

Anna ROGOZHNIKOVA

Five Stories

THE HEAD

There is a special kind of pleasure – to have dreams about gorgeous men. They all are slim and cynical and they all grovel at my feet. Many square kilometers of biceps and triceps each belong to me. There is no power on the Earth to budge them. Until the fly happens. “Where are you going to, my admirers?” – I cry. – “Come back!” But they keep running from me. All I can see are their heels, angry male heels. There is nothing I can do to get my dream back. The fly’s buzz unmercifully flings me into reality. I hate her! I hate the fly. She’s a bitch. I pull a blanket over my head, leaving only out my nose, slightly tensing the muscle of my memory, and start a fascinating travel into the history of tortures. First of all I go East. And I say to the emperors of the medieval China: “Oh, Your Resourcefulnesses, you were the best in the art of physical punishment. Leg by leg, wing by wing, the insect disappeared in the skilful hands of your executioners. I’m respectfully yours! Then I go, cap in hand to Ivan the Terrible. He just impaled them. As for the ancient Sogdiana, they solved the problem in a gracefully oriental way, filling up the flies’ mouths with molten silver. Even in Tibet flytraps were used. There is nothing worse than to be reincarnated in a fly. One can’t leave with such karma – any enlightened person knows that. So, flop! – and adieu, sansara! No buzz here! Euthanasia, an act of mercy.

I’m rather merciful too, though. I’ll go to the supermarket and, among thousands of United Colors of Spray-cans I will find the one with a fly’s death inside. I’ll treat the fly with the sweet scent from the atomizer. Do you know how dichloride works? I’ll tell you, just listen to me. Flies adore it. They flock to the scent of dichloride like moths to the light of a kerosene lamp. They love dichloride, love it to death. People are not able to love so. For all that I’m a gentle, a very gentle killer.

Suddenly! My telephone rings!

- Hallelujah! ... oh, sorry.... Hello!
- Is it the school?
- No!!!!
- Oh, sorry...
- Ne-ve-rrrrr!

I put the receiver in its place, created exclusively for the purpose. And envy the receiver, it’s much happier than I am. I can’t find any place for me. I’m like Swan, Cancer and Pike. First I move to the sky, then move back and finally I sink. But I’m much more mixed up than these animals from a fable – there are three of them and I’m alone. Well, I can’t sulk any longer. It’s high time I should kill that fly! Whenever I resolve to take action it turns out that I must brush my teeth and wash my hair first; then it’s time for make-up and at the very last moment a sandal’s clasp breaks. I kick the door – it hurts me! I’m injured, I’m an invalid, no more fight for today.

Nurse! No answer. Nurse! No answer. *À la guerre comme à la guerre*: one is helpless without a nurse. There is nothing left for you to do than die peacefully. That’s why I’m a

staunch pacifist. Leave this world in peace. For myself I demand nothing. But it doesn't mean that I need nothing. I only rely on your generosity. Bring back my man to me if you do care for your lives. Because I've decided it all.

So while you were listening to all this rubbish about war and peace, I've changed my sandals (there are plenty of them in my home: my uncle owns a shoe factory). Now I'm going to a supermarket. It's a pity you cannot see the way I'm doing it. My hips are swinging, my nose is turned up and there is a star shining on my forehead (don't mix me up with a Red Army type, you'd better mix me up with the Swan-Princess). In the face of this kind of magnificence the supermarket's doors should open wide and the supermarket's personnel should fall flat on their faces (like the men in my dream). But life doesn't follow my id's tastes. The doors open automatically and the personnel only smile (and only because they are afraid that I'll tell the manager on them). Never mind. I'm leaving this gang for dessert. I'll be back. Later. Now the fly is the first in line. (She can die a natural death while I'll be discussing those salespeople).

-Is there anything new in the dichloride market? – I ask a pretty blond salesgirl, dusting her cans full of momentary admiration. The salesgirl is so beautiful – I have the nerve to repeat. It's not her cup of tea to be dusting the spray-cans here. She was born to kiss Robby Williams in his videos – she is just the one he likes. Pleasure with duty, as they say.

