

By the Liter

by Ekaterina Sedia

My neighbor, businessman Ipatov, was killed a few years ago, back when they still sold beer by the liter. I remember him because he was my first.

I'd just returned from the corner kiosk, my shirt drenched with cold condensation from the flank of a five-liter beer-filled jug I held against my chest. Outside of my apartment building I heard sirens and saw the yellow police cruisers and a white ambulance van with a red cross on its pockmarked side. My neighbor Petro, a middle-aged Ukrainian with heavy brows and a heavier accent, watched the commotion of people and vehicles and dogs from his second-story balcony.

"Petro," I called. "What happened?"

Petro looked down at me. His wifebeater bore a fresh oil stain that made the fabric transparent; his fleshy nipple and the surrounding swirl of black chest hair stood out in naked relief against the oil spot. "Huh," he said. "What happened. Guess three times."

I stopped for a smoke and a rubbernecking as the cops went inside, and the paramedics brought out the gurney with the lifeless body under a white sheet. The wind snagged the edge of the sheet and it fluttered, exposing the bluing face of businessman Ipatov and his naked shoulder, branded with the cruel marks of the electric iron.

"Racketeers," I informed Petro.

He scoffed. "You don't say."

His scorn was justified, I thought as I transferred the jug of beer from one cradling arm to the other and ashed my cigarette with a flick of lower lip. Racketeers overtook cancer, heart disease and traffic accidents on the list of death causes of common businessmen somewhere in the late eighties; by the early nineties, they had all but run the other ailments off the mortality and morbidity reports. As Russian business grew healthier, so did its practitioners—nary a single one of them died of any diseases.

One of the paramedics, a young lad with a blond and green Mohawk, smiled at me. "Can't go anywhere." He slouched against the gurney and lit up. "Fucking canaries are blocking us in." His gesture indicated the yellow cruisers huddled behind the van. "Assholes. They're still investigating the scene."

The other paramedic, an aging man with a paunch and chronically disapproving eyes, nodded at my beer jug. "Rest it on the gurney, son. Heavy, ain't it?"

I confirmed and set the jug next to the lifeless remains of my once neighbor. I didn't know yet that beer and the recently dead from violence were a dangerous combination.

"Did you know him?" the old paramedic asked, indicating Ipatov's outline under the sheet with a jab of his cigarette.

"Neighbor," I said. "Seen him around."

"His hands were lashed together with that blue electrical tape," the young paramedic said. "The cops said his employees called the police when he didn't show up for a meeting this morning. His wife doesn't even know yet. The cops said, take him to the morgue; his wife won't thank us if we leave this for her to

find.”

Petro emerged from the front doors, passing by the murder of old ladies on the bench. “Electric iron?” he said as he reached the gurney.

I nodded and squinted up at the stingy May sun. “Getting warm.”

“Yeah,” said the younger paramedic and licked his lips thirstily. “Who knows how long we’ll be stuck here?”

By all rights, I should have been winging my way home, up the stairs to the third story, beer under arm. But the weather was nice, the company seemed all right, and the beer was best drunk with friends or, missing that, acquaintances. “You want any beer?” I said to Petro and the paramedics.

They kicked dirt for a bit but agreed.

“Funny how it is,” the older paramedic named Misha said, taking a large swallow out of the jug he held with both hands. “Here’s a man, who lived, lived, and then died. May he rest in peace.”

His younger fellow, Grisha, took the jug from his mentor. “God giveth,” he said and drank hastily, as if worried about the taketh away part.

The old ladies looked at us disapprovingly, and I tried my best to ignore them.

But not Petro. “What are you staring at, hags?” he challenged, and waited for his turn with the jug. “Haven’t seen a dead man before?”

The grandmas squawked, indignant, but avoided the altercation.

Yes, the dead man. The telltale signs of the iron torture indicated that the thugs wanted something—probably money. I wondered why Ipatov didn’t just give in to their demands. Or it could be a turf war. “Hey Petro, do you remember what sort of business he ran?”

“Money,” he said. “All businesses make is money. Did you notice how they don’t manufacture anything anymore? All the food and shit is imported. Even vodka.”

“Yeah,” I said, and glanced apprehensively at the half-empty jug as it made its way back to me. I would miss it.

