

Klaus

“So you were born in Kaliningrad?” asked Ms Schmidt as she closed the front door.

“Yes. But my family moved to Moscow when I was three and I barely remember anything there.” So for god’s sake do not bother me with questions about how those magnificent castles in Königsberg look now like the customs officer did, thanks.

Nikolai managed to mute the second half of his answer. He would hate that sort of inquiry coming up again, but finding a livable and affordable place had been hard, and annoying his landlady on the first day would certainly be a bad idea. Besides, he felt something vaguely familiar about this elderly woman. She didn't look like any of his grandparents, though.

“And you spent half a day on a train? A plane is much faster and some airlines are cheaper than train. Why exhaust yourself with such a long journey? Surely the scene is quite pleasant now in August, but it gets too hot! And with the snow and ice on the rail it’s going to shatter your bones when you go back for Christmas.” She went on talking while leading him to his room, “And why won’t you take the one on second floor, son? It’s more spacious and bright. I don’t have trouble climbing the stairs though, but old Otto prefers the ground floor and he sheds a decent amount of fur, enough to coat all your clothes and still have plenty left for a fur cap. Son, you really should live upstairs.”

The large cat suddenly bumped into his calf, causing the whole flock of excuses to take flight and truth remained on the ground with him: “Because I’m very afraid of heights, Ms Schmidt, and taking a plane or a room on the second floor gives me vivid

nightmares about falling to my death.” Nikolai guessed the cat was brown, he would have to clean up the fur from his trousers afterwards.

Ms Schmidt frowned, eyes widening and blinking (a very pale color, Nikolai figured they were blue), took a deep breath but eventually smiled: “I see. I’ll leave you to rest then.” Switching to Russian, she added: “By the way, if you ever got tired of speaking German in those intensive language courses, talk to me in Russian when you are home. Russian is my mother language, but I don’t often find people to talk with in it. For now, have a good rest.”

She picked up the cat sniffing at the door and left. Nikolai almost don’t feel bad about the fur stuck to his trousers.

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Nikolai spent a great amount of time daily reading the play aloud. He never regretted becoming a theater student, but the midterm presentation was in less than two weeks and his professor had made it clear that if he could not say his lyrics “with adequate emotion and fewer difficulties with pronunciation”, he would regret having to give a 5 to his presentation. He had better luck at home. Otto seemed to be shedding less fur as the weather cooled. Even better, Ms Schmidt felt more like a family member now, perhaps because they talked mostly in Russian (which unfortunately won’t help his pronunciation).

“My brother wanted to be an actor, but in the end he took training to be a pilot at about your age”, said Ms Schmidt with a tone of affection as they were peeling some

oranges after dinner. Otto cuddled up on the windowsill, away from the disturbance of citrus scent.

“I tried to join the army after graduating from high school and they told me training someone colorblind is not worth the trouble.” Nikolai gave a wry smile, “so I took a train here to get trained to be an actor.”

“Good for you.” Ms Schmidt put away some orange peel for him to defend his wardrobe from the cat. “Is there anything else I could help with your residence for the next term? Have you bought your train ticket yet? It’s no more than one month from winter break, here people buy their tickets even earlier ahead.”

“The renting is settled. I bought the ticket last week”, answered Nikolai. “Has your brother retired? I would try taking the plane if he was the captain, I bet he’s a very good pilot.”

“Had he lived he would be an expert.” Ms Schmidt sighed. “Son, remember I told you I’m from a Russian-German family? My brother did not end well with the Russian part. No, it was gruesome for him.”

Nikolai gasped: “Oh, was that the concentration camps?”

“No.”

Ms Schmidt took two cups from the shelf and poured them some tea.

“You see, Schmidt is a typical German surname and I get it from my father. He once fought at the western front in World War One and he said he was in the same company

as Erich Remarque. Be it true or not, they were of the same age. He survived the bullets and went back to finish university on a wooden leg. He became quite resentful towards war for the rest of his life.