And the beauty gives me a glance. What a wonderful pair of eyes: there are two pupils in each. Oh, my Goodness! I've seen a lot: I've seen cats with differently colored eyes, I've seen Voland, I've seen one-eyed pirates and black-eyed peas, I've seen all three of Shiva's eyes. But! Every eye of these has just one pupil in it. Whatever you may say, four pupils for one lady – it's too much. Even Robby Williams won't let her kiss him. Even Robby's dubber would demand a double fee for such tricks. As a result the salesgirl will be fired, because MTV won't run the video. "Teenagers are watching," - the guys from MTV will say. – "Generation NEXT. What kind of nexts will we get dubbing videos with four-pupiled chicks?" Right they will be. Even I, a physically and psychologically mature person (and one ready to fight) shudder and remember all my life, from Shiva to MTV. As for these babies, trustingly glued to their TV sets, they are sure to be frightened and maybe spoiled. The seller sings her answer to my question:

- Nothing special. Everything's as before. What about you?
- What surrealism? – my head rebels. – Oh, I see, I see. Poor thing is a bit out of her mind because of all this chemistry. Her brain went chemical. That's why she's saying nonsense.
- You better change your job! – I advise. – Would you be so kind as to give me the yellow spraycan with that black fly's portrait.

The salesgirl finds the very thing I need, jumps and claps her hands:

- Ooh, it's so pretty! It's so goody!
- -Thanks, - I stretch my hand to get the can.
- No! – the salesgirl screams hysterically– Its mine! I love it.
- Madwoman, - my head sighs. – And after all that they dare call us crazy, sweetheart! If only they looked in their supermarkets.

I nod. My head always says right things. I'm sweet indeed. I haven't bitten the seller, I made no noise, no leg of mine stamped. Isn't it sweet? Oh, don't say anything. There is no tradition of answering rhetorical questions. It would be just as strange as trying to catch the Russian who doesn't love riding fast with the intent of showing him to Gogol. Don't answer. Don't worry. What you are to do now is to value that logical sense of mine. I say to the salesgirl:

- But look, you possess thousands of spray cans. You have them here, and there are a great many more in your warehouse. And if you request them you will get one thousands more of them. Well?

The salesgirl rolls up all her four pupils, smiles and says:

-One plus one is two... Settled!

I can't leave this stinky supermarket without saying my gracious goodbye to everyone.

I shout:

-Hey, look: all of you have your flies unzipped!

And all of them immediately drop down their faces, even my chemical sister. I like it!

-Good guys, - I say and vanish.

Now I'm out in the street. And I'm running. Very, very fast. Because the fly is waiting for me. It's the second time in my life I've run so fast. The first one was in 1987. Mummy gave me a puppy. Every day I bolted home, knocking pedestrians off their feet, turning over cars and lorries. I was in maximum hurry. I was eager to hug my Tuzick. Do you know what I loved Tuzick for? There was no need to wash my hands before hugging the doggy. That's why Tuzick surpasses everything: sweets, ice-cream and - especially - men. Before hugging a man one should wash one's hands, get a manicure and a pedicure, remove all hair and put on lacy lingerie. It is advisable to visit a tanning booth. But I have no time for tanning. I'm running, clutching the dichloride in my hands and imagining the scene of the crime. I thirst for revenge. And I'll take revenge on the fly for every admirer I've lost! And! Suddenly everything stumbles over a log and falls down. Bang! My head doesn't even ask: "Hey, what's up?" My head knows that only dichloride in a yellow can with a fly's picture can produce such noise. My weapon has killed several stray flies. So I lay on the ground and several corpses lay around me. I look up the sky, then turn sideways. I keep on laying and thinking. You will never learn what is the thought I'm thinking, because I'm well-bred.

-Get up! Stand up! Don't stop taking revenge! - my head shouts.

- Next is mano a mano combat. We've run out of dichloride, - I answer.

- *À la guerre comme à la guerre!* – says the head fearlessly. My head is just like me. No fear, no hesitations. It's not a head – it's a find! Some pun for you: there are many-many lost heads, but mine is a find!

I enter my home, furious and injured (for the second time today). The fly is sitting on my jam. Very poetic of her! I switch on a TV (in order to cover the sounds of hand-to-hand combat) and come up to the fly. The fly is eating the jam so selflessly she doesn't notice neither me nor her death. We both are a bit puzzled.

-Let's not waste our time!

We take the fly and fling her straight into nirvana. Mercifully! Then we take her body and carry it to the Entomology Museum. And after all we've done, me and death say goodbye to each other *sine diae*.

