**IRINA KILIMNIK**

**Summer in Odessa**

Sample by Alexandra Roesch

I am still not sure which of us is less keen on studying medicine, Rajdesh or me. But I am convinced that if we do actually become doctors, we will both be equally awful. Rajdesh, a slender Indian with big dark eyes, has a terrible fear of illnesses and keeps imagining he has contracted something. And I feel out of place here anyway. Maybe that’s why we hang out together all the time like two losers supporting each other in a strange environment. Now we are sitting together in the lecture hall and, while our professor lists the symptoms of another illness, Rajdesh is drawing little monkeys. Radj, as I call him, is really good at that. I can’t even do that and feel almost comatose with boredom.

To be honest, the day started badly. I was woken up by my grandfather’s smoker’s cough. His room is right next to mine. Although the sound, a cross between a whistle and a bark, saved me from my nightmare - in which I found myself in an elevator that, instead of stopping at the floor I wanted, kept going endlessly upwards - it was still not the nicest way to wake up. I yanked open the curtains, opened the window and let the unseasonably mild air into the room. Odessa was still sleeping. Only its lights flickered in the distance, creating the illusion of normality that promised a hot summer filled with fried fish and aubergines, lots of trips to the beach and a feeling of respite from my studies. However, when a light wind arose, briefly extinguishing this flickering, an all-encompassing darkness that took my breath away took hold for a second.

When I came into the kitchen shortly afterwards, my aunt Ludmila was already beating a huge quantity of egg whites with a whisk to a stiff consistency, while constantly dabbing the sweat from her forehead. My grandfather sat to her right calling the shots. He was wearing one of those old shirts that you can’t buy any more, with two breast pockets and a side pocket; small pieces of paper spilled out of all three. He had always used these rather than a recipe book and they contained a system of quantities and ingredients that only he could make sense of, disjointed and never complete.

‘Faster,’ Grandpa grumbled at Ludmila, ‘otherwise the egg white will collapse.’ He shook his head disapprovingly, and I could see from my aunt’s face that she would have dearly loved to fling the egg whites out of the window.

So as not to disturb this domestic bliss, I did without my coffee and disappeared before Grandpa could put me to work. I heard Ludmila shout that I shouldn’t come home too late, but pulled the front door shut at the same moment and hoped that would get me off the hook – probably the best thing I could do in this situation. The cleaning efforts of the last few days had taken their toll and I was not prepared to be subjected to my grandfather’s whims again.

My grandfather’s surprising announcement – the reason for the countless hours of overtime in the kitchen – that he wanted to celebrate his birthday on a grand scale this year is headed into the decisive phase today, and is supposed to culminate in the big finale tomorrow. Whatever the reasons may have been for his decision, one thing is certain: they can’t have been conventional reasons because he usually ignores this day. He usually even leaves his birthday cards lying around for two or three months before he opens them and makes a few caustic comments about them. No-one knows what has got into him this time, and we nervously wait for the big reveal.

I have to yawn again. Radj pokes me lightly in the ribs. The page is covered in lots of tiny monkeys. The monkey leader is easily recognisable by his half-erect penis, while most of the females have young suckling at their breasts. I give him an acknowledging pat on the shoulder, and he turns the page.

‘I’m going to draw someone different now,’ he whispers to me and slips into his own world, far away from sterile operating theatres, bloody intestines and the slightly sour smell of disinfectant that follows us everywhere we go.

Radj’s family lives in the port city of Kochi in southern India. He says the city would be almost European if it weren’t for the Indians. As the youngest child and long-awaited boy, he was completely spoilt by his three older sisters and his parents. Essentially he is still a mummy’s boy despite the stubble on his face. Radj’s family dreams of him becoming a highly-respected doctor one day. Radj dreams of marrying a blonde Russian woman and having sons with her. He is constantly badgering me about it. Find me a wife, Olga, I want to get married, he says, half-seriously, giving me meaningful looks. Why don’t you marry an Indian woman, I suggest and avoid his gaze, at least you know what to expect then. Exactly, he says, my parents will find a wife who meets their requirements and not mine, and I will have to put up with her for the rest of my life. Find yourself a girlfriend for the time being, I tell him, that’s enough for your requirements. Radj looks at me with glazed eyes and laughs stupidly, because he is constantly stoned. Not completely stoned, just slightly, just enough for him to perceive everything around him as if through a delicate veil, otherwise he wouldn’t be able to put up with life, he says, and takes another drag.

