

Glastnost Bride

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One time at Sasha's place we tried to teach Kathy to smoke, but it didn't work. She kept burning her tongue and laughing. I tried to tell her, why do you need this? But she was having fun being the center of attention and wouldn't listen. Borya was the chief instigator. His wife, one of those women with a skull like a lightbulb, was not pleased, and as usual Kathy had no idea what she was doing and what it meant and she didn't know when to stop. I tried to shut Borya up, but he kept urging Kathy to try just one more time.

Later he gave her a ride home, and then we understood that he had organized the entire evening just for the purpose of taking Kathy home. This was during one of the times when Andrei was away. Some men can't help noticing a dying marriage and then they begin circling like vultures. Borya was like that. We all knew how this play would end, so we were surprised to see Borya return almost instantly.

"She jumped out of the car and ran away," he told me and my brother Pasha in a low voice as he hung up his coat. His wife was in the kitchen.

Pasha was worried because Kathy was impulsive and might do anything if Borya frightened her.

"While the car was still moving?!"

"No... no... Well, yes... but it wasn't going that fast.

She ran into their place and shut the door."

"So, you see," I told him.

Then we cleared out because his wife was looking murderous and one of our chief goals in life was avoiding scenes which involved women yelling at us.

Another time we were at our apartment near Yale. Sonya was getting dishes out of the cabinet. We let her hang around and do all the work in exchange for being Pasha's girlfriend. The place was pretty spartan—just table, chairs, dishes, and all of us. Hopefully

Sonya would come up with some kind of dinner soon. Then we'd have something to drink.

There was a knock at the door and Andrei walked in with Kathy. She wanted us to read over her questionnaire, because she was going to do some kind of research in Russia for her dissertation. We always helped each other with whatever was going on. We didn't mind, and we were expecting her to come along sometime, but not really at this moment.

The room got quiet. We looked at Kathy and then away again. We could not believe Andrei brought her now.

He told her to sit down at the table while we looked at her *anketa*, and right away I forgot about the situation because I saw so many problems on the paper.

"Kathy, you wrote here that you'll use the information to improve medical care. People are proud, they don't want you to improve their medical care."

"But it has to be on there," she said. "You have to inform the subjects about the purpose of your research."

"But it's offensive."

"It has to go on there... it's part of informed consent."

That's how it went. We would point out a problem, and she would explain why it had to be that way and she couldn't change it. I don't know why she even asked us to help. She was so stubborn. It must have been on the university protocol: *Review the questionnaire for your study with a focus group beforehand.*

We were annoyed with her, but even more with Andrei because he put us in this situation. We'd never give him away, of course, but we could not really thank him either, because he made his own situation into everybody's situation. It was a beginner's mistake to put Kathy and Irina in the same room, let alone at the same table.

We tried to get through the *anketa* so they would leave, but meanwhile Kathy had time to befriend Irina, which should not have been allowed to happen. We Russians always like Kathy. That is, until we get tired of her. But Irina wouldn't talk with her. Kathy began

to chat with her in her soft, funny, Russian, asking her how old she was, when she came over, et cetera.

Irina was radiant, sitting up straight like a ballerina, with her luminous hair in a high bun, her eyebrows curving high above her attractive face. She was actually only sixteen, hence Andrei's usual jokes about 'Lolita.' Irina gripped the edge of the table with both hands and looked down, a smiling rictus on her face.

She would have liked to pretend that Kathy did not exist, or that if she did exist she was a monster, but here was Kathy herself, bending close to her, talking to her kindly, and trying to overcome this mysterious shyness. Irina looked sideways at us and at Andrei, who was ignoring her while we discussed Kathy's *anketa*. Anyway, in a few days Kathy would be far away and wouldn't exist anymore for either of them.

You could tell that Kathy was puzzled.

Irina probably enjoyed sitting next to Kathy, because there was no question who was more attractive. Kathy is a nice girl, of course. She has that open expression, that vulnerability that some people, especially children and Americans, have around the eyes, as if they are not sure whether you are about to hit them. She was the kind of girl with a heart full of love for the first taker, and Andrei had been the first taker and he took everything. She obviously wondered why he was different now and blamed herself.

