

The Magic Circle

Novel by Evgeny Kissin

translated by Barnett Zumoff

OUTSIDE, IT WAS SNOWING

1.

The smoke from the cigarette was beginning to mix with the emanations from the Indian aromatic sticks. There was no ashtray in the house, so the cigarette ash fell to the floor immediately after each light tap of her finger. She kept slowly and deeply inhaling the smoke, filling her entire body with the mild poison; oh well--the deed is already done, so relax and calm down. Three thoughts kept drilling into her mind: "Sasha, my darling"... "I'll get the money as fast as I can!"...and "Now I've really become a whore—I've lived to see the day!"

"Man proposes and God disposes," her wise grandmother Chana used to say. Her grandmother's words had sounded convincing to her even then, though she was still a child and of course couldn't understand what they meant. Now, in the past few days, she somehow understood them with her whole being, from the tips of her fingers to the depths of her soul, perhaps as never before in her life. When she was still a young girl and had just begun to discover the world of pleasure, she used to fantasize about taking money for love. For instance, a nice man she liked would come to her and propose to spend time with her, and she would answer him playfully: "If you pay!" Now, however, she didn't get to choose only nice clients.

She looked at the clock again—he's supposed to arrive in seven minutes. She again brought the cigarette to the corner of her mouth, inhaled the smoke, and pressed the cigarette-tip to her right knee, which was already

decorated with several dark red marks, just like the ones on her arms—marks of extinguished little fires. She hoped, in the same way, to extinguish, or at least quiet, her inner pain. In any case, the marks wouldn't repel the clients.

She stood up from her armchair, went over to the bed, and threw the cigarette butt into the garbage-can. Then she opened the drawer of the night-table, took out a tube of jelly, squeezed a gob of it into her palm, and started to smear it on her legs.

“I've become a prostitute...Oh, Sasha dear...poor thing--what are they doing to you there?”

She really didn't even want to convince Sasha not to go to the protest demonstration. She loved him for that too—for his honesty and boldness, for the fact that he simply couldn't be silent and sit with his arms folded when there was injustice all around him. After he was arrested, she was beside herself. She went to all the authorities, and the very highest one, a sloppy, pot-bellied fellow in a uniform, told her straight out, not even cynically but as if it were the usual way to do business: “Five thousand dollars and he goes free.” She, a teacher of foreign languages, had never in her life

even dreamed of such a sum. She had no newly rich friends. There was only one way to obtain that much money, so she decided on that.

She lit another cigarette, sat down in the armchair again, and touched the can of pepper-spray in the right-hand pocket of her robe; the can gave her a certain security—whatever might happen, it was a means of defending herself. OK, one more drag--the client should be here soon.

After Sasha's arrest, and especially in the past few days, her sixth sense had become sharper. It was now whispering to her that this next client of hers was not like the previous ones. There was something different about the way he spoke to her on the telephone—she felt it clearly, though they had only spoken for a minute. Why was that? She couldn't explain it. That he was polite? No—the German businessman who had spent the previous night with her was also polite. Even her very first client hadn't

spoken coarsely to her when he rang her up on the telephone to discuss their appointment. Was it perhaps intelligence? No—not just that; it was something else.

The ring of the doorbell cut through the half-dark room filled with a sour mixture of smoke and smells. She quickly got up from the armchair and ran to the garbage-pail to throw away the cigarette stub. When she got to the door, she looked into the peephole anyway.

2.

His parting with Isabel had caused him a lot of pain, though their relationship till then hadn't given him a lot of pleasure. Her pathological jealousy of everything and everyone, and the endless scenes, had been really unbearable. For the first time in many years he had rung up Masha, his first love, and as they were strolling in the park on that warm end-of-summer evening, he told her about everything and they kissed several times. But Masha hadn't wanted to go any farther under the circumstances. He hadn't had any success with Lina either. She may have loved her boyfriend, but the truth was that he was in love with her mother, the famous actress whom he had worked with and been close to for several years.

Now Winter had come and he hadn't met any other woman. He was tormented by desire—it was tearing at his body. The only good thing was that he had a lot of work and plenty of money. Finally, he gave in to his desire and decided to sample what he had previously considered a low thing—lower, at least, than virtue. He had never had contempt for prostitutes, but still he had sometimes thought: am I already so ugly and unpleasant that I can't get beautiful women for free? And yet, here he was...

