I

The blissful silence of early Monday morning was interrupted by harsh sound of an alarm clock. Maria Muftiyeva, whom all people called just Masha, heard it. She automatically pressed the button and returned back to her dream. Masha just could not leave the adventurous story of her dream unfinished, as if she felt responsible for the successful solution of the task.

... She was riding a fast horse with some important parcel, a book or manuscript, in her hands. She had to safely pass it to the people in the castle she was approaching. Bright colors, intensive scents of summer time, her own dress and the surrounding atmosphere woke up a feeling that she was in medieval Spain. She urged her horse, and they flew, leaving behind carts with hay, small villages, barking dogs... And here is the castle. The heavy gates slowly open; Masha rides through into the stony-grounded yard and jumps down from the horse. A tall man in leather cloths hastily approaches, with a silent concern in his eyes. Masha gives him the parcel, wrapped into linen cloth. “The task is fulfilled”, she sighs and sits down on the littered ground, absolutely tired. The turmoil of buzzing around people is no longer interesting to her...

Suddenly Masha was startled out of her dream by the lucid awareness that it was long time since the alarm clock rang, that today is Monday and that this afternoon she is flying with her colleague to the international linguistic conference in Berlin. She opened her eyes and cast a look at the alarm clock. It was half pas seven.

„Oh, my goodness, I am going to be late! The boss will again tell me off. And I still have to pack my luggage – I hate it!”

As usually, the night before the journey she could not get asleep long. The thoughts were wandering about the final details to her presentation – what to wear, how to speak, which things to take with her... And as usually the morning after such a busy night starts with a big headache and tense nerves.

“Why was I dreaming of Spain, if I am flying to Berlin?” Masha’s mind returned back to the bright and vivid dream. Unfortunately, there was no time for pleasant return to the state of dram and its analysis. With the power of will, Masha returned herself to the busy reality.

First of all she called taxi, as it usually took up to half an hour to have one at this time of a day. It was the only way to escape a lecture of her boss, pedantic Aleksandr Timofeyevich, the head of the department of general and historical linguistics of Moscow University. He never missed the opportunity to teach his employees that the lack of discipline, willpower and

organizational skills will never – never! – allow any scientific worker to reach any prominent results.

Masha cut down her daily morning programme. She did not tidy the covers of her sofa bed so that she could simply jump into it when she returns tired from her journey on Wednesday.

She took a short shower; hastily combed her thick long brown hair and decided to do her make-up in the ladies room at job. Into her compact bag, she put her classical yellowish-brown suit and a thin white blouse for a presentation; comfortable slippers, a toothbrush and paste, day and night face cream, a small bottle of perfume... She stood for some moments in deep concern if she did not forget something. Masha was used to travel with only main, necessary things as she hated the inescapable procedure of all journeys - packing and unpacking bags.

While getting dressed in dark brown loose linen trousers and linen jacket, she gulped down her morning coffee – black and without sugar.

“What else?” she asked herself looking around and trying to waken up her still sleepy mind. She double-checked her handbag – the passport, purse with euros, mobile phone, cosmetics, three ballpoints, notebook, USB flash drive with her presentation...

The telephone rang – taxi was waiting.

“Oh, my garden!” she reminded herself. On the windowsill of the kitchen in decorative brown pots there grew parsley, cress, oregano, dill and some other spices. A lush fern on the top of the dresser kept them company and looked after them as a solid supervisor.

Masha quickly watered them all from a small plastic dark brown watering can. Almost all her cloths and belongings were of various shades of brown – her favorite color. It suited well to her dark brown luxuriant hair and brown-green eyes.

“Now, my dears, good bye, I have to run. Do not feel lonely, I‘ll be back in two days”, she told her plants and smiled at them encouragingly. Then she took her bags, on last moment decided to take a leather coat with her, if the broadcast appeared to be wrong and the weather was cooler that expected; locked the front door of her one-room flat on the first floor of a block of flats and dashed down stairs to waiting taxi.

* * *

It was half past nine when Masha breathlessly entered the teacher’s room. With inner tension, she was preparing for the gloomy look and flow of words from the Head of the department. She was surprised, though, to find everyone relaxed with no sign of tall, upright, grey-haired Aleksandr Timofeyevich. Senior lecturer Svetlana Ivanovna, her large body dressed in a tight white sleeveless dress, was openly doing her make-up. Elderly dignified associate professor, prominent specialist of Indo-European phonetics, Kiril Nikolayevich, was imitating seriously busy, while searching on the Internet sport websites. Beautiful, self-content

administrator Lena, ignoring the indifferent audience, was deeply immersed in loudly discussing newest academic rumors. The only one in the work mood was Olga, Masha's colleague and friend with whom they were going to Berlin. Olga was busily adding some final arguments to her tomorrow's presentation and was not aware of anything around her.

