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The Women of Lazarus

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World Editions

Published in Great Britain in 2015 by World Editions Ltd., London

www.worldeditions.org

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Cover design Multitude

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First published as *Zhenshiny Lazarya* in Russia in 2011 by
AST Publishers, Moscow

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available on request from
the British Library

ISBN 978-94-6238-019-6

Typeset in Minion Pro

Published with the support of the Institute for
Literary Translation (Russia)



The publication of the book was negotiated through Banke, Goumen &
Smirnova Literary Agency (www.bgs-agency.com)

Distribution Europe (except the Netherlands and Belgium):
Turnaround Publishers Services, London

Distribution the Netherlands and Belgium: Centraal Boekhuis,
Culemborg, the Netherlands

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Chapter One: Barbariska

In 1985, Lidochka turned five and her whole life went down the tubes. They never, ever met again, Lidochka and her life, which is exactly why all the smooth, slightly salty, damp details of their last happy summer together settled in their memories so firmly that their heads buzzed.

The Black Sea (it's black because it never washes its hands, right?). A resort's guest house that looked like spilled matchboxes. A beach strewn with softened little cardboard cups from fruit and berry ice cream (ice cream where the price is a dream, Papa liked to say). Huge, scorching-hot bodies. The morning walk to the chosen spot and all those tiny polite steps to avoid snagging a heel or towel on someone else's luxuriating, vacationing flesh. Lidochka would quickly lose her patience and then all Mama had to do was get distracted for a second—by a neighbor at a cafeteria table or a roaming seller of forbidden cotton candy—and Lidochka would break free of her tight visual leash and rush off toward the sea with a piercing squeal, her fat, round heels haphazardly pounding the sand.

Alarmed vacationers raised themselves up a little, as if they were sea lions, shaking large, barley-like grains of morning sand out of damp crevices and synthetic creases, smiling in response to the parents' apologetic ritual lamentations, It's fine, let the child have some fun! Just look at that, galloped off, what a fidget! You've got to understand, it's her first time at the sea... And where might you be from? From Ensk. Oh, you've come a long way. We're from Krivorozhe, got this holi-

day trip from the factory, that right, Manya? Manya nodded cheerfully with a kind mouth generously loaded with gold ore. She shifted all their junk into a heap so it was easier for Lidochka's papa to spread out a towel. You vacationing at Sunnyside? Yes, we are. Mama quickly extricated herself from a sundress crackling with artificial silk's static electricity and weak stitches. And we're at Red Banner. Nice to meet you.

The long-term friendship ready to spark—complete with greeting cards on major holidays and reciprocal cross-country visits—was hindered by intense heat and Lidochka, who was golden-brown, ear-splitting, smooth, and glistening in a small surf for all Soviets. Mama just couldn't tear herself away from Lidochka, not for the sweating watermelon that made a sugary crack under the peaceful Krivorozhe proletarian's predatory pen knife, not for the ongoing beach game of fool, *And what do we have as trump here? No, hearts were last time!*, not for the ever-intricate monologues from enticing, unfamiliar lives, *And then Petrovich, that's my brother, he says, So you take the kids, Lariska, and move in with me, there's enough room. And the government really did just give him a room, twelve square meters, you could hold a wedding there, you could ride a motor scooter in there!* But Mama just smiled absentmindedly, even as fate's tentative dotted line for some Petrovich nobody knew threatened to transform itself into a solid line of full-fledged human happiness.

At any other time she would have been delighted to try on someone else's unachievable fate, if only to convince herself how cleanly and cleverly her own had been cut out. But the thread of the story slipped away hopelessly as soon as it took on a new plot turn filled with communal poverty and babies begotten in sin—meager Soviet life somehow always pro-

voked unprecedented, downright Byronic passions—because Lidochka jumped away from a tickly wave, laughing. The horizon, dimly visible and quivering from the surging heat, was blinding and Mama squinted, frightened when she didn't see her daughter's familiar sun hat among peeling shoulders, titanic rear ends, and exultant shrieks. There she is, thank God. Lidochka waved in reply and, without taking off her red and blue inflatable beach ring, crouched down to mold an appetizing cake of a house with termite towers that she pressed out of her hot little fist.