On the website, he first checked the ages of the girls: if he was indeed going to go to a prostitute, he thought, it should be to an experienced one (that someone who was mature according to her age might be new to the profession didn't occur to him). The oldest one was the same age as he was, thirty-nine, which disappointed him somewhat. Her face in the

photograph was blurry, but the text (and in three languages at that: Russian, English, and German!) grabbed him:

“A love-goddess is waiting for you! Oh how I love bed-games! I can be a sweet little kitten or a passionate tigress; a refined courtesan or a filthy, lewd, lustful whore—anything you want! Come quickly, my sweet, and let’s dip into the world of bodily pleasures, of perversions and debauchery. Oh, oh—how delicious it is!”

After reading it, he had no doubt that he would go to her, to the “love-goddess.” One hour, two hours, a night? Let’s try one hour. He rang her up. It turned out that just that night she was free. At precisely eight o’clock he was already standing in front of her door in a half-dark corridor, trying to

hold his breath. He had previously taken off his gloves and stuffed them into the pockets of his sheepskin coat and had taken off his fur hat, which was already a bit covered with snow. Then he unbuttoned the two upper buttons of the coat, made sure that the envelope with the money was in the innermost pocket, and rang the bell of the dark door.

3.

When she saw his face through the peephole, she thought: “An artist, a man of art...” This was evidenced by both his wavy hair and his look—a bit lost. She drew back the bolt, opened the door, and, squeezing out a smile, she said: “So come in.” He wiped his feet on the doormat and crossed the threshold of the apartment.

“You didn’t forget to bring me the little gift?” she asked, winking lightly at him.

“No—of course not,” he responded quickly. He pulled the envelope out of his coat-pocket and handed it to the woman.

“OK—excellent!” she said, smiling, and put the envelope into the left-hand pocket of her robe. “Get undressed—let me help you.”

He smelled the sour odor, like something from his distant childhood (his mother had liked to burn Indian aromatic sticks at that time), and saw the woman's face: big, brown eyes and a big nose— Jewish, he thought, or maybe from the Caucasus. She took his hat and coat, and while she was hanging them on the hanger near the door, he noticed that she was wearing high-heeled black shoes.

“OK, let's go!” she seemed to hurry. She took him by the hand and led him into the room. Before they reached the bed, he stopped and said:

“Listen!” She stopped too and looked into his eyes. “Listen! You understand that it has turned out for me that...now I really need...I really need feminine warmth, but I don't want to do anything that is unpleasant for you, and...”

“What a nice fellow!” she thought. “Indeed not like the others!” and then said aloud:

“You're such a good guy! Of course I'll warm you up! Let's go!”

She squeezed his hand harder, embraced him, and led him to the bed. A weight dropped from his

heart. She indicated by a nod that he should sit down on the bed, sat down next to him, and said, still smiling:

“Take your clothes off—it'll be easier that way. And I'll get undressed too...”

She stood up, took off her robe, and threw it onto the bed with the movement of a stripper. He saw her firm little breasts and the dark triangle...She helped him pull off his sweater and pants and take off his shirt, repeatedly whispering the whole time:

“I want to caress you, caress you a lot...and it'll make you feel good...and I'll feel good too. A nice man is a pleasure to caress...”

“Thank you,” he answered, embarrassed.

After hanging all his clothes on a chair, she sat down next to him again, and pointing to his socks, she half-asked, half-stated:

“They say that the British pay a lot of attention to socks”—she playfully winked at him, and pulled them off his feet. “You’re not British, are you?”

Laying them on his half-boots, she embraced him, and quietly, with a soft voice, she said to him: “Now come to me...”

She lay down next to him and started to caress his back. He embraced her too. Closing his eyes, he heard his own breathing...

“Do you want me to massage you a little first?”

“Yes, thank you,” he answered.

He lay on his stomach and she got up on her knees, clamped his legs between them, and began to

massage his back...

He went back home quickly, striding through the cold, snowy Minsk streets. Later, lying in his

own bed, he felt shocked...her manner of speaking, her whole look. He felt that she was nothing like what she presented herself as. She must be from the intelligent classes. She too had suddenly felt in the night a certain empathy with the unknown man, her client...she even thought that by selling her own body she could learn quite a bit about people and their stories...

