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World Creation Recipes

From Paris to Siberia, across the whole 20th century

*A novel*

Female

1

I want to talk about the young lady in the photograph. Do you have any objections?

On 1 March 1939 she made her way into the studio where the master craftsman was sleeping peacefully, an elderly Armenian with sharp eyebrows worthy of Gurdjieff. Giving a polite cough in his ear, she asked if he would be able to do her portrait. The master rubbed his eyes and said, 'You insult me! Might I in some way *not* be able to? Before you sits a man who was there when cinema was born. Who has looked through the viewfinder at a procession of movie stars. And let me tell you. Compared with you, they were all—pff—and he mimed spitting. Try me. Thus speaks the Last of the Mohicans, who still knows a thing or two about art. Together we shall now create something after which we shall be able to die without regret. We shall make a masterpiece. The finest portrait of the most beautiful girl in town. One print costs five rubles—the money will go towards the old master's funeral. Sit in the rocking chair and smile, so that he may for the last time feel himself to be veritable *oryol*, my dear, a young eagle. First things first, though. Name and surname.'

'Galina Orlova.'

'Very good.' The Armenian nodded, and made out an invoice.

The photograph, to be honest, was a botched job, no masterpiece. The old man had tired of his work long before Galya was born. He took money off his clients in advance and photographed them all in the same coquettish pose: legs tucked beneath them, hands behind the head, elbows forward.

The seventeen-year-old Galya tried very hard to look like a soulful *femme fatale*. Her shining fair hair epitomised the headlong rush towards the heavenly ideal of the platinum blonde (hereinafter 'PB'). Because the blonde is the crown of creation. The heroes of ancient Greece dreamed of living with her and dying for her; our heroes likewise. When they invented cinema, that ray of light in the kingdom of darkness, the blonde became queen of the world.

Well, maybe not straightaway, but certainly after the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange. In 1931 the film of the same name came out. The earthly manifestation of the PB was Jean Harlow. She was the first sex bomb, blowing the mind of a whole generation. Girlfriend to gangsters and boxers. A tragic figure. A star who burned out in full view of the whole world, like the Tunguska meteorite.

Before she even reached thirty, she was gone. The Hollywood tabloids blamed her death on the director Howard Hughes, who forced Jean to poison her hair with noxious dye. Pre-war chemistry was as toxic as hell. The actress's tender kidneys could not bear the burden. The image killed its bearer.

Life went on, though. New blondes stepped out into the arena. They, too, worked seriously on their image, to their own complete destruction. Producers set squads of gnomes tapping with magical hammers at the golden heads of the models, seeking the perfect form of the power to kill. In Los Angeles and Berlin, in the forges of UFA and Paramount, tap tap tap, day and night, so that viewers could fork out to see 'The Cinderella of Democracy vs the Brünnhilde of Totalitarianism.'

Celluloid burned well at that time, smoking with presentiments of world war and sparking like gunpowder. Bats flitted above the summer cinema in the town park. Two girls trying to fit into one world was a tight squeeze.

The blonde beast warming up the Wehrmacht cranked up whole stadiums, arousing in men the desire to expand their living space and march, roaring, flambeau in hand and hand in the air. Aryan directors did not bother with variety, perfecting just one model: Lily Marlene, torch aloft, in Valhalla.

The many-faced Hollywood fairy gave her audience the illusion of choice. Something like the zodiac ecliptic, where every mortal woman could find her archetype, either in peroxide or in nature—it was not important which.

Stalin, mean and covetous, furtively enjoyed the product of Hollywood in closed screenings while not allowing his people to do the same. Picture postcards of overseas stars came over the borders as contraband, though. Shadows thrown by the shadows of cinema. A big hi! to the Great Terror from the Great Depression.

Soviet young ladies studied the postcards and carefully picked out identities for themselves. A pussycat with curls. A minx with the pretty face of an angel. An imp in a skirt. A cutie *femme fatale*. And so on. Galya was not much like Jean. Put it this way: there was a faint resemblance. By comparison with the original, Galya was too snub-nosed; she did not pluck her eyebrows into a thin thread, and her cheekbones gave away the Mongol Tatar lurking in her genes. All this, though, in the grand scheme of things, is trivial. The important thing is the dream.

The picture was taken in Ivanovo, the city of brides, where the names of the streets sounded like calls to extremism. Galya grew up on Fighter Street, in her youth she sauntered along Conspiracy Street, and somewhere there, in the studio of the gobby Armenian, she wasted her first bursary trying to stun the world with four copies of her beauty. She did not have enough money for a big print run. Only those worthy souls who had proven themselves by their persistence received cards.