We all put on a mask when we fall in love. Maybe someday, she would realize that there was a completely different and unique person behind the mask. Maybe not. Either way, we knew that her life with Andrei was nothing but suffering.

We tried to look out for her. When she and Andrei fought for the car keys in the street when he was barely sober enough to drive, we kept an eye on the situation from our door. We had our standards. Driving your wife home while drunk was okay. Beating your wife was not okay. But it didn't come to that—he kept the keys, easily—and we went back into the house as the car screeched away.

Another time when she was leaving alone, snow had fallen and the car was buried deep. She said goodbye to us, brushed off the

snow, got out her shovel, and dug the car out. Again we watched from the door. She was like an elf in a fairy tale, jumping about. She was so small and there was so much snow—we would have helped her if she asked. But she didn't ask. She never even looked up at us. It was cold, so we went back inside.

That was the problem with Kathy. American women are too much like men. They shovel their own snow, put on their own coats, drive their own cars, and just like men, they can't cook. She used to cook some awful messes for Andrei. He didn't care—he just added more ketchup. But we all found it more congenial to hang around at Sasha's where the food was better. I can't remember Sasha's wife's name now, but she was always cooking something for us.

Kathy was also a bit of a *zhidka*, which we found both fascinating and repellent. When she was not around we used to argue about how much Jewish blood she probably had.

Irina was different: a real long-legged Russian beauty. A girl you didn't want to get on the wrong side of. She knew who she was but would keep you guessing, and self-confident, like an Olympic skater or a famous ballerina, and you'd race around the table to light her cigarette.

Finally Kathy gave up trying to get acquainted with her. We got through that nightmare *anketa* and told Kathy that her own words, faulty and strange Russian as they were (though we did not say this) expressed her ideas and her personality very well. Then we were embarrassed because she thanked us so gratefully.

I walked her and Andrei to the door and I told him,
“It's not necessary to behave like this.”

He raised one eyebrow at me and nodded toward Kathy.

Sasha must have told him, sometime before Pascha.

Just a few days earlier, we were all outside the church at midnight, kissing each other and wishing each other Happy Easter, saying *Christ is Risen!* and answering *Truly he is Risen!* Perhaps we did not live much like Christians the rest of the year, but on this one night we felt that it might be possible to obtain forgiveness for everything. We always kiss each other on the cheek at Pascha—that's the

tradition, and it's not erotic, it's a normal custom. When it came to my and Pasha's turn to kiss Kathy, Andrei gestured to her, smirked, and said,

"Friends... my wife."

Here she is. Kiss her. It's fine with me. You know you want to and you probably have.

This was meant for me, but Pasha and I both recoiled and refused to kiss Kathy or even go near her. Kathy was crestfallen because all she wanted was to say *Christ is Risen!* and exchange the traditional greeting with us and now she couldn't.

I don't know how Andrei knew. And there was nothing to know! The simple fact is this: yes, while Andrei was away, I used to help his wife on with her coat. Was that a crime? Was that something that he should use to torture both her and me? To spoil Pascha for everyone?

It started back at New Year's when Andrei was away. We were all gathering at Sasha's as usual. When I arrived, I suddenly understood that I was glad to see Kathy and she was glad to see me. I didn't expect that.

We were never alone together, we never even spoke to each other, but I was sorry for her. I got fond of her too. When I saw her, I felt sorry for the wife I had left behind in Moscow—but that's another story.

Anyway, we both knew. Pasha knew too.

As I said, she wasn't unattractive and there was really something about her eyes that went to your heart.

Andrei was supposed to be coming home soon and he called us all at Sasha's. He should have called to wish us all a Happy New Year, but instead he called to ask Kathy's permission to stay away longer.

Why ask permission, when he always did exactly what he wanted? Because this way he entangled her in his plans, and so made her his accomplice. Then he could blame her later, as in, "Why did you say I could stay away longer if you didn't want me to?"

Kathy was usually a quiet girl. Too quiet, until you gave her some vodka and she became normal.

This time she freaked out. She cried and screamed into the phone. We all had to listen to this, and it was not very festive for our New Year's celebration.

