

FOUR

Excerpt translated by Kotryna Garanašvili

The Seaside Reading Club

Little L was published by Angry Letters, who presented it as off-beat and provocative, “an offensive novel”. Offence there was, to great effect. The book was popular: a reprint, a few local prizes, a few interested foreign publishers, a film adaptation by a trendy director.

At first, Urtė was genuinely happy about Lukas’ success. She couldn’t understand why he agreed with Tank’s suggestion though – it was the glasses with a metal khaki frame which earned the publisher this nickname – to market the book as autofiction.

Lukas hesitated upon hearing the publisher’s strategy.

‘What does autofiction mean, anyway? What’s a “semi-autobiographical novel”?’

‘Precisely that,’ Tank seemed to have thought the whole thing through. ‘Think about it: the action takes place in a London borough, the protagonist is an emigrant from a Post-Soviet country. He’s around thirty, right?’

‘Viktoras is twenty-seven.’

‘Same as you? You were an emigrant yourself a couple of years ago. An outsider in London, just like Viktoras. An unrecognized artist, a loser, no?’

‘What about Leila?’ Lukas had no desire to make excuses for seducing a thirteen-year-old.

Tank laughed and put out his cigarette on a huge, incessantly clean ashtray.

‘What about Leila? Autofiction is not a confession. Besides, no one knows what actually happened between you and that girl,’ the publisher grinned. ‘Viktoras tells one story, the girl’s mother insists on another. Seriously though, what inspired Leila’s diary?’

‘Urtė, my girlfriend. She let me read her girlhood diaries. I looked through some teen websites, read some blogs – you can find stuff there that’s even worse.’

Tank nodded with satisfaction and filled Lukas’ glass which he had barely touched.

‘You’ve done your research, then. That’s good. And don’t go into detail about what you copied and from where. Who cares whose idea it is. Ideas are in the air. The emigration thing is splendidly done. Makes me feel like I’m there, standing by a sink in a slimy junk food joint, holding a hose.’

The publisher’s compliments were gratifying. Lukas took a sip of wine.

‘All in all, your book is going to be a hit. And if it’s not, we’ll make it one.’

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As the popularity of Lukas’ novel grew, so did Urtė’s vicious sneers at him for selling out – having interviews with anyone, agreeing to present Little L at regional book fairs. And the idea of him taking part in the Seaside Reading Club was completely ridiculous: to an artist, this kind of event was humiliating.

‘Suburban ladies having a party. Booking you like a stripper. Haven’t you thought about that?’

‘Don’t be a snob!’ Lukas tried to brush it off as a joke. ‘I see it as an adventure. A chance to garner some ideas.’

Urtè does have a point. But even more often her words betray no more than common envy. It’s probably inevitable: he’s successful and she can’t even finish her dissertation.

‘You better see it as a paying gig. Those Balzacian women might pay you extra for having wine with them on the beach.’

‘How do you know they’re Balzacian? I picture toned up thirty-year old bodies, sunbed tan, silicone boobs.’

‘That’s what the Balzacian age is, thirty.’

So much for peace and quiet before the meeting with the Seaside Reading Club.

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Lukas looked over a tidy pile of clothes on the bed. A white T-shirt, two pairs of white underwear, three pairs of white socks. Minimalism. A tall slim man with blonde curly hair was smiling in a full-length mirror hanging on a yellow wall. He was wearing a white T-shirt and faded blue Levi’s jeans with a ripped knee. He’s going to wear Converse – he doesn’t have any other shoes for the summer. He’s going to take a light yellow cardigan, similar to the one that Kurt Cobain wore at the MTV Unplugged concert. His shabby classic look will contrast well with the group of fancy ladies.

Lying next to the underwear pile is a plastic toiletry bag with a green zipper. Inside there’s a toothbrush, a half-empty mangled toothpaste tube, a travel-size bottle of shaving foam and a heavy, perpetually cold ‘Jagger’ razor. Sheffield, says the note on the handle.

He’s never been to Sheffield. When he bought the Jagger two years ago, he was living in Feltham, a dull borough in London. Hangars of shopping centres, dirty windows of the fast-food restaurants. He washed dishes in one of them for almost a year. He hated every dawning day but never tried to look for a job closer to the city centre.

London was supposed to offer him opportunities he didn’t have at home. Lukas’ English poems were supposed to appear in British literary publications and magazines. He imagined being invited to readings and parties.

The naivety.

Everything started and ended in scabby Feltham. Within a few months he was overcome with an actual melancholia. The state was hardly reminiscent of a bell jar, more like a translucent plastic bag with a few air holes. All but suffocating, unworthy even of air. He would only pick up on his days off, when he went to London.

It was on one of those trips that he bought this vintage razor in an antique shop in Camden. Stainless steel. Jagger was his first and only serious purchase during the emigration. He paid practically all he had – forty two pounds. He only kept the train fare to get back to Feltham. In the darkest moments, he would shut himself in the mouldy bathroom that he shared with his four neighbours who lived on the same floor. He would take the blade out of the razor and stroke it against his wrist, holding the edge up so that he didn’t cut himself. He didn’t want to die. But he had to do something.

What he feared more than anything was the thought of him losing control and one of his neighbours then finding him unconscious in a pool of blood on the dirty floor and laughing and laughing.

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Lukas didn't die in Feltham.

It was just in time that he returned to his homeland – it was September, the start of the semester, and he easily went back to his philology studies. Before the New Year, he got a call from the editor-in-chief of *The Arc of Arts*, offering him a post of a section editor.

