

Variants

A story by

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1.

The city was full of light. As it was a northern city and the sun was a rare guest there, the light seemed much brighter and irritated the eyes. But people did not seem to mind.

It was in the late morning of a working day. The sun was welcoming everybody who hurried to the office for a business meeting, on the bus, or in the metro, or at the green traffic lights.

Trolleybuses clicked and creaked. Cars rattled past. The city sounds ebbed and flowed.

There was a sharp wind though, usual for that time of the year. According to the weather forecast, it should have been western, coming from the sea-side. But it blew from everywhere. It rushed down the streets, sweeping away the dust and smell of their cafes and shops. Only its stinging freshness was reminiscent of its western origin.

Still, people felt the soft warmth under the sun and everybody forgot about the cold. Along the solemn streets, they slowed down and their cares flew away for a while. They looked to the sky. Maybe out of habit that good things were a godsend, they looked for gods. But there was nothing but the sun. Someone began to smile. Then they went on their way into the shade.

The shadows of the houses fell obliquely on the street and marked out the border between light and darkness, warmth and cold, careless joy and routine.

The sun was enviably indifferent to vanity. It swept over faces, hands, and over the facades. Like some handwarm molten wax, it was hot no more but still pleasantly soft. Like some oil-paint on Monet's paintings, it seemed to be white at first, but on closer inspection, it split into variegated colours. There was Kazansky Cathedral, which seemed dun. There was Stroganov palace, which was almost white. The water in the channel reflected the sky.

It was incredible how the city changed in the light. Once you had caught up this moment, you would not want to move away. The world was delighted. The sun triumphed. What a beautiful day!

So Masha thought, standing with a cup of coffee on the windy bank of the Griboedov channel. The river together with the coffee created the fragrance of the moment. But it soon faded away. It was time to go back to work.

In her office she was Maria. Maria Krylova. How serious! She preferred to be just Masha. Or Marie. As her mother called her, stressing the end of the word because she dreamt of France where she had spent a year in her youth but had come back because she had dreamt of Russia. Her mother was always like this – passionate, so touchy-feely and devoid of any practical sense. But Masha was not like that. She did not want to be like *that*. To raise a child as a single mother, to do odd jobs, to be indebted to all friends. To dream – not for a world! - about some “artistic life”, “social freedom” which would begin one day we-don't-know-when and which

meant in fact to live God knows how! Left in limbo. Always insecure. She should stop it, she told herself. Every time she began to think about her mother, she was ready to cry. She crossed the street to the shady side.

Masha was twenty-six. She felt fulfilled. She had been working as a web-designer – how long? Three years already, a good experience! She was excellent at her job, it was true – at least everybody said so. She was focused and accurate. Why make mistakes? Better be safe than sorry. Life could not exist without routine.

She reached the office. Someone was already there. The rest were late as usual. “Hello! How are you?” “Fine.” The client had already called. He wanted to see the project soon. Masha would have it finished, for sure, by the end of the day.

The project was waiting for her. A new casual bar downtown. She liked it though. She liked the idea of a city of bars, small galleries, coffee-shops – small places organizing a network, the everyday life, the city she loved. It was a creative process. She would not give all her life to it. To any work. What’s the need to deny everything for Art’s sake, the small in honor of the great? “Great Art.” Everything can be beautiful. Or useful. Everybody needs to do what they know best. It is the art of life.

So Masha thought while choosing a type to match the web-page. She could not decide whether to put the title at the top or under the picture. Maybe she should change the background? She loved editing. It reminded her about the artist’s vanguard books which she had studied heartily at college – Apollinaire, Danielewski. The labyrinth of words and images charmed her. It would be fun to design a site which would retrace the construction of the bar, why not? Would it be Art then? No way, she should just follow the wishes of the client.