"Morning", Masha casually greeted her colleagues, approaching her working table. "Where does this wind of freedom blows from?"

"Aleksandr Timofeyevich has just called to tell he is sick", Lena explained. "He caught a cold this weekend in his country house. It was unexpectedly windy. I also froze on Saturday when I was going to the theatre. They broadcast warm evening, and I did not take a jacket. Now I also feel that my throat aches and perhaps I have some fever...

Masha did not listen to well-known Lena's complaints. "Still, there is at least some justice in the world," she sighed relaxed. "If I just knew it, I could have slept longer..."

"Masha, the secretary of the dean asked you to come", continued Lena, offended by the absence of sympathy from others. "You have not signed the trip documentation."

"Right", murmured Masha.

Without any haste, she started up her notebook, checked her e-mails, news websites. Then, following Svetlana, put on her morning make-up. Only after she looked at the mirror and felt satisfied with the results, did she leave the room and moved in the direction of the office of the dean. Just round the corner of the corridor she almost run into a young light-haired elegant man with high, open forehead and grey, almond-shaped eyes. Masha's heart jumped up in her chest – Fiodor, talented lecturer from the Department of Germanic Philology. A month ago they broke up their one-year-long serious relationship, and Masha still felt uneasy every time they met, which was hard to escape when working on the same flour.

"Hey, be careful! Where are you rushing this way?" With tension in his voice muttered Fiodor and looked her from head to foot, as he was used to. "You look beautiful. How you doing?"

He always remained polite and friendly as if nothing had happened. But Masha felt that he was also willing to leave his way as soon as possible.

"Thanks, I'm all right, and you?" She smiled, playing inescapable social game.

"Great, see you", and Fiodor quickly walked away.

Masha's good mood disappeared. This day was definitely not going to be favourable to her. The day of the trip always unsettles, and there you are an additional emotional pressure. On the other hand, maybe it is even good that she met Fiodor: repetitious sense of guilt if she did everything not to break up with him will distract her from thoughts about the presentation of her scientific theme in the conference. Masha had already participated in some conferences – in

Rome, Oxford, Petersburg, and she was highly nervous every time. It seems, Olga feels the same, Masha noticed to herself. When she could see someone else acting or feeling the same in a similar situation, Masha always felt better – this made her feel less peculiar or self-controlled. It is all very well for Aleksandr Timofeyevich to teach of self-discipline and self-trust, when he is a widely recognized specialist of Sanscritology and can afford not to pay any attention to his critics. And Masha was always annoyed by and lost her temper because of every argument of opponents if she could not find a proper reply. She would later discuss with these opponents in her mind for long, until she would find a decent answer, although this would be too late. These inner discussions sometimes made her so much weary that she would have to apply her willpower to switch her thoughts to other issues.

Lost in her emotions and thoughts, Masha automatically came into the office of the dean, sign the document and returned to the teacher's room. Olga, swinging to sides and murmuring something, was still deeply immerged in her presentation text, with her eyes fixed on the computer monitor.

"Olga, we have to leave in an hour's time", reminded Masha without any need.

"Right, I know", muttered Olga, "Some good arguments came to my mind. I'll finish soon."

* * *

"I feel sick to my stomach", complained Olga to Masha in the bus on their way to the airport. "I have got diarrhea from early morning, and I feel acute abdominal pains right now."

Masha looked at her friend attentively. Olga's pale face expressed suffering.

"Have you got some medicine?"

"Oh, yes, I have already taken two *Smectas*, but it seems this does not work."

"You must have eaten something," diagnosed Masha. "Some spoiled fish? Unwashed fruits? Do you remember how Svetlana was seriously ill last October from the unwashed orange peels?"

„Thank you for comforting me," snarled Olga. "I think it's only because I am very much nervous. The theme of my scientific work always provokes lots of critics. If only Aleksandr Timofeyevich would not press on me finishing this work, I would surely switch to another theme..."

"Olga, just stop!" Masha was tired of Olga's constant grumbling. "Either you change, or accept the present one and work on it without complaints. Otherwise you just weary yourself and others."

"Oh, my belly," Olga moaned painfully, pressing her hands to the abdomen. "I just hope, I shall manage to keep myself until the airport."

Her state did not become better in the airport. After she came out of the ladies room, Olga took two more *Smectas*. One more medicine she received from a stewardess in the plane. With the help of it, Olga managed to reach the *Novotel Hotel* in Berlin, the venue of the conference, where they also booked a twin room for two nights.