4.

Several days passed and a few more clients visited her, but she was still far from having the necessary sum of money. And he, after that first experience, wanted more. He wanted to “sample” various girls from the website but the second one disappointed him, and after a few days, actually on the night before New Year’s eve, he decided to go again to that other one, the “goddess,” and spend a whole night with her.

In the middle of the night, while she was in the toilet, he began to look at the books on her shelves, as he used to do in every house he went into. Bulgakov, Pasternak, Nabokov, Marques... also books in the Latin

alphabet: Shakespeare, Dickens, Hemingway, Goethe, Remarque... Seeing the volumes of Sholem Aleichem's work, his suspicion that she must be Jewish became even stronger. After that, when she came back, he began, as was his custom, to joke and sing. He saw how much she enjoyed it when he finally sang out, slowly and dreamily: "I am an unhappy Jew... O caress my Gentile member!" She laughed loudly and they both felt closer to each other...

When they were saying good-bye to each other, he said quietly... "I wish you a good year," and again reached into the innermost pocket of his sheepskin coat. "I don't know whether people give you tips, but..." he stuck out his hand and gave her another hundred dollars.

"You're such a nice man!" she said, taking the money. "Come again!"

He left and she thought: "Another six hundred; I already have more than half the whole amount! O Sasha dear—I just hope you can hold out..."

5.

Another few weeks passed before she got the five thousand dollars, and during that time she remembered him more than once. What she felt was certainly not real love, and yet it was something more than just human empathy. After every client, she thought not only about Sasha and how much more money she had to get but also about him, that visitor of hers with the beautiful head of hair and an otherworldly look. He was always so nice, so empathetic, and he always dealt with her not like with a prostitute but like with a woman, even a lady... at such moments she would feel ashamed, feeling that she was unfaithful, as it were, to Sasha, who was languishing in prison...

The official kept his word—Sasha was freed. Life went on and she hoped to forget everything that had happened as soon as possible and for good. As time passed, she stopped remembering him.

He too--he got a couple of new jobs at the beginning of the new year, and concentrated on the work. Occasionally he would remember her anyway, but now quite differently, and he even thought: "Why should I

not make her acquaintance simply as a person? Who knows, maybe something might come of that? And even if not, she is still an interesting person...and Jewish, in addition...”

He had kept her telephone number in his cellphone.

“Hello.”

“Greetings. Do you remember me? I was with you twice at the end of last year...”

She did indeed recognize his voice immediately... “Well,” she thought. She had believed she had

forgotten him already, but it turns out that he had never gone out of her life.

“Yes, I remember you very well, but I am not working any more. If you look at the website,

you’ll see that I am not there any more...”

“Really?!” he rejoiced. “That’s even better! I actually wanted to suggest that we meet just like

that, to have a chat...”

“O my God!” she thought, and remembered how her grandmother Chana used to say: “Now

what?!”

“Listen,” she tried hard to speak as calmly and politely as possible.

“You’re a very nice man, but

I love someone else, so let’s forget about the whole business, and I wish you all the best with all my heart...”

“Hello” he almost yelled. “I beg of you, don’t put down the receiver! I have no intention of becoming your boyfriend, I assure you! I just think that we two have something to chat about, just as friends, nothing more! Or...do you find me repulsive?”

“One mustn’t hurt a person” she thought, and answered:

“Dear boy, you’re a good fellow, and you are not at all repulsive. But I really love someone else and I really have no free time. Unless...” she stopped for a few seconds and sighed, “if you promise that it will just be a friendly meeting, I agree...for an hour, no more.”

“Thank you very much!” he answered enthusiastically. “Of course I promise—have no doubts! When are you free?”

She thought about it.

“OK, tomorrow after four I’ll be free.”

“Outstanding! Let’s meet at the Grand Café at four-thirty?”

She had been to the Grand Café only once in her life; it was a special occasion with many

friends.

“Good—thanks.”

“Agreed! I will wait impatiently! Till tomorrow!”

“So long.”

“OK—if he doesn’t keep his word, I’ll get rid of him immediately!” she thought.

And he simply didn’t want to lose her, even as just a friend. He was very lonely...