Lidochka's white sun hat cast a lively perforated shadow on her tanned cheeks but the shadows of her eyelashes were even longer and more transparent, oh and your daughter is so sweet, knock on wood, not to jinx anything, and Mama graciously accepted the praise like a special gift, not just feeling but secretly knowing with an exultant, bubbling certainty that Lidochka was singular, not just 'so sweet.' Inimitable. The most wonderful child on earth with the most wonderful and flawlessly fortunate fate. Mama looked at her little daughter with a quiet stunned smile and then at her own stomach— young, tight, and not at all disfigured from her early pregnancy—not believing herself that at one time Lidochka, now as wide-eyed as a puppy, with silky, warm shoulder blades and weightless adult curls on her dark, chubby neck, had fit inside there, all of her, and hadn't even existed before.

Then Mama's thoughts reached the limits of the comprehensible and began spinning dangerously, like a truck hanging over a precipice: the hacking wail of an agonized motor, two wheels vainly spinning bald tires in thickening air, the other two tires spewing little clumps of gravel that seemed to explode from pressure. With just one second before the fall

(one second, one second) a translucent little plastic devil toy jumps in front of her eyes, *Vovka made it out of IV tubes, owes me three rubles, the pain in the ass, now it definitely won't get paid back, so there it is, you know*, that's how it is, that's how people die, there's what I'll never be able to tell anyone... But why does non-existence before birth scare me more than the emptiness after death? Why isn't it scarier to die, Oh-dear-Lord-have-mer-cy-and-save-me?

'You look a little pale, Ninusha,' Papa said, worried. He kissed Mama on the shoulder. The skin under his lips and tongue was hot and dry, as if lightly starched. 'Have you been in the sun too long?'

Mama smiled guiltily. The dark thoughts let go of her and her soul lightly crossed itself and steered onto the main road: it was saved, soaked in sweat from horror and exhausted, but still feeling a little despondent not to have learned what was over there on the other side, just beyond that final second, after which there's only a tumbling flight that races with soundless metal wreckage and then the crack of straining muscles, and... and... and... Mama felt lost trying to imagine the impossible and rubbed her forehead on her husband's merciful arm, a strong arm with large freckles and familiar, dear reddish fluff. Yes, it's hot, sweetie. I'm dizzy.

Lidochka, still just a little creature at five years old, sensed an unsettling little draft of otherworldly air and ran right to her mother. She was hot and agile, wearing remarkable imported day-of-the-week panties. Each day a new color, each day a silly new appliqué. Monday: pink panties with a strawberry. Tuesday: light blue with a bristling bunny. Wednesday: yellow with a gap-toothed sunflower. Ma, what's wrong? Ma-ma's delicate lips touched her daughter's eyelids, one little eye,

then the other, everything's fine, Barbariska, you're not going to get sunburned on me are you? Nah, and Lidochka, now calm, slipped out of Mamochka's affectionate arms and tore off for the sea again, and their new beach friends grinned affably. Lida, Lidochka, Little Lozenge, Barbariska—little family nicknames that were the cooing patter of parental passion. No one would ever be so intense again. No one, ever.

'Don't sneak off, you little partisan,' Papa said. He gathered Lidochka up in his arms, agilely flipping her over, which made her laugh uncontrollably: the sea and sky had smoothly changed places; biting fishes, sea horses, and little ships on the horizon were just about to fall into the clouds; everything was swimming, slipping away; deafening seagulls hung on invisible threads; and Lidochka herself hovered between sea and sky.

And this was happiness: beloved, hot hands that would never let you go or drop you even if the whole world turned upside down. She grasped that later. Much later.

'You sit with Auntie Manya and Uncle Kolya for a bit,' Papa said, setting Lidochka on the sand. The sea was on the bottom again and the sky was on the top. Like usual. 'Will you sit for a bit? Mamochka and I are going to swim out and back, she's boiling hot already.'

'Go on, go on, don't you worry,' Auntie Manya said in her rich honking voice, 'I got my own two on their feet and the third granddaughter's on the way—I won't take my eyes off your little charmer. You go swim as long as you like.'

'We won't be long,' Mama promised, sounding guilty and pressing Lidochka with her soft, burning-hot cheek. 'Do what Auntie Manya tells you. I love you very, very much.'