In exactly a year, Lukas' first and thus far only poetry book, *Albion in a Plastic Bag*, came out to critical acclaim. One of the reviewers compared the poems to sharp-edged shards of the world which the poet collected in an attempt to reveal the beauty of the breakage. And the success of *Little L* was even greater than he had dared to dream of.

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'Proper biography, nice appearance, decent English skills and an okay novel – good enough for a start,' a representative of a small French publishing house whom Lukas was meeting in a VIP café at the book fair was speaking with a nasal twang.

'Authors from Post-Soviet countries are hot right now, we need to use that,' added the Frenchman, seemingly addressing himself.

During the conversation, the agent kept peeking at the black-and-white portrait of Lukas on the cover of a lifestyle and culture magazine. However much it had cost Tank to put him there, it was worth it. In the portrait, the curls fell on Lukas' forehead in the fashion of Michelangelo's David, only his countenance was derisive rather than indifferent – it took half a day's effort with the photographer and a chubby stylist to achieve this effect.

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A shy but confident and provocative intellectual – this was Lukas' image. Although he couldn't really decide how suited he was for this role, the Davidesque curls that reflected in the window of a train rushing towards the seaport reaffirmed his likeness to the photograph of himself.

"Straight out of the cover of a magazine," he smiled.

Sitting in front of him was a young girl with carefully straightened black hair. She seemed to have recognized him. She might have even read about him, because she kept glancing in his direction. Lukas wasn't in the mood to chat. He was gathering his strength for the evening. He focused on the views behind the window.

Endless fields. A lone wooden house. Two men in an old garden drinking beer from dark brown plastic bottles behind a table. Their calm empty expressions. For some reason the drunkards' faces, their dense calmness annoyed him.

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He didn't manage to find out any more about the questions or the detailed programme of the event from Eva, who invited him to present Little L at the Seaside Reading Club.

'The women would like you to read from your work. We might have a little chat afterwards. And then we'll have dinner. You don't have to prepare anything. We're going to get everything ready. We've read your novel. We're great fans,' Eva was whispering, as though in fear that Lukas was going to refuse and hang up.

'I see. And what would you like to chat about? What would you like me to read?'

'You can choose whatever you like,' Eva's voice was becoming even softer. 'It's our first meeting with such a famous writer – we used to invite authors local authors before.'

'I see. But I'd still like to know.'

'To know?...'

'Well, yes, at least the topics for the conversation ...'

Does he have the right to interrogate a woman who for an hour-long meeting offered him as much as The Arc of Arts paid him in a month?

Eva didn't seem offended:

'I'll inquire about the questions and call you back. All right?'

Throughout the whole conversation, Lukas was trying to picture what Eva looked like.

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Eva never called him back. He didn't want to call first, anxious that it would make it seem petty and overbearing.

"Finally," he sighed triumphantly, seeing an unknown number on his phone screen on the night before the meeting. But it wasn't Eva. The caller introduced herself as Sara and reconfirmed that they would cover the expenses of the journey, and accommodation if he decided to stay in the seaport for overnight. She wanted to know what time Lukas' train would arrive.

'Don't get out at the main station though. Go to the very end, to Purrrg...' Sara's voice faltered for a second. 'Don't be alarmed if you find yourself alone in the train. It's mostly workers from the port and the depots who take it. The carriages are empty in the evenings. There will be a car waiting in the car park – a white jeep. When you walk out of the underpass, turn right, and then go straight ahead along the street.'

"White jeep," Lukas grinned.

'We can't wait to hear you read. And to see you. We're very excited.'

Lukas said he was just as excited. Even though he would have given anything so that he didn't have to spend six hours knocking around towards the end of the world. And what for? To share his work with housewives? To explain that he never seduced a thirteen-year-old and that he's not an alter ego of Viktoras?

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'... station. Would all passengers please ensure they don't leave any belongings? Thank you for travelling...' he was woken up by a crackling, electric voice.

The carriage was empty. His first impulse was to grab the backpack and get out as fast as possible before the door closed. Then he remembered Sara's warning not to get off at the station, but to go to the very end.

Behind the dirty window he could see the platform of the grand station, reminiscent of imperial times. People milling around under the arches which rested on the top of curved columns. Everyone looking very small. It was probably the tall arches and immense columns that made it seem that way. The clock stabbed its knife-like arrows to half past five.

The first time he visited the seaport was with his parents when he was six or so. They spent a few hours in one of the station rooms, waiting for a train to take them to a seaside resort. The room with stained-glass windows and a cupola with Zodiac signs painted on it reminded him of a fairy tale castle. Lukas had dozed off. He dreamed that the celestial bodies on the ceiling had angry faces, which were stretching and distorting, and that the columns were bending. He woke up terrified, and his mother took a long time to soothe him.

He found out later that madness did indeed lie in the architecture of the station building. The dramatic life of its architect was recorded in *The Sacrifice of a Heart*, a story which was included in his school syllabus. It focused on the architect who sold his heart for an opportunity to create eternal buildings. Of course, the devil had deceived him and when the time came, he demanded the heart from Rosenblum's fiancé rather than Rosenblum himself. In order to outwit the evil one, Rosenblum strangled his innocent wife on their wedding night and then shot a bullet through his own heart. "He sacrificed himself as well as what he cared about more than anything in order to defeat the devil. To banish the evil from his heart. The heart is the symbol of sacrifice and the sacrifice is the highest form of love," explained the literature teacher.

Rosenblum's attempt to kill himself didn't in fact succeed. But he didn't create anything afterwards and died in the seaport madhouse.