The fly's spirit is rebellious. She doesn't want to stay in nirvana. Every night the fly's spirit comes to my place and scares me. But it's not easy to scare me. My head is by my side!

Together we have the power!

THE MOSQUITO SONG

It's million degrees above zero. Even paratroopers are cracking up from the heat. Not only paratroopers – I'm cracking up too! I'm waiting for the cold. Not for winter. Oh, no. I'm waiting for the global icing. When everybody will freeze. Absolutely everyone! And then I'll put on mittens, take a crow-bar in my hands and go traveling over the Earth. Somewhere – don't know where exactly yet – I'll stop and dig out the handsomest guy in the world. We will wear fur-coats and drink that vodka called "Finland". We will toboggan down from Mount Olympus and from the Kilimanjaro. We will chew on incredibly delicious icicles from the roof of Kremlin and dive naked into ice-holes. And no flu! I promise. I'll promise you anything you want, just cut out the heat! I'm longing for sleep but I've got too many degrees here to be able to. A mosquito flies in. No!!! No more insects! I hide under the bed, lay my head on a pair of slippers and, for want of anything better to do, join the bloodsucker in singing:

My floor's made of wooden bars.
In spring it's covered with buds.
Then the floor goes green and catapults acorns into the ceiling
(that's why there is no chandelier in my house,
the sun shines for me.)
I read a red book
written about animals, which happened to be very special.
Nobody has written such a book about me,
because it's not easy to notice me: too many people around.
And I'm singing the mosquito-song!
Very beautiful one...
There is a she-goat living with me,
She's here for my fresh herbs.
"My dear goat,
You too haven't been noticed:
you are not very special.
'Yeah!' – she says.
My heart is turning sour.
It is eager to catch all the reflections of the spring puddle
which lays happily in the spring street:
the blue feathery sky,
and young smiles,
and it wants to be waded by baby's red rubber boots
just like the puddle is being waded now -
illegally and gaily.
But I've got neither a baby in red rubber boots
nor my own red book.
What a pity!
I rehearse our first kiss before a mirror
and my solemn speech:
Usually I don't understand life at all.

But sometimes everything clears up.
At these moments I hold the whole world in my hands.
But it lasts just for a little while.
Then I become a little fool again.
Now is the moment – look how dexterous I am.
When my hand stretched in the darkness is a white stick.
I want my white stick to reach the dawn
and switch off the lights outside.

I sang my quiet song so pitifully that the mosquito lost all its anger. “I’ll kill you, mosquito,” - I thought to myself with pleasure, and fell asleep right under the bed. But sweet sleep-walkers, who stroll about all night long entered my window and carefully put me back in bed. They even tucked me in! Oh, those sweet sleep-walkers. I dreamt of a choir consisting of men who were in love with each other. The choir was antique and grandiose. The men were standing on a huge stage. Two guys were singing solo. One of the two had a beautiful girl on his hand. The story they were singing about was almost trivial. He loved him, but another he loved a girl Alesha. (I thought – what a nice name. Alesha – very feminine). Nevertheless the first guy was not offended, because it was the gods’ will. At this very moment the choir struck up a frightening OOOOOOOO!!! And the soloist tossed Alesha to me, and I caught her. Alesha shouted with laughter and bit my nose. I woke up. It was dark and cold in the room. The sleep-walkers had dispersed long ago. The mosquito was sleeping like a log on my stomach. My blood was digesting inside the insect – I heard it myself. “My blood is yours, brother!” – I whispered. And fell asleep again.

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THE BRIDES’ TOWN

Where the sun lays its warmest rays and the moon shows its dark side is the center of the town. In the center of the town Camilla lives. She tells fortunes in chamomiles. Later grooms pay her off by letting her have the right to the first kiss. Early in the morning, when trams start circling, you should go to the outskirts to have a look at Wet-nurse. She is the only woman in the town who never runs out of milk. That’s why each townswoman has been nursed by her. And each of them has taken in, with Wet-nurse’s milk, the blue color of her eyes and the chocolate taste of her soul. She is the richest woman here. She wears the most expensive bras.

In the dark cinema hall Somebody will touch your hand and pour little blobs of something inside your shirt collar. It’s so easy to learn her name. It’ll be shown in the end titles.

There are thorny girls lying on the beach. Their legs are very long, legs like that can step over the sea. By they won’t lift a finger. Very lazy. All their activity is digging in the sand when it gets cold. And nothing else.