At the start of the war, two pilots and one poet sought Galina's hand. Such were those times: pilots surpassed poets in both number and capability.

5 December 1942 was her twentieth birthday. The first squadron of the Normandy airborne division marked the day by landing at Ivanovo air base. An excellent present for a student of the philology faculty.

The lads of Normandy turned out to be so strong and healthy that the girls had no choice but to fall in love with them at first sight. Sunburned, smiling, they glinted like flashlights on the wintry streets. Very useful during the blackout.

Knowing neither the city nor the language, the French started by mastering the way to the teacher training college hostel, and strolled around it in delight. Even in the frost they smelled of eau-de-cologne. If they met someone, they filled the air with their *bon soir* and *enchanté*. They spoke about the war in mocking tones, badging the fascists as aching teeth and aerial combat as a trip to the dentist for a filling. No reason to put off meeting. *N'est-ce pas?*

Meetings were fixed up. The language barrier was overcome by giggling. When a tall pilot introduced himself to Galya with the words, *Je m'appelle Cesar, comme Jules Cesar*, she did not at first understand what he was talking about. Then she got to where she thought the guy had an amazing neck—delusions of grandeur, even. She enjoyed it, though. She did not much care for modest people. Discussing her admirer with her girlfriends, she called him 'My Julius Cheater', or simply 'My Cheater.'

On 31 December in the second year of the war, the weaving factory workers' club—a place exclusively for the ladies—went completely French. The *gallants* were all charm and chic. The *mademoiselles* sang along to Edith Piaf. There was a waft of the perfume for which Coco Chanel sold her soul to the Wehrmacht.

Orlova danced with Caesar, who softly whispered in her ear that this was meant to be. You are Galina and I am Gallic. Such a magical consonance of sound could not be mere coincidence. Hitler was not forever. Caesars had been pounding the Germans for two thousand years, and they would batter them in this war too. And—oh, what eyes you have! Grey like the sky above *La Manche*. You and I will live together in a free France. *Après* victory, I shall inherit the family business—a fish stall in Dieppe. His words were spoken in vain. '*Le poisson?*' goggled Galya. '*Jamais!*' A very direct answer. 'Fish? Never!'

2

A week after the New Year ball, a summons came from the recruiting office. She was to get her things together and present herself. Galya packed her suitcase—powder, books, biscuits, and a length of material—this last a farewell gift from the Soviet government. In October '41, the fascists had come right up to Moscow and all but torched Uncle Joe's little hut of a Kremlin. The fright prompted him to remember his youth, and he gave permission for the population to loot the loot. Radio Ivanovo, carrying out the leader's wishes, invited all who so desired to come to the warehouses of the yarn factory and plunder at will, so that the stuff did not fall into enemy hands. That autumn, quick-witted brides-to-be provided themselves with a dowry. Every one of them hit the road with material for exchange.

At the address given in the summons, a man whose purple face evoked the setting sun was sitting in a smoke-filled office. He saw her and started bellowing. 'You will go to Tashkent. The Germans have bombed a Moscow Aviation Institute train to hell and back. They need new third years. Immediately!'

'Comrade Commissar,' objected Galya. 'I am studying at the Institute of Philology. I know nothing about aviation.'

'Record book!'

She fetched out her student record book, confident that the misunderstanding would be straightened out at once. The Commissar ripped the book up without even glancing at it, and tossed it into the bin.

'Passport!'

*He'll tear it up!* Galya was horrified. Wrong again. The guy with the red mug locked the book with the red cover in his desk. Wrote out a travel document and stamped it with a thump.

'Get yourself to the station!'

That evening, she found herself sitting on a train as slow as Chinese torture. For a week they agonisingly crawled as far as the Urals, making stupefyingly long stops. Finally, Chelyabinsk dragged itself into view through the window, after which Russia came to an abrupt end. From the foothills of the Urals they turned onto the emptiness of the endlessly melancholy Kazakh steppe. Occasional tumbleweed bowled into the heart of Kazakhstan. Sand crunched in the passengers' teeth. Animal bones yellowed on the earth, and at night the Milky Way glittered, like God's own backbone picked clean.

Along the Milky Way they travelled. Past cemeteries with tombs that looked like birdcages. The biscuits had been nibbled down to the last crumb, and Galya was starving. A family from the Leningrad intelligentsia gave her food. They ate strangely: peas from children's rattles. When the blockade tightened all around Leningrad, these smart folks had set off round the shops, buying up celluloid parakeets, bunnies, and other such nonsense that had been stuffed with dried peas so as to make a noise. They gutted the rattles, and that saved them.