The four of us killed the jug, and as its amber contents diminished, Misha’s loquacity grew. “You know why a Russian man is driven to drink?” He didn’t wait for an answer and gestured expansively. “It’s cause of all the space. Steppes, tundra, everything. You have all these open horizons and the human soul can’t take all that sober.”

I could see a weak point or two in this theory but didn’t point them out, enchanted by the image of a soul cowering in fear of horizons.

“What do you do?” Grisha asked me.

“I’m an actuary,” I told him. “Manage risks.”

“He should’ve hired you,” Grisha said, pointing at dead Ipatov.

I shrugged. There was no point in telling them that the risk of death in businessmen was so close to certainty that the only thing I ever recommended was saving enough money for a coffin. They liked them

ostentatious. I should probably attend Ipatov's funeral, I thought. This is when the dead man's memories first stirred in me.

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Businessman Ipatov led a quiet life for most of his existence—I remembered his grey adolescence as a treasurer for his school chapter of Komsomol, his joyless pursuit of a college degree in one institute of technology or another, his brief courtship and marriage. After that, I could not remember anything.

Not being given to superstition, I arrived to the only logical conclusion—the dead man's soul and/or memory had entered mine, either due to my extended proximity to the gurney or to the consumption of beer that rested against him. If I were a dead soul, I supposed, I too would be drawn to the golden shine of the beer jug, I too would prefer it to the cold eternity of whatever awaited Ipatov as an alternative. Still, I found it disconcerting; sleep had proven elusive that night, as I kept reliving Ipatov's tremulous first masturbatory experiences and his terror of the laws of thermodynamics and physical chemistry.

I went outside and looked at the windows of the façade. As expected, there was light in Petro's, and I walked to the second floor and knocked. He opened quickly, as if he were waiting just behind the door. His eyes were haunted.

"Come in," he said, and led me to the kitchen. My mother always said that the kitchen is the heart of every home; Petro's apartment's heart was clogged with crap that spilled into the swelling pericardium of his one-room efficiency. "Sorry for the mess."

"It's all right," I said. "I live alone too."

I sat at the kitchen table. A few overfed cockroaches sauntered toward the wainscoting, still decent enough to feign fear of humans.

"Do you hear him too?" Petro asked.

I nodded. "Remember rather."

Petro sighed. "He screams and screams and screams. Can't sleep at all."

"You remember his last days?"

"Yeah," Petro said. "Everything from when he first started the business until..."

So if I got his youth and Petro—his business career, it meant that Ipatov's generic Soviet childhood and the working life in whatever state enterprise he was assigned after receiving his degree was sloshing inside the two paramedics.

Petro also had the gold, the death. "Why did they kill him?" I asked.

"Money." Petro heaved a sigh. "Wouldn't pay up protection."

"Oh."

Petro hesitated for a while, but finally said, "Did you know he was Jewish?"

"No. Does it matter?"

Petro huffed. "You got me all wrong, Anatoly. I'm not one of those nationalists, okay? I'm not the one of those 'drown Muscovites in Jewish blood' types. But this torture... did you notice that they burned

Kabbalic symbols into him? He knew what they were, 'cause he was a Jew."

I perked up. "What symbols?"

"A triangle, for the trinity of Sephiroth. And circles inside of it. I think this is what held his soul here."

"That's the tip of the iron," I said. "And those little holes in it. It's just a coincidence."

"So? The symbol's still holy, no matter how it was made." Petro tilted his head to the shoulder, as if listening. "What's Kether?"

"No clue," I said. "Ask Ipatov."

"I can't. I only remember for him. And he forgot what Kether is."

Petro made tea and we drank; the cockroaches, hearing sugar, crowded in the corners, their antennae undulating eagerly. I contemplated the electric irons and their built-in alchemic and magical powers. I wondered how many more souls hung about, trapped by the thugs' unwitting alchemy. Judging from the newspapers and the latest mortality reports, lots. That gave me an idea.