Lidochka nodded inattentively as Auntie Manya energeti-

cally dug around in her purse, like a plotter—it was clear she was preparing to extract something very, very interesting. Uncle Kolya looked intrigued, too: his life with his wife had obviously been filled with young, exciting surprises thus far. ‘Ta-da!’ Auntie Manya said with circus-like intonation as she presented Lidochka with a huge, warm peach, softly fuzzy and overflowing with tigery-pink color. A cool wave pawed at Mama’s stomach and goose bumps instantly dashed along her back and shoulders. Lidochka sniffed the tickly peach and squinted. Shall we see who’s fastest to the buoys, Nina? Mama jerked her head and smiled trustingly. Eat, hon, Auntie Manya affectionately instructed Lidochka. Uncle Kolya had already knocked a boiled egg (procured from the same purse) on his knee and malformed ‘oxheart’ tomatoes had appeared one after another on a newspaper as if by magic, along with sausage, slices of bread expropriated from the cafeteria, and grapes from the market that were golden through and through. Auntie Manya bragged that she’d haggled them down to eighty kopecks, then, with identically nonthinking tenderness, she stroked first Lidochka’s sun-warmed little head, then the close-cropped, degenerate back of her proletarian husband’s, oh, Marusya, you’re good as gold, what a wife, I’m jealous of my own self, swear to you...

Lidochka ate almost half the peach, taking deep breaths and moaning a little with pleasure, the sticky juice dripping down her chin and chubby, tanned stomach. No, no, don’t smear it all over, hon, I’ll wash you off in the water later, you’ll be all nice and clean, just like a little apple, And where does your mommy work? Whoa, and does your daddy draw plans, too? And how many rooms do you have? Hear that, Kolya? I told you, didn’t I, how engineers get three-room apartments

right away up north but then you thought, why the hell does Genka need technical school, he should go straight to work at a factory? And that's how he and his family's going to croak, in that dorm. So do your mommy and daddy make a lot of money? Don't know? Just eat, hon, eat, may God give you health and your mommy and daddy, too...

The shriek came up suddenly, as one terrifying note—AAAAAAA! Lidochka choked and dropped the peach, immediately coating the most delectable pulp with large-grain sand: there'd be no washing it, only throwing it away, too bad really, but the shriek got closer and closer, working itself to such inordinate heights that the picture of the beach—which looked like it had been drawn on thick, translucent glass—instantly dimmed and transformed into a web of frightened cracks. Vacationers slowly got up from their towels and chaise longues like sleepwalkers; some had already run to the shore, jostling the rest aside.

AAAAAAA! HELP! HELP!

Auntie Manya crossed herself, scared, Lord Jesus, Kolya, take a look, see what happened, just don't you howl, hon, someone's head obviously got baked, let's us go have a look, too. Lidochka kept turning to look at the fallen peach, which was hopelessly ruined. She wasn't even thinking of howling. Quite the opposite. This was all terribly interesting.

Papa was kneeling at the very edge of the beach: his arm was being pulled as if he were a little boy by a tall, wet guy, one of the brigade of muscle-bound lifesaving Atlases who usually hung around for whole days at a time in wooden watchtowers, stuffing themselves with ice cream and flirting with female vacationers, but mostly, of course, bored silly.

'You all right, comrade?' the guy asked Papa, sympatheti-

cally leaning in so that his rear end, in blazing swim trunks, jutted out behind him.

One of the curious in the crowd answered in a reproachful deep bass, 'What do you mean, "all right"? Can't you see, a man's drowned!'

'It's his woman's drowned,' someone corrected the bass voice. Papa finally tore his arm away from the lifeguard, groaned softly and dully, and then fell facedown, like a toy accidentally jostled from a familiar place by an elbow.

The lifeguard straightened up and looked around, bewildered, but a shouting woman doctor, as white and brisk as a motorboat, had already broken through the ring of vacationers. A motorboat that was just as white and brisk—but real—was already spinning around the buoys, cutting anxious circles as the other lifeguards dove off the boat into the smooth waves with a noiseless splash, their distant young voices pealing as they shouted back and forth.

'Look at that, his wife drowned but he's in one piece,' said someone in the naked, sweaty, babbling crowd. He was invisible and indistinguishable; maybe he was reproachful, maybe envious. Papa got right up as if he'd heard those words: he was all covered with heavy brown sand, just like Lidochka's unfinished peach.

Then he suddenly lifted his head to the sky and threatened someone above with his fists in a gesture of such ancient and frightful power that it wasn't even human. A mischievous little wave decided to lick at his pink, somehow childlike heels but then got scared and threw itself back into the sea, returning to its own. Papa's naked, wet eyes surveyed the vacationers.

'No,' he said, completely calm. 'None of that's true. It's time