In Tashkent, the secretary of the admissions board gaped and asked, 'What idiot sent us a humanities scholar?'

Galya sobbed. Through tears and her lush eyelashes she looked out helplessly at the world. Naturally enough, the secretary was sorry for her. He wrote her out a lunch voucher and a chitty that said she was currently not needed by anyone. In the womb of Tashkent, the market, where everything was about as comprehensible as Babylon on the first day of Babel, Galina received in exchange for her material a bag of rice of unimagined beauty. A hundred thousand translucent grains through which played a shimmer of green jasper. The bag did duty as a comfort, and as a bed, when for three days and nights she languished at the station, begging for a reservation.

At last she was lucky. She fell into the train. Coupled to the train was a carriage full of violent art school graduates, guzzling vodka and inspiring horror, like marauding hordes from a scary history lesson. Shrieking that they were going to their deaths, they dragged the defenceless passengers into the vestibule. Galya, being a smart girl, poured out a measure of her precious rice for the conductor and, during the marauders' raids, hid in the guards van. Within a couple of days her credit had dried up, but while the train was stopped at Aral Sea (that was the name of the station), Galya made the

acquaintance of an officer from the next carriage. Being no longer young, he was quite selfless, and took the young lady under his wing until the end of her journey. The journey became pleasant. Our rapist heroes, cannon fodder tanked up with booze, hankered in vain after Galina's charms. The officer pulled out his TT with the warning, 'I'll shoot to kill.'

It worked. None of them wanted to die. They did not touch Galya. Others, less savvy, got themselves fucked.

She arrived back home as if from a round-the-world voyage. She brought with her some Saracen millet and an experience not to be forgotten. Nor did life at home stand still. Sasha, from a parallel year group, was now going out with Caesar. The lovers smiled guiltily when they met. Galya, though, to general disappointment, had no wish to orchestrate a drama. Why do that? The thing was simply funny. After Tashkent, even a double betrayal (Sasha was a girlfriend) seemed to her to be one of life's trivia. All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. And while we're on that subject, she kept her word to Caesar. She did not touch fish to the end of her days. Not once.

Where did I learn all this? From reliable sources. Do they deserve my trust? Yes, and yes again. Let me say it straight out: I am a witness. When it came to engaging with fish at home, this was always the job of my tirelessly industrious grandfather. He was a Russian, a party man, never went abroad (if you don't count Alaska)—but more on that later. Fish first. He gutted them, cleaned them, and prepared them with passion and attention to recipe books. Molokhovets, Pokhlebkin, the soviet bible on taste and healthy food, the wisdom of French cuisine and of the unfathomable peoples of Maghreb. He was a chef with a high regard for world culture. He fried pollock backs in flour, peasant-style. He baked pink salmon in parchment, gourmet-style. He braised perch over a slow fire, sprinkling it with Hungarian paprika. He stuffed pike *à la juive* with white breadcrumbs. Sturgeon he boiled with parsnip and twelve black peppercorns. Herring he embalmed according to a special Kremlin recipe. And so for his whole life, throughout the entire half century of their marriage. Galina, the model of eternal femininity, was responsible for dessert. On festival days she cooked up 'Napoleon'—pancakes suffused with condensed milk and sprinkled with Gold Label cocoa powder. At one time this was considered a treat. Grandfather could not resist; his control in this regard was zero. Everyone in our family remembers the night in 1968 when he got up, slid the pie out of the fridge, and gobbled it down on the sly without turning on the light, the night before a dinner party, leaving his guests with no sweet.

With other sweets he had no such track record. He was more than a husband; he was a dream. Every evening, my grandmother stroked his head as a sign of appreciation. Although sometimes, when the mood took her, she turned to irony, saying, ideal husbands don't occur naturally in nature. They are the result of selection, of Michurin's stubborn work.

Recalling her girlfriend, seduced by the offer of the hand and fish stall of an overbearing corporal, Galina laughed and said, 'Imagine what those hands smell like now!'

3

The other admirer was a poet. He declaimed verses loudly and solemnly, like a loudspeaker on the high street. His name found its way into the encyclopaedia—author of the great text 'Call Me A Communist' and other ringing chimes of propaganda, beaten out with the hammer of his talent.

