to stop flying would mean to lose himself. The family life in a full harmony of feelings and peace of mind was not what he had been looking for. There was one more reason for that. It was difficult to see it on the bright background of his heroic profession – he couldn't make a choice in such complicated circumstances. It was not about his everyday work with its direct danger! It was where there were no risks.

For both of them their every meeting was a special occasion. Today it also coincided with the Christmas fireworks of the local administration. Expecting a beautiful spectacle, people were crowding along the shore. Vessels and ships were crowding the bay. They were coming one after another from the left along the small narrow strait like cars driving along a busy road. In the night only the red back lights could be seen. In the sky around the barge where the fireworks were to be set off, small planes were patrolling the sky.

The first volley of the fireworks flashed, the music started over the smooth sea and its enchanting sounds were making their way onto Anton's soul and he could see the past and the future at the same time. He could see the straw field of wheat with cornflowers rustling in the sun. He could hear the leaves of bird cherry rustling. Then the wonderful music was going deeper into his soul and one voice was separating into two to the concealed polyphony of the fugue... Multicoloured spheres were flashing high up the sky. Their twinkling lights were coming

apart like dandelion blowballs, then come together and as two huge universes were dashing apart to the anxious high sounds of violins.

The next day Katya flew away.

6.

The tour in Canada continued. Katya was singing, dancing, changing towns, singing again and only at night, when the narcotic effect of the stage stopped, she was tortured by the same questions and couldn't sleep. Why had they met, being so different? Why were they in love? He was in the sky - she was on the ground. He was on his own, face to face with his stars, she was always with her viewers and fans. Like oppositely charged particles, they accidentally collided and after that no force could separate them. But there was sadness in her soul of their repeated and sort of happy and careless but in fact so hopeless meetings. Will Anton be able to leave the sky? She had always been anxious when they were to part, she wanted to understand what would happen later, how she could live tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. At the end of the tour she had a dream at night of Anton driving a car somewhere and her running after him under pelting rain, all wet through, waving her arms and banging on the car window... Then the car slowed down and stopped running into a tree... She also stopped... The door window didn't open, neither did the door. No one got out of the car... She couldn't see who was inside. She kept standing there until she suddenly realized there was no Anton there. He had died, driven to death!.. Having woken up of her own and sobbing, Katya felt unbearable pain when she understood everything was all over, she would never be able to see him, say what she wanted to say to him... The pain splashed out over the

edge of her soul and was now veiling her eyes with insufferable salty tears and the pain wouldn't go... it was a grateful pain – for Anton had been in her life!

A year had passed after their meeting in Vancouver, then two more and more... She had a son now, she got married, gave up singing, moved to another town... Her complicated feelings for Anton were now being replaced with clear thoughts, and her parents' long-standing reasons in favour of a different life seemed more convincing.

"Many people love rain," Katya would say to herself. "It's splattering on the roof and its pleasant and calming sound makes you think of the future and recollect the past... Is it nice? It must be. But it has never applied to me. In my childhood I couldn't go out in the rain, when I got older it caused troubles again – it ruined my make-up..." Of course, Katya realized the rain nourished the soil and cleaned life. After the rain everyone could blossom, sing and dance. But to stay all the time under the rain? If there was a reason to love the rain it was for it to end sooner or later or turn into the snow.

It was the same thing with Anton, his dark grey eyes looked like rain... It was difficult to leave a person she had been happy with. But every time she parted with him she felt and understood clearly she could face a real loss. What if that fragile and happy world cracked and fell to pieces one day? She wouldn't have a family or children... Then no stage could give her peace of mind.

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When Anton saw Katya in the cafe he quickly turned around and left. His unusual and burning thoughts were oppressing him. Like an Amphibian man, who had once met his love and plunged into a deep, unknown and earthy feeling, Anton couldn't hover in the air and give himself to that magic state of his soul. He had to make a

choice but he was not able to. Or had he already made it? He was walking along the streets of Marbella towards the setting sun rays, looking into passers-by faces. Trying to remember their smiles, gestures and movements. Around him there was a normal life, passers-by were carelessly walking, lovers were cuddling, children were blowing bubbles, jumping and trying to catch the versicoloured balls...

7.

Another year passed. Katya was walking in the park with her son. It was getting dark and when they were leaving it poured down with rain. They heard a tram clank. Escaping the rain, they got through the open doors and took seats on the tram.

An elderly grey-haired man in a coat and a walking stick was sitting in front of them and reading a paper. Katya automatically looked at its pages. In the right bottom of the paper somewhere under the man's hand she saw a black-and-white photo. "Anton! It's his face..." her chest was thumping, everything around her was spinning and disappearing and Katya couldn't understand what was moving - the tram or black silhouettes of people, where she was and where her son was.

She squeezed the child's hand, gently stroked an unruly lock on the top of his head and turned her face away, hiding it. Katya was cuddling her son and in her thoughts she was returning to the happy frosty morning in Vancouver...

The old tram was clanking. The first snow was ripping the last leaves off the tree branches. The wind was carrying them and knocking down rain drops off the window glass.