Expectant mothers are a special caste. Girls with surprises inside them. They move along the street holding onto the banisters in order not to be blown away – so ballooned are they. When the moment comes they can't stay on the ground any more. The wind picks them up and takes them away with the dandelion seeds and the maple tree helicopters. They come back to the town with new little people and tell nobody where they have been. They keep the secret of birth.

Occasionally brides drop by in the pub. In the pub they form several groups. Two groups of music-lovers pull an accordion from one side to the other. The jocks clear the bar. But there are also indifferent ladies who only observe the world around. They sit at their tables, stretching out their netted legs. That's how they feed themselves.

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SPRING

Spring had finally come. I was sitting on the lawn and fooling around with matches. I wanted to empty a matchbox for a beetle. But firemen react immediately. My fireman put on his fire-proof suit, took a stairway and a hose and came up to me. I said:

-Wow! Are you an alien?

I had never seen firemen before. And aliens are the creatures nobody has ever seen. That was my logic.

-No, I'm not. And you? – answered the fireman, thinking to himself: “Oh, baby! What a fool you are!”

-It does offend, - I thought to myself.

-Sorry, - said the fireman to me.

Suddenly we both felt ill at ease. Noisily a lorry moved along the highway not too far from the lawn. Some more lorries followed. There were so many lorries on the highway that they made a traffic jam. To kill the time the lorries' drivers began to read *Playboy*. One of them lighted a cigarette. The picture was so sweet, so peaceful.

-It's great that spring has come finally, don't you think so? – I started my speech. – I'm loosening my mind, you know. Every time I catch an ant, I place it into my matchbox and keep it there until the ant falls in love with me. As soon as it does, I kiss it (ants are so salty, it's perfect to have some Mexican vodka with ants) and let it go then.

-How do you find out the ant has fallen in love with you?

-As soon as a new freckle occurs on my nose.

The fireman looked at my nose:

-I guess the whole ant hill is already in love with you, - and added cautiously: - How many freckles will occur if I fall in love with you.

-None. A pimple will occur on my nose.

-Faugh! If so I'll stop loving you at once.

-That's what I call antipathy of the human relations!

The words “antipathy”, “human” and “relations” impressed the fireman so much, that he began to think seriously about life. He decided that we never notice when everything starts and everything stops. And only in another life do we understand that we have spent our

lifetime not looking under our feet. But it makes the picture of the world wider – objected Kolya to himself and summarized: It's the right way we live!

At that very moment he felt in love with me. He made a posy for me, decorated it with a bee and advised me not to kiss the bee.

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LIPSTICK

Maybe you want to ask me why all of my pillows are marked with red smudges? You are welcome! I've got an answer. It's lipstick. The lipstick which I use daily to become beautiful. The day before tomorrow I took the lipstick as usual but didn't manage to finish my make-up and fell down on a sofa. I was lying down and whispering:

-How could this happen? How could this happen?

And the pillows were around me. I was lying down flat, gesticulating and smudging the pillows. Don't shake your heads, I did it all because I was hopelessly in love. Some people do stranger things! Just go to a pond at night. You'll see it all! It's dark and cold and fearful, but young girls come to drown themselves. Water-nymphs try to not let them to do it, even vampires and devils prevent them from the act. But the girls who are hopelessly in love are not afraid of anything. All they want is to drown themselves. God looks down on them, and realizes that it's his turn to rescue the girls. And he changes the World History so they too are loved. Otherwise there would not a girl left on Earth. As a result technological progress slows down and world harmony is delayed.

So it's not a sin to mess up some pillows, as you can see. I don't blackmail my destiny. I stay indoors and wait for the magic laundress. Rat-tat! Here she is! She has fat hands and a big heart – just like the favorite women of classic Russian authors. The laundress has brought a bucket. We place it in the middle of the room, shake hands and start the final countdown:

-16, 8, 5, 1 Go!

Foam, foam and foam runs out from the bucket. And soap bubbles. It's pretty noisy all around. My classic laundress and I are laughing and clapping. My neighbors are knocking at the door, outside all the cars are honking their horns, the sirens are wailing, football fans are shouting Goal!, the teakettle whistles in the kitchen, Archimedes is tossing up rubber duckies and crying Eureka! In the bathroom. Quietly the laundress and I have washed all my pillowcases. There are no more marks of my love. They have vanished. No more questions, please!

Translated from the Russian by the author