“My grandmother, the Russian one, managed to bring her two children to Berlin in the winter of 1917. My mother was really just one month away from adulthood and my uncle Pyotr was 13. They later went back but she stayed there to keep studying at university, the very one my father was in. They fell in love and got married in 1921. My grandparents were all quite content. She gave birth to my brother earlier the next year. They named him Klaus.

She paused to take a sip from her cup.

“Klaus was seven years my senior. He got more from mother’s look and I from father. I’m not sure if Klaus was a good person by today’s morals. Well, one of the few things I remember about him was that he died a Nazi. But I also remember him as a rather nice brother who would always keep his promises to me. Also he was smart enough to be admitted into pilot training school, but far, far from smart enough to see what was to happen when he was ready to fly out in 1941.

Otto stretched out and jumped down from the windowsill, making a loud bang as he landed on the ground.

“Yes! Bang! When his training ended they were no longer seeking their luck in England, they were about to fly to the Far East and bang! Bang!

Her arm hit the table as she wrung her hand in agitation, the teacup shook and

Nikolai flinched.

“My parents were not a bit amused, to say the least. My father asked if there was anyway he could quite when he came home for a break before they were to set off. No, that would be suspicious and get the whole family into trouble. My mother sat there motionlessly, knitting. ‘But what about nana? Her legs are not good and she can’t run fast! And what about uncle Pyotr? Can we at least bring them here before you fly off?’ I asked, ‘And what if you never come back like those who flew to England? I want to go hiking with you in summer!’ He burst into tears, and the whole family were just crying. The next morning he left us and promised solemnly to me he will be back. A few weeks later someone came over and told us his plane crashed while they were flying over Königsberg. They figured there may be a glitch in the engine, which was very unlikely to happen, but was the only reasonable cause for his plane to shut down. But we knew better what reason he died from.

“ He killed himself!” Nikolai cried out involuntarily.

“ He killed himself.” Ms Schmidt repeated.

“In a matter of two years the war was pushing back, and my mother became so keen on helping me practice Russian. It was just me then. My father had got himself jailed for speaking against the war. She was so focused on me to the extent that I got mad at her for her reaction after she learnt the death of my grandma and uncle Pyotr from a comrade of his. ‘That’s horrible, Liza, but there’s nothing we can do. Now go on practicing the past perfect tense.’ That was what she said, and I called her heartless. We

kicked up such a fierce quarrel, well, all in Russian, the soldier who brought us the information rushed back to see we did not kill each other. My god, I was so terrible to her!”

“It’s really terrible for both of you.”said Nikolai, trying to comfort the old woman, “All you had left were each other, it would be impossible to keep calm. ”

“Well, not that bad.” a slight smile creased her face, “My father came home shortly after the war and my mother hugged him with such force they both lost balance and fell. We stayed at where later became east Berlin and he was given a job in the office. It was nice for him. He couldn't stand for too long after so much hardship even though the new prosthesis fit much better. My mother became a Russian teacher in middle school and occasionally came home vexed. But when I asked her if her students were doing well, she would grin and say: ‘Well, a few are having difficulties, but to be fair, I’ve seen worse.’

“I went to university in my early twenties to study engineering, and soon after graduation I was employed with my fine grades and fluent Russian. Things went well, but then my parents started to talk about marriage. One month before my thirtieth birthday my mother called me into the kitchen after dinner. ‘No, mother, I will not get married.’ I said immediately after we sat down. ‘But Elisabeth, your dad and I are in our sixties now and someday we will no longer be around. Then are you really planning to spend the rest of your life alone? Your colleague Joseph is an upright man, and I can tell you two are getting along well.’

“‘But what for?’ I argued. Suddenly the vision of my brother’s plane falling from the sky like a shot bird pierced my mind and I snapped: ‘And what if war broke out again and I wish to keep my husband and son away from the battlefield? Should I try breaking their legs so they don’t march away? Or maybe gouge out their eyes so they don’t fly off? I don’t have the heart, so spare me the sorrow, I will never get married!’ And that closed the marriage issue. My parents never brought it up again. Well, the same as their treatment to Klaus. They never said a word about him after the war, as if he was never born.