After the war he soared upwards. He joined the generals of literature, was bard of the Bushy Eyebrows epoch, sat on the Supreme Soviet, headed up the World Defence Committee. That is correct—the whole world.

In my grandmother's memory, though, he remained forever Misha and forever right at the start of his journey into the mountain, the Soviet Parnassus. His first collection of lyric verse went by the beautiful name 'Downpour'. Cute young ladies from the provinces trembled on meeting him. A poet with a real book—wow. Misha had a stack of fans who wrote to him, but offline he pursued Galya.

Altogether the dashing war correspondent, he kept turning up in the hostel, trying to poach her away from her girlfriends. When the poet walked in, burning up those present with a look from the big eyes beneath the bulging forehead, the girls were struck with paralysis, like participants in a séance who have successfully called up a spirit. Without taking off his greatcoat, he sat at the table and read in a ringing voice:

Death is ridiculous. A clod. And by golly,

Said he, his arms out wide flinging:

'Guys, grab your pens, write a letter to Polly:

Today we heard nightingales singing.'

The listening ladies were all a-flutter, while the envious Maximov, exempted from military service and the only male specimen on the course, dubbed the voice 'that fucking trumpet.' Secretly infatuated with Galya, he bitingly condemned her passion for Misha. He said things like, hang around a little longer and he'll dump the garbage of his poems all over you.

That is just what happened. For many years, the poet's compositions hid bashfully on the second row of the cabinet in my grandmother's library. There, a little more out of the way of prying eyes, stood *Ivan Denisovich*. Taking Ivan's *One Day* as my starting point, I travelled along the shelf and stumbled across a lilac-coloured book by the Genius of Ivanovo, with an inscription, as on a gift: 'To Galochka, my muse.' I forget what the collection was called. I do remember that I neighed over it mockingly, like one of Genghis Khan's horses, then sought out the muse herself and provoked her into confession. The story was told with cuts, of course. Abridged for children and young people. I got the essence of it, though. There was no romance—because of the greatcoat.

The revelation hit Galina in the third class carriage of the Ivanovo to Moscow train.

Imagine this third class carriage: the scent of tobacco and lard hanging thick in the air, the space completely taken up by the sharp corners of suitcases, elbows, and knees. Misha and Galya, embracing, perched on the side shelf. He is off to a business meeting, she to relatives, having slid out from under the tutelage of her strict mother, a school director with a revolver at her waist (these were difficult times, so communists always carried guns).

The train is making its weary, laborious way, stopping frequently. The front line is moving in a westerly direction, but the Luftwaffe is still making a nuisance of itself, so the carriage windows are blacked out with scraps of cloth. The darkness in which the journey is being made stands for the gaps in the story of what our heroes are up to.

The poet takes off his greatcoat, says, Lie down, you're tired. His companion, with pleasure, stretches out on the lined inside of the coat, soft like silk. The carriage sways. Ah, how pleasant it is to slide like this, on one's back, in darkness, forgetting time and oneself. But something is nagging at you, disconcerting you; for some reason the cool, enveloping softness feels strange. Think, think. The wheels rattle; what you feel is silk, but your thought ... is steel. Think, think. Whoa! The train brakes sharply. Something has happened. On the railway in wartime something is always happening. The sharp braking sends people and things tumbling from the first, second, and third shelves.

Abruptly finding herself on the floor, which is covered with an uncultured layer of cigarette butts, Galya recognises the cause of her alarm. The lining of the greatcoat. It is genuine silk! That is really scary. The greatcoat is masking the inner world of the deceiver: outwardly, the coat is of rough cloth, but there he is, caressing himself with its hidden silk lining. Girls from Ivanovo have no worse an understanding of soft materials than do weavers from Lyons.

The squeals of alarm die down. The poet's groping hands find Galya, fallen out of her nest, and return her to her place. Movement starts up again. The rhythmic swaying of the carriage is soothing. The young lady picks up signals from the cosmos, which turn into pictures of her future life 'with Misha', that is, behind him, in the shadow of his talent, or in the bright but cold light of the poetic 'I'.

Before dropping off to sleep, Galya makes up her mind. It is not important that the story might have unfolded in another place, in the hayloft of a collective farm, say, or in the wings of a people's theatre, after the theatre troupe have gone their separate ways. What difference, where the greatcoat was lying? The only important detail was that lining.

In Moscow he telephoned the flat belonging to Galina's relatives, and asked her to take a walk with him along the boulevards. Galya lied, saying that she was at the bedside of a sick aunt. There was no point explaining. The poet would never have understood.