At four-thirty the café was almost empty, and therefore quiet. She ordered coffee and he ordered

tea, and they both ordered cheesecake.

“So what’s your name?” she asked with a half-smile. He sighed and answered: “Venya.” “Venya,” she repeated, “a nice Jewish boy...”

And so everything would be clear, she added:

“I am half-Jewish and half-Armenian, and my name is Marina. Glad to meet you!” she said

mischievously, and gave him her hand.

They looked into each other’s eyes, holding hands for a few moments, and then both broke out laughing.

“And what do you do, Venya? If it’s not a secret, of course.”

“I’m a composer—I write music.”

“Oh, oh—I imagined precisely something like that from the very beginning. And what kind of

music do you write?”

“For the movies, for the theater, for various gatherings. I am also an arranger.”

Venya thought that perhaps Marina didn’t know what “arranger” meant, but she didn’t ask about

that. Marina felt that she should tell him what her occupation really was.

“And I am a teacher. I teach English and German,” she said, sighing and smiling.

“Now it’s clear,” Venya thought, remembering the books in her room.

Marina remained silent, but she felt that she had to explain to Venya why they had met as they

had.

“I did that kind of...work” she emphasized the last word because she couldn’t find any other

one...“for only a few weeks. Something serious happened and I needed to get money right away. I don’t know how to rob banks, and I wouldn’t do it if I did...”

“Did one of your relatives get sick?” Venya asked. “Yes,” Marina nodded.

That’s what he had thought, so he asked:

“And now everything is all right?”

“Yes, yes, thank you.”

Venya looked into her eyes and said quietly:

“Please excuse me...I didn’t know that you were in such a situation...”

“God bless you, Venya!” Marina grasped his hand. “Of course you didn’t know. And you were so

nice. Everything is all right, everything is good...”

“Thank you.”

She felt that they should change the subject, and turned the conversation toward him, beginning

by asking him what he was working on now and where one could hear his music.

The hour that she had promised turned out to be more than two hours. They talked about

everything—about their families, about their childhood, why they hadn’t emigrated...after that, when Venya had told her about how his life was going, Marina asked:

“Tell me, Venya...you’re such a good person and up to now you haven’t met any woman who appealed to you?”

“I did have women, and quite a few...”

“But no one you wanted to spend the rest of your life with? Or do you just not need that at all?” “On the contrary—I would definitely want that, but I haven’t found one yet...”

“You know what? I’ll introduce you to a good friend of mine...”

The café gradually filled with people. Outside a quiet, clean snow was falling, as happens in

Minsk at that time of year.

SPRING STORMS

1.

A sudden ring from Marina’s cell phone cut through the delightful silence. While still lying on Sasha’s chest, Marina stretched out her right hand to the night-table. She didn’t recognize the number on the telephone screen.

“Hello?”

“Hi!” she heard a happy and somewhat tipsy voice. “Can I drop in at your place for an hour?” A shudder and a chill ran through her body.

“You have the wrong number,” she answered, and quickly closed the phone and laid it back on the night-table.

“That’s all I need!” she thought, seized with panic. “And who knows what else could happen? What can I do? Try to change my number?”

Sasha noticed that Marina's skin had suddenly broken out in goose-bumps, and he asked her: “What is it?”

“Nothing, Sasha dear,” Marina answered, trying not to reveal her inner turmoil.

“Thank God he didn’t hear anything,” she thought.

“Do you have a chill?”

A muffled ring was again heard from the phone. Marina hesitated about whether to answer, but

Sasha asked: “Who is it?”

Marina picked up the phone—it was the same number.

“I told you already that you have the wrong number! Stop calling so late—it’s scandalous!”

Marina spoke into the phone with a firm voice.

“Probably some drunk, she said to Sasha, laying the phone on the night-table.

They hugged each other again and lay thus for a few moments, till they again heard the stubborn ringing.

“God!” said Marina quietly. Sasha picked up the phone and handed it to Marina. “The same number...”

“Apparently it’s really some drunk,” Sasha remarked. “Devil take him!”, and he laid the phone back in the same place.

2.