My aunt Ludmila thinks Radj is so skinny because he is vegetarian, and every time he stays for dinner at our house, she tries to convert him. Ever since she joined a slightly suspicious religious community, Ludmila sees conspiracies everywhere, especially in vegetarianism: they – whoever they are – want to reduce the human race because of the threat of overpopulation and vegetarianism is their weapon. When we cook, there is almost always something meaty in the pots and pans. Radj smiles and eats the side dishes. He pushes the meat to the side of the plate with his fork making sure it doesn’t touch the vegetables. ‘It’s very tasty,’ he says, at which Ludmila sniffs disdainfully.

As a consequence, Radj comes around less and less often. My other aunt, Polina, thinks it’s better this way because the neighbours were already gossiping that we were subletting rooms to foreigners. Your Rajdesh does seems to be over at ours quite a lot, she said, giving me the look that makes her eyebrows go up and gives her face a stupid expression. I assure her for the umpteenth time that he is not my Rajdesh and that I have no intention of marrying him.

My mother agrees with her sister: I shouldn’t get the wrong idea. Finish your studies first, she says, then we can see; the ‘we’ bothers me considerably more than my studies, which as usual, come first with her. I reply that there is nothing to see and that they can all relax again.

At least when it comes to my best friend, my mother and her two sisters agree.

After the lecture, I head into the centre of town with Radj.

‘This birthday is getting out of hand. The preparations are wearing me out,’ I complain, and he gives me an appraising look.

‘And yet you still have time for me?’ he asks.

‘Studying takes priority. That is the only excuse my family will accept,’ I say, hoping he won’t read anything into it.

‘Yes, studying …’ he says and winks at me.

The sun beats down in the city almost incessantly, heating everything up to high summer temperatures. Despite recent events, the mood on Deribasovskaja Street is exuberant. Tourists with selfie sticks, café terraces that take up almost the entire pavement, driving the citizens of Odessa into a rage, a queue in front of the French patisserie that opened up a year ago and is already listed in every travel guide. Horses pulling white carriages behind them, rhythmically beating the cobblestones with their hooves, children licking their ice creams, and their grandmothers with a handkerchief in hand, always ready to step in. And the sun, penetrating every nook and cranny, mercilessly chasing away the remnants of spring. An idyllic picture, a picture that overlays that of a suddenly occupied peninsula, that of a divided society, smoothing out the entire situation, feigning a normality that perhaps no longer exists.

Radj purposefully heads over to a kiosk and buys his favourite snack: pierogi with potatoes, two for me, four for him. We turn onto Bunin Street, unpack the first pierogis and eat them in the shade of the trees in Shevchenko Park. The air smells of lilac and yellow acacia.

‘Shall we head to the beach?’ Radj asks after a while and gets up.

We almost always go to Lanzheron, the oldest beach in the centre of Odessa. Lanzheron was my mother’s and her sisters beach when they were teenagers. Now they never go there. Too full, they say, too loud, too much noise – there is no peace and quiet there. As if Odessa’s beaches were ever famous for their peace and quiet or for having plenty of space. For now they go back to 16th Fontan Station, the beach of their childhood. After each of these excursions, they rave for days afterwards about the dachas, the air and the most beautiful flowers and make plans to sell our old dacha to buy something smaller there. ‘Over my dead body!’ my grandfather shouts, and they continue to whisper softly. ‘Do you remember Tram 29? And the monastery near Lustdorf?’ They nod at each other, their eyes gleam, but I’m sure that they will consider grandpa’s feelings this time too.

The sea shines turquoise blue. I let myself fall onto the hot sand, while Radj polishes off the last pierogi. He takes a greedy bite, some of the greasy potato filling lands next to me and eventually I can’t stand it any longer and bury the lump.

‘Is it good?’ I ask reproachfully.

He nods contentedly and doesn’t complain that its lacking seasoning like he usually does when we get something to eat in town. He usually tells me how the dishes in India are much more exciting and he reproaches me, in place of the whole of Odessa or even Europe, for not knowing how to use spices, for not knowing anything other than salt and pepper to change the taste of our dishes. And how the only herbs we dare to sprinkle on our food are dill and parsley. Sometimes, when he is in a good mood, he prepares some food for us, and his entire flat smells of cardamon, cloves and other things that he keeps in his little jars and only uses sparingly. The stuff is usually far too spicy for me and I drink litres of camomile tea afterwards to calm my stomach. Radj says I will get used to it eventually, and doesn’t see the point of toning the dishes down for me.