Suddenly she got a call. It was Lisa, her best friend, who wanted to see her. She always suggested things as if she was free all the time and the entire world should be too. Sometimes it was infuriating. But Lisa was so lovely. One day she simply moved from Kaliningrad to Saint-Petersburg and started her own small work-shop where she now sewed charming dresses. Charming she was. Why was she calling though? What had happened? Her voice quivered. But it could have been the wind. She was not at home, she was in the street. She said it was nothing serious. Of course, they could meet at dinner time. Masha hung up. But shouldn’t Lisa have been attending yoga or something at this hour? It was strange. Anyway, Masha needed to finish the project.

2.

Lisa was waiting on the bench next to Masha's office. She had not decided yet if it was right to call her. Maybe she should tell her later. Maybe it would be better to run away? But she had nowhere to go. She had no better candidate to talk to. She could imagine in details what Masha would tell her. Did she need to hear it all? Marie could be unbearable. Her questions would be unbearable. What could she do now? How was she to live? The die was cast.

So she was sitting on the cold bench poignantly waiting for Marie. Her head swam. She threw it back and closed her eyes. The sun was beaming down into her face. The warm softness caressing her skin helped her forget about the passing of time. She tried to breathe deeply.

She reconstructed the labyrinthine course of her life. How had she come to this? She was Lisa Petrova. She was twenty-five. She remembered her childhood in Kaliningrad. A small street lined up with old German houses. The courtyard. The way to school or to the drawing classes. Her father working in the garage. The familiar smell of petrol and the mud on the roads to be only noticed after a long absence.

She had left her hometown to go to Saint-Petersburg – the city she had dreamt of. She rented an apartment where she could work. She sewed and loved it. She felt the joy of *creation*. The inspiring feeling of freedom had never left her even in bad times. It was hard, the clients were different. That woman with a big hat definitely did not like her new dress whose patterns Lisa had worked on and on for almost two months. She had almost failed to meet the deadline for the twenty dresses ordered by a dancing-school. How tired she was! But there was no way to stop. She needed to pay her rent, to buy fabrics and fancy goods, to promote her own collection. Every day she needed to prove to the world her right to freedom in this city. She did everything herself. Why didn't she have anyone to help her? She had never had a boyfriend. Just some pals, but not a real boyfriend. Was there something wrong with her? It was better not to think about it. She just had not met *him* yet. Would it happen? Oh God, what would her life be like in a year? In five years?

"Lisa, dear!" It was Marie. Down-to-earth. It was time to explain. Lisa hesitated. How could Marie always be like this? "I was just going to call you. Why are you sitting here? It's cold." It really was. It must have been surprising for Marie to see her there. Though Lisa tried to look her usual self, the situation gave her away. There she was: worn-out eyes, disheveled hair, without a bag, sitting on a bench in the middle of a working day.

Her sense of despair was overpowering. She could not say a word.

"Are you ok?" Masha gave her a hug. It was perceptibly warm.

"I am pregnant," Lisa blurted out.

3.

“Now I have fifteen minutes to take a rest,” Elena said to herself.

To work in a school sometimes could be exhausting, for sure, but it was the only work that could satisfy her. There she could have a rest that she had hardly known since she had become a mother. There she gave children composition classes, a course for a musical school she had designed all by herself. All these funny exercises on creating images for spring and winter, rain and wind, and the different people the children met – well, it was inspiring! It was much better than any other job, but still it was work.

She made herself a cup of tea in the confined space they called a teacher’s room: yellow walls, a cabinet with a mirror, and a window overlooking the Fontanka river. How boring it was inside, Elena thought. She should have redesigned that interior into something more artistic. Sincerely, she would redesign all the school, that “palace of culture” as it had been called since the Soviet period. How was it possible to create anything good in such an ambiance? But real art had nothing to do with places, for sure. At forty-eight years old, Elena could rough some trivial matters. At least, she had that opportunity – to drink her tea quietly, alone during the break between lessons.

Solitude was her sphere. Nobody could share it with her.