Sasha was already snoring lightly, but Marina couldn't get to sleep—she was tormented by restless thoughts. Several months had passed already since Sasha had been freed, and now—this! If she wanted to change her cell phone number, how would she explain it to Sasha? And if not, who knew which of her former clients still had her number and could call her when Sasha was nearby. It was Spring now, after all, and men's blood runs high then. She lay there with her eyes open, thinking those thoughts. Suddenly there was a sharp, loud ring at the door.

She was frightened to death. Sasha woke up immediately. Seeing Marina's frightened face, he asked her:

“Who is that?”

Marina didn't know what to say, and kept looking fearfully at Sasha, who had a sudden insight:

“Someone first called her on the telephone and now has come here.”

There were two more rings of the doorbell. Sasha sprang out of bed. Running naked to the door, he heard a drunken male voice:

“Open up, kitten! Open up—I'll pay you!”

Sasha looked through the peephole and saw a fat, ugly, and definitely drunken person.

“Who are you? What business do you have here?” cried Sasha.

“Ah—someone else is here!” came a merry voice from the other side of the door. “So let's screw

her together! Open up, fellow!”

“All is lost!” Marina rendered a verdict on herself, as it were. She decided that in such a situation

it would be better for her to come to the door too. She and Sasha looked at each other, not knowing what to say.

“O-o-open!” the other fellow bellowed, and banged on the door.

“A crazy man,” said Marina helplessly.

A few seconds later both of them heard the door across from their apartment open, and their

neighbor, a burly fellow, yelled out:

“Why are you yelling so, you whore, and not letting people sleep?! Get out of here, mother-

f’ker!”

For a moment there were some noises, and then heavy footsteps quickly departed. The door of the neighbor’s apartment closed, and it was again quiet.

“What was that, Marina?” Sasha asked, looking into his beloved’s eyes.

“I have to tell the whole truth—I have no other choice,” Marina thought to herself, and said: “Well, Sasha dear,” she sighed. “How do you think I got you out of prison?”

3.

After hearing Marina’s story, Sasha hugged her.

“Poor thing, my little girl. It’s kind of a nightmare. I thank you, my love. You are the very best in

the world,” he whispered, and at the same time he felt that he didn’t want to kiss her on the lips anymore.

He thought that that feeling would pass, but several days went by and he found that his physical desire for Marina had disappeared. His reason told him that he was being unfair, unjust, even thankless, but his emotions didn’t follow along. He kept cursing himself:

“What kind of a pig are you?! She did it for you, so you could sleep sweetly with her in your own bed and not on a wooden plank in your cell, with crooks! Do you think it was easy for her to sleep with all kinds of bastards—for you?!”

And yet, every time they got close he pictured the fat, ugly face of that big lug on the other side of the door. He would imagine Marina with him, and a wave of nausea would come over him and he would get a lump in his throat that he couldn't swallow.

Marina, of course, felt his reaction immediately and asked him about it. "No, Marina dear—you're the very best!" he answered quietly, "but it's difficult for me now.

It'll pass—I just have to digest it."

But it didn't get digested. Marina understood, but she couldn't get over the injustice of it all.

Both of them fell into a state of despair.

One day Marina came back from the institute and found a note on the little table in the bedroom:

"Dearest Marina—you are the very best in the world, but I am not worthy of you. Please forgive me if you can."

Marina stood still for a few moments, looking into the emptiness. Suddenly a thought came to her:

"Perhaps I should go out into the street and give myself to all the passersby, Devil take us all!"

She wanted to light up a smoke, like then in those winter days, but there were no cigarettes in the house. Finally she threw herself onto her bed and hugging her pillow she broke out into tears.

She cried that way on the bed all day, and the same complaints kept whirling in her head: "That thankless pig! They're all thankless pigs!" Suddenly something struck her:

"Only Venya is not like that!"

During the following days, she was in a daze. She forced herself to do everything she had to do, but the same words kept whirling in her head:

“All of them—but Venya is not like that!”

She couldn't prove it, but she felt that way when she pictured the quiet, curly-headed composer.

Lure of the Great Outdoors By Evgeny Kissin

Venya liked Natasha, Marina's friend. She was a blonde woman with a pleasant smile, dimples in her cheeks, and a nice figure. She was definitely intelligent and educated, and had a good sense of humor. In addition, she was a historian, and Venya had always been interested in history so he had something to talk about with her. She also had some Jewish blood: her paternal grandmother was Jewish and Natasha always remembered that, which Venya liked.