She gave out a heavy sigh and buried her face in her hands.

All at once, Nikolai felt sorry for the young man. Well, just a bit, that man was a Nazi who was ready to bombard civilians. But crashing the plane to a violent death and being disowned by parents are just too overwhelming.

“Thirty years after losing Klaus, my parents passed away in quick succession.” Ms Schmidt carried on, “My father went out for a walk on a warm June morning, dozed off on the bench and never woke up. For the next four months my mother was spending a great deal of time sitting on that bench until she was caught in a cold rain. ‘Pneumonia.’ said the doctor, and I was told to prepare for the worst. One Saturday in December, she woke from a trance and did not recognize me. ‘But how did my Liza grow up so fast?’ she murmured, ‘And where is my boy? Did he not promise to take his sister hiking?’ And she started to call out my brother’s name. ‘He promised so, mother,’ I held her hands, feeling them turning waxen and cold, ‘But some promises are just too hard to

keep.’ On Monday I was preparing for the second funeral that year. My mother’s family tree was already barren, it was some of her students and my father’s relatives who came to pay her a last visit. And then I was, alive but alone.

“Oh, I forgot to count in the cats. They are great companions.” Ms Schmidt suddenly reverted to her first language, “Otto is the sixth I got. His roommate died last year and I dare not get another cat. Heaven knows how much time I have left, eighty years is quite generous. Oh there, is it so late now? I must have used up much of your practice time!”

“It’s nice talking to you.” said Nikolai, he didn’t know what else to say besides bidding her good night and going back to his room. A chill ran down his spine as he changed into his night clothes. The German winter, though far less harsh than the winter in his hometown, had come.

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The midterm results came out one week after he was back from the break, Nikolai was relieved to see a “2” on his presentation mark. That was the equivalent of an A-, not bad. He thought he should give Ms Schmidt a call. Her voice was somehow weak when he called her on Christmas Day, he hoped she was getting better. He tried a few times, but nobody answered the phone.

The next day, Nikolai took a bus to Ms Schmidt’s house. As he approached it, he saw a “On Sale” sign in the yard. Slowly, he paced in front of the house, not sure if he should expect someone to come by or just leave for good. The dog in the neighbor

barked at him, a woman opened the door.

“Hallo, that gentleman there, is there any chance of you being Mr Kuznetsov? Oh yes, I recognize you now. Wait a moment.” She stepped back into the house and returned with a box in her arms.

“Madam, did you know where Ms Schmidt was?” Nikolai was almost sure about the answer, but there was still a ray of hope. She might just moved away, perhaps to her father’s relatives...

“At best, she’s in the kingdom of God.” the woman put down the box with a loud thud, “Her cat ran over to my place and scratched poor Duke the day after Christmas. I tried to send him back and she didn’t answer the door, but the TV was in a high volume. I called the police and they found her fainted in the living room. She didn’t make it to the New Years. She wanted you to have these. By the way, would you like to take her cat? Her relative was allergic to fur. The cat is in my place waiting for adoption.”

By dinner time, Otto was joyfully covering his new residence with fur (“ It doesn't matter what you keep as long as you clean up the rooms when you left”). Nikolai placed the books from Ms Schmidt onto the shelf. Very well preserved Russian books. Their late hostess had found someone who would keep cherishing them.

At the bottom of the box laid a piece of something small, Nikolai picked it up. For a moment he thought he was looking into a mirror with wooden frame, then he realized It was actually a photo.

The Slavic face bore such a striking resemblance to his, yet they shared nothing in

common. The young man stayed still on the paper, in the plane, for the past, with a promise.

“But I also remember him as a rather nice brother who would always keep his promises to me.”

On the back of the frame it read, “Klaus.”

—the end—

This short story is inspired by the content of AP/GER1790, a demanding yet very fascinating course.