It was the way of life she had chosen some thirty years earlier. That day she had told herself she would be a musician. That day in mid-November it was raining. That day she quit her university – her father was lost, her mother cried. Then she packed her things in a bag and set off on her way. She remembered how frightened she was. The first three months were horrible. But then she was blessed with good fortune. Elena sang her songs to one Czech guy with whom she started to play. They spent two years in squats moving around Europe - the happiest years of her life.

After all that - why had she come back to Russia all alone? Could she explain? It was a choice made overnight. She wanted more. The wildness and the lightness were intoxicating. She had a strong desire to give a direction to her life. She needed to set roots for herself. She chose Saint-Petersburg. What was it – the motherland call? Or some painful urge to do things differently all the time? For sure, she had always tried to complicate her life in order to overcome the difficulties afterwards. Her whole life experience consisted of kicking herself out of her comfort zone. That’s why her music was so lively. That’s why she knew clearly how to transform life into a song.

It was in Russia she found she was pregnant. Her European visa was not valid anymore. She didn’t try to contact her Czech friend, neither did he contact her. Elena always said to herself, there had been nothing but music between them. She decided that a child could be a kind of start in her life. She became a mother. Never denying her artistic vocation, she found a place to live in and some acquaintances to stay with. Her parents, who had never understood her,

helped her first to find a doctor, then to raise her little girl. But nothing was easy. She remembered that period very dimly. Her life was determined by the child. Later, she recorded an album of lullabies she had written at that time. The songs were quite dark – were they for mothers rather than for children? They contained different natural noises Elena had collected while living in her room – street sounds, or neighbors’ cough, squeaky floors, or some baby babbles.

It had seemed quite possible to live on the fringe of Russian society. And so, she remained but a marginal. Who cares about social status? It doesn’t compare with the truth of Art – Elena knew it well. Art was her way to think life; it was built into her everyday reality. As fishermen live by the water or physicists spend their time in laboratories, she inhabited self-made studios surrounded by instruments to do music with. Thus there was enough space to create and nothing else had a meaning for her. But still, how enormously difficult it was – to stay a musician with a child. Elena could hardly ever say she had been a good mother. She suspected she would have a lot to be blamed for.

She was looking through the window. It was a nice day. Saint-Petersburg wallowed in the sunlight. Elena loved the sun. It had inspired most of her music. She could not explain the metaphysical influence that sun bore upon her. Whenever she felt hopeless, she would watch it. That day it was exceptional.

Suddenly she had a message. It was Masha, her daughter. She was hard sometimes, it was hard to talk to her but probably that was her, Elena’s, fault. Not everything was easy between them.

“I will come today after work. Will you be free?” the message said.

Masha didn’t come often. Had anything happened?

“Sure,” she answered.

Eventually, they tried to stay friends. At least, she tried. Elena finished her tea and went back to work.

4.

Masha had always thought Lisa was unpredictable. And there she was. Four weeks pregnant. Sudden blow.

But who had made her pregnant? Not Andrey, God forbid! That guy had never looked very serious. Masha had never suspected the relationship between them. Fancy, engaging in such an affair – so typical of Lisa! Well, anyway, Masha needed to get them to some warm place. A big noisy coffee-house would do, she thought - suitable not to attract a lot of attention. She ordered a big pot of tea and a salad. Lisa stayed aloof.

Was she absolutely sure? Blood tests, echography, doctor's opinion... She had had it all. No doubt left. But how did it happen? What went through her mind?

Masha was surprised. Maybe she should not have asked all the questions. She did her best to imagine what Lisa could think, with no avail. Instead, she felt estranged. Why had not Lisa told her? If she had, she would have given her proper advice.

She wanted to help – but how? What was Lisa going to do? She was thinking about an abortion, though it terrified her. She was probably right. She was not ready for a child. She couldn't raise a child in Saint-Petersburg alone, nor in Kaliningrad with her father for that matter. She had just started her own business and couldn't stop. To expect help from Andrey was pointless and rather humiliating. That was clear. Lisa deserved better.

They sat in silence for a while.