She liked Venya too; he was completely different from all the men she had previously encountered, somewhat unlike other men from hereabouts, very courteous and polite, and definitely a decent person. She (and Marina too) knew several of his poems and had seen films with his music, but she had never seen any photographs of him because none had been published. Venya was extremely modest and always tried to remain in the shadows.

Marina had discussed with Venya the made-up story that she would tell Natasha about their encounter: he, Venya, wanting to meet an intelligent woman, had waited next to the Institute, and

when he saw Marina he went up to her and asked whether she would like to get to know him. The moment she looked at him Marina immediately thought of her friend Natasha, with her current personal problems. When Marina asked Venya to stick to the story, he understood what a fool he was, because that would be a good, and perhaps the best way to meet a woman who would be close to him in spirit.

Venya and Natasha soon became close. At that time, Natasha had to work a lot because she had left her husband several months previously and was living in her mother's house with her nine-year-old son. Besides teaching history at the Institute, she had begun to work as a tourist guide,

and for that reason she couldn't meet Venya every day, but their rendezvous were more or less regular, and for him it was a great physical relief. In the beginning, everything had been good; Natasha could be both a "sweet kitten" and a "passionate tigress" and Venya liked that. At times he astonished Natasha with his behaviour: he reminded her of a somewhat spoiled child who treated her body parts as if they were favourite toys. In general he was somewhat childlike, but that was charming-- she excused it by saying that after all, he was an artsy person. On the other hand, he was always able to give her pleasure and he was a good lover—very gentle and more "creative" than all her previous boyfriends. She was even falling in love with him a bit.

In the second week of May, as soon as it got warm, Venya convinced Natasha to make love outdoors—at first on the roof of the nine-story house in which he lived, and then in various parks. For Venya, bodily pleasures represented a sort of release of tension in his free time; in them, as in his work, he was extremely creative.

During their second experience in the park, he got so excited that he even started singing his own improvisations, as was his custom. : "It's so delicious to be with Natasha in a park..." and suddenly a cop came up behind them quietly and said "OK, kids, come with me!", grabbing Venya by the collar. Venya quickly pulled a couple of banknotes from a pocket in his halfway lowered trousers and stuffed them into the cop's hand. Pocketing the money, the fellow said in a croaky voice: "Get out of here! I don't want to see you here anymore!"

After that episode, Natasha categorically refused to continue that way, though Venya was prepared to try out every park in the city, if not every bush in every park. She didn't get insulted by that--she treated his sexual fancies as mischievous child's-play.

One Saturday, Venya convinced Natasha to go out of the city with him for the day to sit in the lap of Nature. The weather forecast didn't predict rain. Natasha told her son that she had to go on an excursion for the whole day, and she went to the railroad station where Venya was already waiting for her with a gigantic backpack.

In the meadows, everything went well, though it was not very comfortable there. In the woods, however, in the very flame of their passion, they suddenly heard voices not very far from them; it was an elderly couple and two children who were apparently gathering mushrooms. Fortunately Natasha was sitting on top of Venya and her dress was pulled up, so she quickly pulled it down and tried to cover, at least partly, Venya's naked loins. When the couple got closer to them, the woman cried: "How disgusting! People like that should be shot on the spot!" Natasha and Venya didn't move, and when the couple left, Venya, disappointed, said: "Oh, well—let's get out of here." Pulling his pants up, he grumbled half seriously: "What's happening to our country? Even in the

woods they don't leave you alone." Natasha went over to his backpack and proposed: "Let's have something to eat."

After they had eaten, Venya suggested to Natasha that they test their luck at the river-bank. They went down to the bank, found a quiet spot near a big bush, and spread out their cloaks. After prolonged caressing under the mild sun, when their ardor had heated up, Venya again felt a creative inspiration and burst into song: "and the sperm will flow like the river..." Suddenly they heard from the other side of the bush: "Why are you yelling there--you'll drive away all the fish!" Astonished, Venya answered: "Please excuse us—we didn't see you..." "Get away from here!" he heard the same voice saying. So the words would sound more convincing, immediately after them a stone flew over from the other side of the bush and almost hit Natasha in the head. They quickly collected all their clothes and things and ran away from the angry fisherman.