Having lain on the bed, Olga's will finally left her and she could not move out of acute headache and abdominal pain. Masha checked her friend's forehead and understood that she had fever.

"It might be some disease; I need to call an ambulance," – Masha said anxiously and dialed the reception.

Olga lay motionless and did not react to Masha's words.

The woman from the ambulance staff examined Olga's state and declared to Masha: "Acute food poisoning or some infection disease. We are taking her to the hospital. As soon as we know the real cause, we shall contact you. Could you help with your friend's personal belongings? She might need to stay in the hospital for a few days."

"Oh, no! My presentation!" Olga raised her head.

"Your physical state is dangerous, you should think of your health now," answered the woman strictly and helped Olga to stand up.

"Masha, you must give this presentation instead of me, otherwise my participation will not be accepted for my Doctoral Thesis. You have a copy in your USB flash drive."

"Me?" Masha was deeply shocked. "You definitely do not expect me to make a decent presentation on the theme I vaguely know only from your eternal complaints."

"Please, do it for me," Olga started to cry. "The main thing is to make it, and not to make it *perfectly*. Why am I so unlucky? Couldn't this illness occur earlier or later? I knew something wrong would happen to me – it is always my bad luck..."

Masha clenched her teeth and tried to calm herself down. Olga had a talent of grumbling. And usually things turned out the worst way for her, so that she could prove herself and others that she had all the reasons to complaint about her fate.

"Maybe it's only a small stomach upset and everything will be all right. She will have her stomach pumped and return back still tonight," Masha hoped.

Alas, an hour later a phone rang and a professionally sympathetic, female voice declared to Mash in a slow, polite pace, so that even a foreigner could understand: "Your friend has a case of salmonella poisoning caused by the sausage eaten yesterday."

The voice silenced down waiting for any reactions or questions. Masha, caught by surprise, only murmured something in reply.

"Do not worry," continued the soothing voice, apparently used to this role. "We shall take all necessary measures and cure your friend in some days' time. All expenses of the treatment and return home will be covered by the insurance."

"So maybe the insurance could make a presentation in the conference on the behalf of Olga?" retorted Mash irritated.

"Sorry?" a strange question confused the voice and for a while it lost its formality.

"Nothing. Can I visit Olga?"

"The disease is inflectional," the voice regained its patronizing manners. "Your fried has a mobile phone. She will contact you when she feels better."

Today's failures tipped the balance in their favor.

At the reception desk, Masha got Olga's presentation printed out from the flash drive. Back at her room, she took a shower to refresh after the trip and then, up to the late night, she was reading Olga's presentation. Masha hoped to prepare herself on the alien theme enough to be able to at least superficially keep the discussion on it. The theme seemed a bit absurd to her: "The influence of Old Slavonic on the development of classical Sanskrit."

"Only Aleksandr Timofeyevich could have thought such a research theme. No wander it confronts lots of critics not only from the Eastern, but also from the Western philologists," – Masha thought.

* * *

Dressed in an elegant yellowish-brown suit; having made her hair in a bun; with a golden necklace and bracelet; perfumed with her favourite *Dolce Vita*; Masha felt herself comfortably during the conference. To herself, she decided that she looked much better that Olga, who had a slim figure but bad taste in clothes, preferring contrasting, bright colours and ultramodern style.

Both Masha's presentation went on well. Surely, Olga's theme rose lots of opposing comments and questions. Masha skilfully managed to turn the discussion from Sanskrit to the divergence of Proto-Indo-European language and the dating of this period. In this theme she felt like a fish in the water, and in general the presentation scored a success.

After lunch Masha presented her own scientific work: "The dating of the divergence of Proto-Balto-Slavic based on the regular change of consonants in hydronymy." As she already was a bit tired, she confused while explaining her main idea about the change of consonant "p". Still, her presentation was accepted positively and she felt proud with having done two complex presentations in one day. She sat in the conference hall almost not listening to the others, analysing in her mind what she had said right and what she should have said in a different way.

After dinner, Masha and her colleagues form Berlin University went out for a walk. After a while, they chose to get into one café. It was crowded and noisy. Masha felt that this atmosphere

irritated her. She was not interested in further on scientific discussions – all she wished was a peaceful walk down the street in a fresh air which would calm her mind. She excused herself from the table, wished her colleagues good night and went out.