"But the child could be a great source of happiness," Masha said after some time. Lisa raised her eyes:

"I know."

She stared vacantly. Poor little thing, Masha thought.

"I think I'd better go," Lisa said.

"When do you have your...appointment?" Masha asked.

"Tomorrow," Lisa answered.

"Do you need help with money?"

"I have enough money."

"I will pay for the tea," Masha said in a desperate attempt at being helpful.

Lisa nodded. She put on her coat and left.

Masha watched her through the window. As disheveled and devastated as she was – Lisa looked great. There was some lightness in her movements, devoid of vanity. The little nothings of life meant a lot to her, for sure. But something more significant was always hidden behind them. Lisa understood the essentials. She could have been a good mother, Masha thought.

The street was in the shadow. People were passing by. Everyone's life originated from someone else's will. Not God. But one's mother. How strange it was - Masha wondered - that if Lisa decided not to bear a child, the child would not come to exist. No need of God to solve the equation. Eventually, everybody results from other people's decisions. How different the obstacles could have been!

But if so, was a child worth all the bother?

Take her mother. She was an unbearable woman. Masha had never known her father. Who was he? Where was he? She had always suspected that the vague story about a Czech musician was not true. Maybe she had just been abandoned by a man? Maybe he was Russian? Maybe they were living in the same city? Even in the same place? Masha looked around. The men in the café were her age. No one looked like her father. Stop being silly! But what could she do? She had always considered herself to be a child born in defiance of common sense, taking after her mother.

Could it have been otherwise, though? She needed to talk to Mum, she thought. Masha remembered her childhood days. Mother's house had never been in a proper order. Masha had spent a lot of lonely hours there. Later, living with her boyfriend she missed it sometimes. But as a child, in that strange room, she felt left to herself. Mother brought her along to some parties, but there, she was nothing but a funny child. When mother bought her an ice-cream, she tried to make it last – just to get sure, mother will be near her waiting. And she stayed near her getting nervous. Masha saw it and ate even more slowly. Did mother understand her little game?

She would call her. But not right now. It was better to write a message. She would go and see her mother later. She needed to finish the project. She needed to keep her forces. But still, poor poor Lisa! What should she be thinking?

Masha paid and went out.

5.

“What about keeping this baby?” Lisa thought. “Or not?”

But a child should not be a random choice. It was not a small change.

Masha seemed to be perplexed. For her, such a situation was absolutely unpredictable. She wouldn't deal with it. Lisa would have loved to be like Masha.

But she was not. She was careless. Soft nature. So, she should make that choice now – to bear or not to bear this baby.

The first wave of anxiety had passed. Lisa tried to think clearly. With a child her life would definitely take on a different rhythm. No workshops outside, no fashion shows, no after parties anymore. So, was the choice entirely hers?

She was not individualistic, she said to herself. She thought about the child too, she should be responsible for the future of them both. But would her baby have a happy life with her? Lisa had but a small room and her sewing skills. She had her father and two or three friends to help her. Her life looked easy when reduced to a number of figures, she thought.

She looked around her room. Maybe it was not that small. There were some clothes stands, a mirror and a table with a sewing-machine. Further into the space there was a sofa and a whatnot that served as a partition. Behind it, by the window, there stood a bed and a wardrobe. Not much a child could expect there.

Did she want to change her life? Of course, she had always dreamt about a child. But one day she was invited to a good friend. The next day she would have some free courses at College. She loved the life she had built for herself for years. The idea of a baby had nothing to do with the real passing of her time. It invaded her life cruelly. She pictured the image of a child devouring her and her room with all the dresses. How awful! Things should not come to that.

Lisa lay down on the bed and fell asleep.