On the way to the train station, Venya was silent. He just dragged along with his head bowed, and he looked like a child from whom someone had taken a candy. Suddenly he stopped and a brilliant thought flashed into his mind: "Nata-a-sha," the thought took form in words, "if we find an empty couch, we'll fill it with our love songs, to spite all our enemies!" Natasha looked at her boyfriend and didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She had never encountered a lover like Venya.

The problem was that Natasha had to settle her personal life as soon as possible. She had fallen in love with Venya, and would certainly have linked her life with him, despite his strange ways, but Venya couldn't fall in love with her - she wasn't the right kind of woman. All her good qualities weren't enough. Being of a creative nature, he needed a Muse. Natasha was not suited for that role. When he thought about that, he would remember Marina : she was definitely the kind he needed... Those thoughts and feelings brought Venya and Natasha to a painful parting. It happened at the end of the summer.

And The Circle Closed by Evgeny Kissin

1.

Of course Natasha immediately rang Marina and told her everything. They met and had a long conversation. A few days later, Marina received this letter:

“Dear Marina:

Unfortunately, nothing came of my dates with Natasha, but in any case, I thank you very much for your concern. I hope that you and your relatives are well and that everything is going well for you.

Sincerest good wishes, Your Venya.”

During the seven months before she received that letter, Marina and Venya hadn't met; he just sent her SMS messages with greetings: for Women's Day, Passover, and Victory Day. After Sasha left,

she thought of Venya often. With time, as her pain and resentment subsided, she gradually began to understand Sasha, thinking that he was also proud in his love for her, and it would therefore have been easier for him to suffer in prison than to learn about the price that she had paid for his freedom. And yet, she also couldn't stop thinking that Venya wouldn't have reacted that way in such a situation, that he would have understood everything, would have forgiven her, and would even have valued what she did for him. What she had felt after their Winter

encounters rose back into her mind, got even stronger, and became transformed entirely into an inner geshtalt.

After reading Venya's letter, Marina got confused. If something were to happen between her and Venya, Natasha would be sure that she, Marina, had taken Venya away from her, and she would lose her friend forever. And yet, after brief doubts, Marina decided that such an opportunity occurs only once in a lifetime, and whatever happens—let it happen!

She read Venya's SMS again, and clicked on the ring button. When he saw Marina's telephone number, Venya felt that his heart would jump out of his chest.

“Hello...”

“Good morning, Venya, it's Marina.”

“Yes, yes—I remember your voice.”

“Thanks for your letter. Well, it happens, of course—what can one do...”

Venya felt calmer.

“Tell me, Venya” Marina said, “Perhaps we could meet some time.”

Venya's heart again began to beat faster and harder than it had a few seconds earlier.

“Yes, of course—of course, Marina, with pleasure.”

“Are you free tomorrow night?”

“Is this some kind of joke?” Venya couldn't believe his own happiness.

“Yes, I'm free.”

“Outstanding! Come to my place.”

“Thank you very much. What time?”

“Let's say seven-thirty.”

“Thanks, Marina. I’ll be there.”

“If it’s not some kind of trick”, Venya thought, “something like this probably happens once in a lifetime.”

2.

Venya didn’t recognize Marina’s apartment. Though it wasn’t dark outside yet, the whole house seemed soaked with a bright electrical glow.

“Well—come in,” said Marina.

After those words, they both got a little confused; they remembered how she had greeted him with the same words when he came to her for the first time. Now, however, she spoke them with an entirely different intonation, and she also looked entirely different—no comparison.

Venya handed Marina a bouquet of red roses, a bottle of wine, and a box of chocolate candies. Perhaps both of them were thinking that those were a lot more pleasant to give and receive than an envelope full of money.

The table was in the middle of the room. It was covered with all sorts of food and was decorated with two lighted candles. Delicious odours were wafting from the kitchen.

When she had put the roses in a vase that Venya helped her fill with water, Marina invited him to come to the table.

Marina was the first to speak. “So Natasha is not the kind of woman you could fall in love with?”

“Unfortunately no,” Venya answered, and then added: “Actually I don’t know whether it is unfortunate or not — but no, not the kind...” and he looked into Marina’s eyes as if he were trying to guess how she would answer him.