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The problem with Ipatov's memories was that they were much like my own. His adolescence was similar to mine, and remembering it just didn't satisfy my longing for worthwhile experiences. Ipatov's shortcoming was shared by many of our contemporaries—we all remembered the same signifiers of childhood: summer camps and songs praising youthful and heroic drummers, we all treasured a rare trip south, replete with a pebbled beach and a mind-boggling abundance of peaches. Standardized, trivial lives, their monotony only broken by an occasional memory of a grandfather—those were rare. We all viewed the change of regime with joyful trepidation; some were later disappointed, some were not.

I learned all that as I started visiting the scenes of body removals, sometimes tipped off by Grisha, who took as much pleasure in the soul consumption as I did, and sometimes by the police, who would tell you anything if you offered to supplement their dwindling state wages. Like where the dead bodies were, and how to call a specific ambulance if one wanted. They also didn't mind letting Grisha dawdle, and they didn't mind us drinking great golden jugs of beer after we let them sit next to the Kabbalic symbols burned into dead businessmen's flesh. Beer never failed to lure the dead souls.

Far as memories went, it was hit and miss. Most blended inauspiciously with my own, grey and generic, difficult to separate from each other. But there were rare splashes I lived for—the memories of a tropical island and feathery palms, the glitter of New York on a rare pre-perestroika trip abroad, an exotic hobby of orchid collecting, a fresh memory of love so consuming that even torture could not distract from the thoughts of the beloved.

Grisha and I compared memories over the phone. We prided ourselves in our acquisitions; we both grew very fond of a young Chechen who enjoyed flowers and Persian rugs and had an abiding fascination with high-breasted women. We snickered over a paunchy, middle-aged guy who believed himself a reincarnation of Gautama Buddha, the belief especially ironic considering that he had fallen in the shootout between two organizations, which quarreled over the protection money from three stores by Borovitskaya. After he was shot and unconscious, his enemies captured him and meted out their slow electric revenge.

"Sad," Grisha observed. "He could've went to Valhalla had he been slain in battle."

It's the tidbits like that that made me lust after Grisha's soul. But according to the mortality reports,

paramedics tended to die of alcoholism often co-morbid with traffic accidents, and not of the homegrown Kabbala of the bandits.

One of our later finds, a neckless thug with the requisite burgundy jacket, brought Ipatov to the forefront of my mind. He seemed much like the rest, with a piquant difference—his father was a mid-caliber apparatchick back in the days, as Grisha, who received the entirety of his youth, told me. I got the good part: his adult life. He was the one who killed Ipatov.

He remembered Ipatov as a small man who would not pay what he owed—a peculiarity that filled the thug with perplexed bitterness. Through his memory, I saw Ipatov's face as it was in his last moments—his white spasming lips and the shirt torn to expose his shoulders and chest. "Just take me from here," he pleaded in a hoarse voice thick with a suppressed scream. "Just don't let Lilya see me like this."

The thug flicked away the butt he smoked down to the filter, and burned his iron magic into poor Ipatov, workmanlike as always. He wondered vaguely whether Lilya was Ipatov's wife, and thought that he too used to date a girl named Lilya when he was a vocation school student.

The thug had trained to be a car mechanic, but then things changed; he fell into being a thug like many others—ex-cops, Afghan vets, who had no other employment options. I marveled at his conviction that what he did was justice: people who owed money should pay it back, and the thug was there to enforce the law in the law-enforcement vacuum. Ipatov's agony was thug's justice, and I enjoyed the juxtaposition of the two memories, enclosing them like pearls with the soft generic mantle of my own.

Our collecting days came to an end when they stopped selling beer by the liter. The cans just didn't have the same appeal to the souls, and who could blame them? Could a fat man wiping his balding, apoplectic head with a handkerchief and gracing cans of Danish beer compare to the thick amber and sensual droplets of condensed moisture on the cold glass? No, my friends, he could not. The souls remained behind, fearful, trapped behind the charred alchemy of the electric irons, and Grisha and I had to content ourselves with what we had.

Now, even the electric irons are going out of fashion, Grisha tells me. We still see each other and reminisce; he often tells me about Ipatov's childhood, of how he once threw up on the bus during the field trip and all the other kids made fun of him for weeks. I tell him of Ipatov's crush on the Komsomol secretary, and of his loathing of thermodynamics. Of course, we have other, much more interesting lives and memories, but Ipatov gets precedence. He was our first, and that ought to count for something.