She had a dream. She was by the sea, walking along the shore, not far from her hometown, all alone. The waves were trying to touch her. The noise came from the pebbles. She did not mind. She felt relaxed, nothing disturbed her mind. But then she understood she was not alone there. There was another person at the end of the beach. She tried to make it out. It was a young woman. Lisa tried to approach her. The wind became stronger therefore it was harder and harder to walk. Lisa made efforts. She was enormously interested in the person. When she came nearer, the woman turned out to be a girl who resembled Lisa very much. The same face. The same hair. She wore one of Lisa's favorite dresses. But still, she was not Lisa. The waves intensified while Lisa tried to follow her. A stiff breeze got up. It became dark. Lisa fell down covered by the water. She woke up.

She looked around. She was still in her room. The sun was setting.

6.

"Hello Masha!"

"Hi Mum"

In a room where everything looked disordered, Masha stood like an alien. She seemed to hate it so much, Elena thought.

"Anything wrong?" she asked.

"Should there be something wrong?"

"You don't come to see me without any reason, Marie."

"I do," she said in her usual reproaching tone. "But this time you're right. I want to talk."

"About what?"

“Well, it is complicated.”

Masha hesitated. Elena glanced at her, while she was searching for words. Marie, her independent girl. She was beautiful when serious. She always seemed to keep aloof. Elena felt sorry for that. Of course, she was not the best mother in the world. They differed so much. What was she going to ask?

“When you were pregnant, Mum, did you ever think of an abortion?”

“Oh God! Why this question?”

“I just want to know how you decided to keep me, if you were all alone. Wasn’t it crazy?”

“Well,” Elena took a breath. “It was difficult. Extremely difficult. Sometimes I wanted to damn it all.”

“Sometimes it was exactly what you did.”

“Don’t speak like this, Marie!”

“But it’s true,” Masha answered roughly.

Elena was discontented. What did Masha want her to remember? The time when Elena didn’t want to care about anything in life? Or when she had almost nothing to eat? The acquaintances she had lost because of her debts to them? She should be careful with words, she thought. She was sorry. But no more self-reproach! Why did her daughter always have this triumphant look on her face? What was she trying to prove?

“I’m just trying to understand,” Masha said in an apologetic tone.

“Well, if you want to know,” Elena answered, “I’ve staked a great part of my life on you. I mean... I think there were days when I did not want to continue anymore.”

“To continue what?”

“To live like that. To be musician and your mother. To stay myself. And at times I wanted to stop it all, to take a rest. So, I did it. I asked your grandparents to have you for a while.

“And I ended up spending there most of my time!” Marie smiled sarcastically.

“Yes, but I always came back. I never abandoned you, Marie. You were my challenge, my greatest creative work. All I did had to do with you.”

“Did it?”

Elena knew that was a matter of Justice. From now on, her words would be used against her. The judge of her life was in her room, in front of her. She was used to paying her due for her artistic choice in life. She had even developed some kind of immunity to such judgments – first, with respect to her parents, than to landlords and employers, than to friends and now – to her

daughter. Marie was right. The truth Elena had found while creating was, first of all, her personal truth. Her child was the greatest masterpiece she had ever produced. There was no self-denial here. But maybe that was the only reason she ran her life the way she did.

“I loved you as well as I could. There is no good recipe for being a good mother. Nor for being a good daughter,” she said.

Masha stared at her.

“Are you pregnant?” Elena asked.

“No, not me.”

“Do you still paint for your work?” Elena asked.

“I don’t paint, Mum. I’m a web-designer.”

“Not at all? But you did earlier.”

“They don’t need painters.”

“What a pity! And your friend Lyosha, are you still together?”

“Yes. But his name is Lyonya, Mom.”

“Sorry, I always mix them up,” Elena sighed.

Masha grimaced.

7.

Masha was in disarray when she left. Her mother lived on Vasilevsky island in the room lent by a friend of hers. The wind was even more cutting now. The dark waters of the Smolenka river seemed cold as in winter. Her fingers grew numb.

She was not ready to come back home. So, she took the metro and went downtown.

She came to the Nevsky prospect. The city was already in the twilight as if some deep-blue had been drawn on the canvas. Yellow patches were scattered here and there shaped as windows and street lamps. The daylight was now dispersed in a myriad of little lights.