His answer definitely delighted Marina; he sensed that from the next words she spoke:

“Yes, such things can happen, but one must be careful. After all, a woman is always full of hope, and suddenly it turns out that...”

“Right!” Venya interrupted. “You are right, of course, Marina! I tried not to insult her, but in any case I was always honest with her, I swear.”

“I don’t doubt that, Venya,” Marina answered. “I know that you are an honest man. Taste the salad.”

They spoke about other things, and both of them felt that it wasn’t so much the words that they were speaking out loud that were making them closer but the feelings that were hiding quietly behind them. Finally Venya raised his glass again, and looking right into Marina’s eyes he said:

“Marina—could we drink to love?”

“To love...yes, of course. What could be more beautiful than love?” She waited a few seconds and then looked Venya in the eyes and proposed:

“Venya, would you like to drink to brotherhood?”

Venya held his breath for a moment. They got up, entwined their hands holding the filled glasses over the table, drank a little wine, and then pulled each other into a kiss...

They were silent for a few moments.

“So that means that you didn’t really have anyone else?” asked Venya.

“I did!” Marina answered. “I never lied to you, Venya, never. I did have someone else then. But,” she sighed, “now he’s not here anymore. There’s no one here anymore but you...”

“And I don’t have anyone but you,” Venya responded. “There’s no one, and there won’t be.” “Venya, my beloved,” Marina’s hand reached toward his hand.

Venya got up from the table and embraced her. She submitted, raised her face to him, and brought her mouth up to his.

“Please forgive me, Marina...” said Venya softly.

“For what?” Marina was surprised.

“For those snowy evenings...”

“Venya, forget about them, I beg you! Do you hear me?” Marina practically shouted, with a tremor in her voice.

“O’K, O’K.”

A few minutes later Marina took Venya by the hand and they went into the other room.

In the morning, Venya got up first. He looked around and saw on the night table next to the bed an open book with musical notes amid the printed text. Quietly, so as not to awaken Marina, he got out of bed and took the book in his hands. He recognised it immediately: “Problems in Teaching Piano Technique” by the well known Minsk teacher Jacob Libman.

“Are you acquainted with that book” he heard Marina ask. She embraced him and laid her head on his shoulder. “How do you come to have this book?” Venya asked. “Jacob Libman was my father.”

“Libman was your father?!” Venya practically yelled.

That her father had been a piano teacher Marina had told him at their meeting in the “Grand Café”, but she didn’t mention her father’s name then. Now Venya was surprised, not only by what he had just heard—it also suddenly reminded him of a remote memory from his childhood.

Venya himself didn’t remember it—his mother had told him that when he was about six years old and his musical talent had become clearly apparent someone had recommended that she present Venya to the famous Professor Libman. He, however, had said that he didn’t teach little children, but he listened to him. Afterwards he had advised Venya’s

mother to take her son to the piano teacher with whom Venya did indeed study for ten years in the music school. Further, he himself had telephoned her and told her about the talented boy.

Venya finished telling his story, and added dreamily:

“Imagine, Marina--if your father had agreed to teach me we would surely have met a lot sooner...” Marina, very shocked, replied:

“Possibly...what’s more, did you study in the Special Music School for Gifted Children?”

“Yes,” Venya confirmed.

“So we could definitely have met a lot sooner...if not for my father” and Marina now recalled the history of her childhood years: when she finished the seven-year music school, her parents considered sending her to study further in the same music school that Venya completed, but her

father thought about it and decided it would be better for her not to link her life with music. “To be a professional pianist is a difficult thing, especially for a woman,” he had claimed. “I know that very well. So think deeply about whether that is precisely what you want to spend your whole life doing...”

“Yes, almost as if it were intentional,” Venya sighed. “It’s as if someone had done everything possible so we would not meet sooner.”

“And still it happened, my beloved”... and suddenly Marina remembered something and added: “As my grandmother used to say, it was ‘destined’”

“My grandmother did too!” Venya exclaimed. “Yes, it was destined. Precisely so, Marinochka...we were destined for one another.”

“True, my destined one,” Marina whispered.

And the breath from Marina’s soft lips mixed with the morning sunbeams.

Translated by Barnett Zumoff.