Every time we come to the beach firmly intending to study: if the subject matter is depressing, at least the surroundings can be beautiful. Then the dangers that emanate from these books that are peppered with diseases might be put into perspective, or at least we no longer perceive them as threatening. We read ‘heart attack’ or ‘kidney failure’ and instead of Radj immediately listening to his body for possible symptoms and me questioning my entire life, we prefer to watch the waves crashing against the shore and retreating as foam. We point our faces towards the sun and don’t think about hospitals or contagious diseases and certainly not about the upcoming exam. We read a few sentences and slowly drift away, stare at the horizon and forget about time. Sometimes I take a drag of Radj’s joint and wait for lift-off. But nothing ever happens. Some people just don’t feel any effect, he says, I should try something more powerful. ‘No thanks,’ I say, ‘I’m not interested.’ Although I do need to breathe a little easier sometimes, to sink into nothingness, no studies, no nightmares, no mindless memorisation.

I take a drag.

‘You need to inhale properly,’ Radj says, ‘otherwise it’s a waste of time.’

‘Where did you get the stuff?’’ I ask. But he just laughs, grabs my hand and pulls me towards him. His entire body is stiff, I can feel his heart racing and I quickly free myself from his grip.

‘Come to India with me,’ he says. His eyes are very clear.

I put the joint between his lips. I don’t like it when he says things like that when he isn’t stoned. He takes another drag, stares at me with his pitch-black crazy-loving eyes and scares me. Please, not again, I beg him silently, and he looks away.

Our friendship is like Odessa’s beaches. They are often washed away by the harsh winter storms and then have to be refilled artificially in spring if they don’t return of their own accord. Radj’s feelings break over our friendship like a hurricane, and it takes a huge amount of strength to rebuild a solid foundation. It’s better not to let these storms arise in the first place.

When we have been sitting next to each other in silence for a while, I say: ‘I’m heading down to the water,’ and roll up my trousers.

‘All right.’ He pulls his headphones out of his pocket and lies down on the sand without looking at me. I suspect it’s Eminem who is finally giving his face a more level expression.

My friend Mascha doesn’t think much of Radj, like almost everyone around me.

‘You just don’t get the fact that he is in love with you,’ she said on the phone yesterday. ‘It’s going to end badly for the two of you.’

‘It’s just a phase,’ I replied. I didn’t want to hear it.

‘What do you see in him?’ Mascha didn’t let up. ‘He awakens my maternal instinct, not my sexual desires.’

‘Who’s talking about sexual desires?’ My voice sounded unnaturally high. ‘We are just friends.’

‘If that’s the case,’ she said dryly, ‘then he will soon hate you for not returning his love.’

‘If only!’ I said. ‘That’s all I need, for him to hate me. Then you would be the only person I could hang out with.’

That wouldn’t be the worst scenario for me. No-one knows me better than Mascha. She knows that I almost drowned while my mother stood there, petrified, unable to take a single step. She knows that I once ran away from our dacha because I was accused of having eaten all the cherries. She knows who my heart really belongs to.

I touch Radj’s shoulder and his eyes fly open in surprise. The music is now pouring directly out of the smartphone that is lying next to him in the sand, and he stares at me in confusion for a moment before he comes to his senses again.

‘Back already?’ he asks.

I ask him to be a bit more enthusiastic, and turn the racket off.

‘Hey!’ he gets annoyed. ‘I was sleeping.’

Radj rubs his eyes and stretches his lanky limbs in all directions. We read things that are of no interest to us. We repeat everything like well-trained parrots and are all the more frustrated when little of it remains in our heads. As if our brains were immune to medical knowledge.

‘I have to stay away from you,’ I finally say. ‘Your grey cells have already been eaten by weed, and now the toxic fumes have attacked mine too.’

He laughs. ‘Then go to your Sergej. He is probably better company for you.’

I chuck a handful of sand onto his open book and lie down on my back.

‘Are you still seeing each other, you and Sergej?’ Radj asks and lies down next to me.

‘No,’ I lie and am surprised at how good I am at it by now. ‘The last time I met him was in our courtyard, by accident. But that was weeks ago.’

Radj nods thoughtfully, and before he can ask me any more questions that will undoubtedly end badly, I quickly change the subject.

‘Do you remember the café not far from the university that you liked so much?’

He frowns.

‘The one with the funny parrots on the wallpaper.’

‘Oh yes.’

‘They are looking for witing staff. You could do that.’

‘How do you know?’

‘From Mascha.’

Radj pulls a face.

‘Hey, are you looking for a job or not? It’s probably best if I just keep my mouth shut if you don’t like it and leave you to take care of yourself.’