Some sharp red rushed past with a disagreeable sound. The exhaust smell followed. Then sparkles flared from above – a trolley bus had passed. It was noisy and the rumble was full of excitement. The world was lying in wait for evening adventures. The air thickened.

Masha loved this city feeling. But she was all alone. How silly it had been to go downtown! What was she to do now? Go to a bar by herself? She had seen lone people in bars millions of times. She still needed a quiet place to stay. She was getting cold.

She took a little street, then another. Then she found herself in front of a small café or bar, which seemed to be very new. The name meant nothing to her. But the interior seemed very familiar, though she had definitely never been there. That meant little risk of meeting a friend. She entered.

The bar was half-filled as it was not very late. Masha looked around mechanically, as if she was seeking someone. Then – as if the person had not arrived yet - she took a seat in front of the window. She ordered a cup of coffee. There was a man at the bar counter who seemed to smile to her. She feigned indifference. Well, quite silly, she knew. She remembered that she had played this game when she was younger. Later on she would pretend that someone had called her and she needed to go. That joke would allow her to spend half an hour in the bar. That was the time she needed.

First, she tried to phone Lisa. She had that crazy idea to talk her round. No need to get rid of her child. They could cope with it together. But Lisa's telephone was switched off. Maybe, she was sleeping. Damn!

She felt sorry to have given Lisa a cold shoulder that afternoon. The problem was that she had always been cold. To her mother, to her colleagues, even to her boyfriend. Lisa was her closest friend, but she could not even help her in hard times. Wasn't she a hearty person? Couldn't she love anyone with all her heart? She was obsessed by her work, but was it because she loved it very much? Or was it just to get her life in order?

"Your coffee is ready," the barman announced. Masha fetched her cup and sat back.

But that was her mother's fault, Masha had always thought. If nobody took care of you as a child, then you were left alone and would certainly learn to organize your life by yourself. What was there to do if your mother was an artist? It had not always been so bad. Masha loved her mother's music. Sincerely she liked her performances, though she hated to attend them. She was under the impression that the person on stage had nothing in common with her. Masha was an orderly person. Her mother was disorganized. Masha was independent. Her mother depended on the whole world. Masha was introvert. She couldn't talk about her feelings to anyone while her mother did it at every concert. Masha had even stopped painting. There was no "artistic" link between herself and her mother anymore. They were poles apart. Nothing to talk about.

Would she love to be more creative though? To live her life more freely? To dedicate herself to some self-made beauty and not to satisfying clients. She did not know.

Masha looked around. The bar counter stood in the middle of the room. She was sitting in a space resembling a café, with tables by the big windows. The passages between them were

marked with lines as in a labyrinth. Behind the bar there was a game room. The walls were painted with conundrums. The name of the bar was "Variants".

Why, sure! She was in the bar, the site of which she had designed. The man smiling at the bar was the manager. They had talked to each other online. Why hadn't she noticed it straight away!

She waved to him.

"Still working?" he asked.

She nodded. She would never show her mistake. How strange though!

She liked the bar. She would definitely repeat its style on the site. She would even add some pictures of her own as well. She took a paper and started to work out the ornaments. They should be in orange and red colors. No green. No black and white. And she would certainly revise the title on the site.

The barman brought another cup of coffee.

"It is free of charge," he said. Then he added, "I liked your idea of the site, it's very stylish."

"Glad to hear it," Masha answered.

8.

It was 7.30 when the alarm rang out. That was a new day, Lisa thought. Life went on. The visit to the doctor's was due at 9.45. She felt nervous.

That day she was to do *that*. Decline the opportunity. Give it back to nature.

She was still not sure about her decision. But she could not postpone it. She had but two alternatives. But she could not choose. It was hard to get up.

Did the dream she had something to tell her? Who could answer? She looked on and on in the mirror while brushing her teeth, then combing her hair. She was only twenty-five, she thought. She had her whole life ahead of her.