In the end she gave him permission, of course. She always did. She hung up, still crying and wiping her eyes and nose on her sleeves like a little kid. She wanted to leave, but we couldn't allow that. It's no fun meeting the New Year after someone storms out. We told her Andrei was happy over there, that's all. She said a Russian man can't be happy alone, he must be happy with someone. She was right of course, but we convinced her that possibly her husband was happy with some of his old schoolmates. In the end she got a grip. She agreed to stay and we all sat down around the table again and went on with the party until midnight and after.

She didn't look at me. But I think all she wanted was to rest her head on my shoulder.

Starting that evening, I always got her coat and helped her on with it. It got so that she would wait by the door for me. We never spoke to each other, but I was her "cavalier" as they say.

Andrei came back a few weeks later and this pleasant rhythm was disrupted. The first time, when it was time to say goodnight, Kathy hesitated at the coat rack. Then she turned her head and looked at me. This was maybe the first time our eyes met.

I shook my head at her, almost imperceptibly, just once. I kept my mouth in a straight line and did not look back at her. She understood me. Something had been going on, but there wasn't going to be any more of it. She turned back to her coat.

Maybe everyone noticed this. I don't know.

Kathy looked around for Andrei to get her coat instead—but he was already outside. He wouldn't care if she froze to death and he would certainly not try to outdo anyone in chivalry. As for me, I wouldn't help her now.

She stood there looking at her coat.

I have my own code of behavior. Messing around with your

friend's wife while he is away, is okay. Messing around with your friend's wife when he comes home is not okay. We all have our standards.

She made a sudden movement as if to throw the coat on the floor. But then she seemed to remember that she was an American woman and could put on her coat herself. Slowly she took it down and struggled into it.

That's the whole story.

The day after we read the *anketa*, Kathy called Pasha on the phone. She never used to call me. Her childlike voice rang through the receiver.

"Pasha, who was that girl? She is so beautiful!"

He did not want to answer this question. Andrei needed to tell her himself, if anyone did. There was going to be a terrible scene soon, a screaming fit, and we did not see why we should have to field it instead of him.

Kathy persisted.

"Is she your girlfriend, Pasha?"

Pasha's voice came out in a reedy whine.

"Noooo, Katya!"

Kathy should have understood that this usage of her Russian name meant that the conversation was taking an intimate turn, but she didn't.

Pasha wanted her to come to the right conclusion, but he did not want to be the one to tell her. Neither did I. We were fond of her in our way and wanted her to be happy, but if that was not possible then we did not want to be there when she went to pieces, as she inevitably would.

I and Pasha looked at each other. We waited, but she did not pose the next, logical question.

We never saw Kathy again. She went to St. Petersburg that summer to do her research, and Andrei promised to join her there two weeks later. (He had abandoned her under some kind of pretense the

previous summer, so this year she planned to go straight to where she thought he would be.) As far as we knew, he never intended to go at all, and he put off his departure by means of strategic phone calls, always saying that he was coming in a day or two and that she should by no means come back. Whenever she begged him to come, he blamed her for misunderstanding him. That was how he managed her.

Meanwhile he moved all her things out or hid them, and moved Irina's things in, and she became a regular with him and all of us at Sasha's instead.

Months later when we arrived in Moscow, Kathy was still waiting.

Andrei even roped Pasha into calling her.

She answered on the first ring.

"Alyo."

"Hello, Kathy, this is Pasha."

She was disappointed only for a moment.

"Hi Pasha!!! How are you??"

"Ah, hi. Andrei asked me to call you and say hello."

"Oh! Are you here in St. Petersburg?"

"No, in Moscow."

"Oh... Do you have a letter for me? A letter from Andrei?"

Apparently when he was courting her in Soviet times he wrote her a lot of charming letters, but once they were married there were no more letters. I've heard her ask him sweetly, "Andrei, would you please write me another letter?" But if he ever did we never heard about it.

"No, Kathy, no letter."

"Oh..." I could hear her lose hope. It was almost audible how it fell away. Then she went on desperately,

"Pasha, your brother, how is he... is he okay?"

There is no reason I wouldn't be okay—I am pretty sturdy—but Pasha understood.

"Yes, Katya, he is okay."

"Well... tell him... tell him hello, from me."

“I will. I will, Katya.”
His voice was very tender.