‘Do you think they would take me?’ Radj then asks. ‘I have no experience as a waiter.’

But my mood has shifted. ‘If you are not too stoned, maybe, but you will never manage that anyway.’

He laughs briefly, then falls silent and I feel bad for a moment.

‘If the tip comes from Mascha, there’s probably nothing in it,’ he says and can’t stop himself, and my feeling of guilt quickly subsides. Radj thinks as little of Mascha as she does of him and the two of them make me feel this guilty on a regular basis. He is actually just intimidated by her, even if he would never admit it. He thinks she is too uninhibited, he disparagingly calls her ‘a one metre seventy-three-sex pot’ and gets wobbly knees and clammy hands when he sees her.

‘You and your friend have no idea how the world works,’ he snorts once more. ‘She actually thinks they are waiting for her in the West, but number one, all they want to do is fleece the women. Like the chickens that your grandfather uses in his broth.’

‘And number two? What do they want to do to us there?’

‘Number two?’ he says and reflects for a moment ‘Probably get you to conform. So that you finally take on western standards and arrange your lives according to these pseudo ideals.’

He is right about Mascha running the risk of glorifying the West, even if I prefer to keep that to myself. Instead I tell him that I don’t care about the West, nor about how its world works. I just want him to stop lecturing me.

Radj mumbles something in Indian, I suspect insults. Then he says in a firm voice: ‘You will shed bitter tears when your beautiful world finally perishes. Look at what’s happened to Crimea.’

‘You are grumbling like my grandpa,’ I interrupt him, and he gets cross, promising never to talk to me about such things again so as not to overtax my birdbrain. For a while there is silence between us until he can’t stand it and accuses me of being manipulated.

‘You dance to their tune and don’t even realise it.’

And we are fighting again.

Radj didn’t actually want to come to Odessa. He found it somewhat perverse to go to the same city where his father had studied years ago. He would have preferred to go to Italy. But he was given the choice: either Odessa or stay at home. And so he went where he didn’t want to go, to study a subject he didn’t like. At least he is far away from his family now. Instead of sitting in a small, cute Italian café stuffing himself with cake, he lives in Odessa, in a dingy flat, smokes too much weed and is scared of catching a terrible disease from one of his patients.

‘You don’t even like coffee. Why did you want to go to Italy of all places?’ I once asked him.

‘In protest,’ he said.

‘Protest?’

‘Yes. In protest against the vile English colonialist culture.’

‘Why is it vile?’

‘How can you ask such a thing?’ He got even crosser. ‘They destroyed our traditions and brought their own with them. They questioned our customs and dictated theirs to us. And then their awful taste! I mean, they actually thought their stiff Protestant culture was superior just because they are oh so rational and not guided by their feelings.’

For a while he continued to rant on about the Queen and the entire royal household and wished the plague on them. Then he sipped his tea as usual, took a drag on his joint and fantasised, while high, about what would have happened to his country if the Italians had come to India instead of the British.

I don’t know how long the two of us have been lying next to each other in silence, angry with each other. The sand is slowly cooling down, the wind is turning, it’s coming from the sea now, it’s fresh, harsh, piercing. I feel a pressure in my head. I’m afraid that my migraine is about to start up again, and check whether the headache pills are in my little cosmetic bag as usual. The first big raindrops fall on the sand, gently at first, then suddenly they come down on us with full force. Radj and I are completely soaked by the time we reach the trees. He swears in Indian, I presume because of his book, which has got wet, and immediately rolls another joint – his answer to almost everything. One, two, drags and his anger dissipates in a cloud of smoke. It doesn’t even take five minutes and he is smiling again, finding it all funny, while I am shaking all over and wishing he would at least think of giving me his jacket or walking to the park entrance to call us a cab.

‘Do you want a drag?’ he asks and comes very close to me. I can feel his breath on my cheek, and then he places his hand at my waist and kisses my neck. I am gripped by anger - maybe it is also disappointment - and I push him away.

‘What are you doing, Radj? Have you completely lost the plot?’

He looks at me in surprise and mumbles something about a romantic mood.

‘Romantic? Wake up!’ I scream at him. ‘You’re getting on my nerves!’

Radj looks perplexed. ‘What did I do that was so bad? It was only a kiss.’

I can’t breathe. Is he really that naïve? I push him aside with my shoulder and walk to the bus stop. Right now I can’t stand his constant presence, his expectations of me and his love, or whatever you want to call this adoration.

‘Olga, wait,’ I hear him call after me for a long time until his voice is finally drowned out by the rain.