She dressed. She put on her jeans, than a blouse. While she was choosing her clothes, a white dress caught her glance – the girl in the dream wore the same one. Could she be her imaginary daughter? Lisa couldn't remember her face anymore.

She switched on her phone. Masha had called. Lisa wanted to talk to her. But she was not sure Masha would give her proper advice.

She took her breakfast. A cup of coffee with some bread and butter. Usually breakfast was the pleasant part of her routine. On ordinary days, then she would have a look at her schedule and start her work. But that day she cancelled the meetings. Silence ruled in her house and within herself while the routine continued outside.

Would she really sacrifice her life if she became a mother, she wondered while eating? She would have less work, less time and less money. But she would still be able to work. She would still love her breakfast. She would stay herself.

At 9.00 she was ready to leave. But the phone beeped. It was Masha.

"I'm sorry. I forgot the time of your appointment."

"It's ok. I have just left my house."

"How are you?"

"I'm better."

Masha took a pause.

"So, have you decided to end it?" she asked.

"Well, at least, I'm going to the doctor's now."

"Do you want to do it? The abortion, I mean."

"Is there a woman who ever wants to do *it*?"

Silence again.

"Then why do you go, Liz?"

"It seems to me logical. It seems to be the most sensible way to behave in my situation."

"Listen," Masha said. "Maybe I'm late but I'll say it. If you don't want to do it, you should not do it. Isn't it logical?"

"I can't imagine my life with a child. I'm afraid, Marie."

"I see. But if it's only for practical reasons,. You could rely on me."

"Hah, what do you mean? You have your own life."

"I mean, whatever you choose, I will help you. There's nothing in the physical world we can't resolve."

"Is it what your mother said to you?"

"Well, I'm still the daughter of my mother's. Sometimes I can be mad. "

Lisa smiled.

“I don’t understand how your mother has been living so far!”

“Neither do I,” Masha sneered. “But we could go to one of her concerts one day and you could ask her.”

Lisa laughed.

“Would you like me to come with you?” Masha asked. “I could be late at work today. Everybody is late all the time, now it’ll be my turn.”

“Yes, if you can.” Lisa said. “Thank you.”

9.

Elena smoked on her way to work. She should have left twenty minutes earlier not to be late. But she had been trying to find the right ending for a new song. It didn’t come. How annoying! Sometimes it didn’t work even if she spent hours on a piece.

There was no postponing the lesson officially. It was better to follow the rules of appropriate behaviour. It was the only way for her to live as she wanted. She quickened her step.

Her daughter was never late, she thought. Masha was her exact opposite. No surprise they had not become friends. Should it be considered a problem? She would have preferred her daughter to be her creative soul mate. She wasn’t. Sometimes it happens. But was it a problem? They just didn’t think the same way.

She didn’t know a thing about her child though. Shame on her, sure. She wasn’t very considerate. That was true. She wrote a message to Masha – maybe in an attempt to say sorry:

“Hi! How are you? How is your work?”

Anyway, Elena loved her. Marie should know it.

But twenty-six years ago hadn't she gone mad? Of course she had! But who cared now! Maybe she was not brilliant. Maybe she was just an exception to the rule. But who would she have been if Mary hadn’t been born? What about her life? What about her art? It would be empty. To stay true to yourself you should always grow up and work at self-improvement.

When Elena was about to reach her school, Masha answered: “I’m with Lisa. She decided not to have an abortion.”

“Good news!” Elena wrote.

She took another cigarette. She thought about Lisa. She had seen her several times. Lisa was a good friend for Marie, she thought.

That day it was cloudy, as usual in Saint-Petersburg. Sometimes some rare threads of sunlight would catch the eye and outline the shades of objects. But then they disappeared. Things retrieved their impenetrable grey. Such was the color of reality where people were to make their own choices without any help. But it was not bad, Elena thought. The sun would come back again and help them see what was right and wrong.

She stubbed out her cigarette and ran off to her class.