It was dusk. Masha liked this period of day, when everything and everyone is slowing down for the nigh. At home, she would go for a walk into a neighbouring park to enjoy the calm moment of the change between day and night. Most of all she loved the moment of sunset, when all life would shortly fall into silence – birds in the trees, dogs in the lawns, even people and children. As if everyone would unconsciously express respect for the past day and concentrate on the preparation for an upcoming one.

Masha was slowly walking down the street in the opposite direction from her hotel. The leaves of the trees, lit with the street lights, glittered romantically, waving sleepily in the breeze; the street asphalt, heated by the hot sun during the day, now was emanated almost visible warmth. Masha was breathing in the magic of the quieted dusk. Passing by cars and casual loud voices from cafe-bars disturbed her mood. She tried to ignore it and to concentrate into peaceful inner space within, visualizing herself in the deserted old park.

After an hour Masha turned back. She thought about Olga – no reply to the message on her mobile phone. Perhaps Olga was sleeping or still feeling bad. “I should call to the hospital and ask, if Olga will be allowed to fly home tomorrow,” – decided Masha.

The news from the hospital was upsetting. Olga’s state was stabilized, but she had fever and was not at all available of returning home tomorrow or in the nearest future. The specialist repeated once again that the insurance would take care of the medicine treatment and transportation, and that Masha should not worry about her friend.

Masha felt acute headache. She took a contrast shower. This reduced her tension and bad mood. She opened the window, to get in more fresh air and got to the bed.

During the first half of the night Masha dreamed of the conference and was having boring discussions on similarities of Baltic, Germanic and Slavic languages. Then the mood of the dream changed. She was walking down the long corridors of the hospital looking for Olga whom she wished to see secretly. Just right the corner she found a staircase, went down the and unexpectedly found herself in a yard at the four-storey old building. Masha recognized this living house, as she passed by it when she was wandering down the Fasanen Street this evening.

The street, the yard and the house seemed peaceful and quiet. The leaves of lime-trees were sleepily shivering in the wind. Masha looked around. She had a feeling that she was in a conscious dream, which would happen to her time to time. Masha’s mind got still, all her feelings sharpened. She was turning her head around trying to understand why she was here.

A bright light flashed through the window of the third floor and three fire snakes rushed out into the sky. They curled intertwined in a fierce fight. It was hard to understand if two were attaching one, or all three hostile to each other, or they were just wrestling playfully. Suddenly one snake made a loud painful cry and fell down on the ground. The rest two did not follow the one, they remained in the air and just watched its flight. The injured snake crashed into the ground and stayed motionlessly.

Concerned, Masha came closer to it. She felt afraid, but also curious. Maybe she could help it somehow? She saw that there was no more a snake. Instead of it, a man was lying. He was wearing a grey suite, his light hair were short cut. He did not seem to be visibly injured during the fall. Masha cautiously touched him wishing to learn if he was alive. The man was warm; he breathed weakly, but was unconscious. “What should I do,” wandered Masha looking around for someone ho could help. The street was absolutely empty – no cars, no people, no any movement or noise. Masha started to feel anxious.

The dream stopped and she got awake. Her heart was beating intensively. Masha rose up, went to the open window, opened the drapes and breathed in some fresh air. The sleepy street was half-lit with breaking dawn.

Masha returned to bed and tried to get sleep again. Her flashing dreams were superficial and inconsistent. She again found her standing in front of that four-storey house. Masha entered the front door and started to climb up the stairway. She wished to get to the third floor and find that flat from which windows the fire snakes flew, but the stairs never ended. When it already seemed that she approached the proper flat, she suddenly found herself on the roof of the house. To her surprise, there was arranged a recreational zone. Lazy holidaymakers were sitting in comfortable chaise longues and sunbathing, paying her no attention. Masha turned round wishing to climb the stairs down, but as soon as she stepped on the first step, she started to fall into the black, cold, empty space...

Masha’s heart again started to beat fast, and she woke up. She looked at the alarm clock: it was almost seven, quite a time to get up. So she did. Masha took a shower, dressed in her travel clothes, combed her thick, long hair into a bun, applied some make-up and went for breakfast. After the meal she checked out and went to the conference, but left the event much earlier that it was necessary for her flight back home. Masha felt a need to have a walk and to see the mysterious house she saw in her dream. So she took her bag in one hand, the handbag – into the other and left the hotel before lunch. “I’ll just go past that house, look around a bit. If there is time, I can go o the Café of the Literary House. Then I would take a train and be in the airport in time”, - she tried to calm down her mistrustful mind, which did not want to accept her night dream as a reality.

With her light bag Masha did not distinguish from other business-like people or casual tourists. I took her half an hour to get to the right place in Fasanen Street. It was a beautiful old four-storey house with two entrances.