

Svetlana Alexievich writes “novels of voices,” based on hundreds of interviews, intertwining the original voices of her subjects into an artful condensation of a panorama of souls. “I see the world as voices, as colors, as it were,” Alexievich writes. “... It is the narrative thread of the people I have come to know... With thousands of voices I can create—you could hardly call it reality, since reality remains unfathomable—an image of my time, of my country...”

A warning to readers: This story deals with the horrors of ethnic pogroms and has some graphic passages.

I Love and I Will Love Again

Svetlana Alexievich

Oh, this I know... if you are in love, you are walking on the sunny side of life. To this day, I sleep with my hands behind my head, a custom from the days when I was happy. I so loved life! The memories, they flow like a river...

I am an Armenian, but I was born and raised in Baku. On the seashore.

The sea... my sea! I left, but I still love the sea. People and the rest of it, they have disappointed me. Only the sea do I love. I dream of it often—grey, black, violet. And the lightning! The lightning dancing with the waves. I used to love to stare into the distance, to watch the sun set in the evening—it gets so red toward evening that it seems as if it will hiss when it sets into the water. The rocks, warmed during the day... warm rocks, as if they were alive.

I loved to stare at the sea in the morning, in the daytime, in the evening, and at night. At night, bats hung under the eaves and I was quite afraid of them. The cicadas sang. The sky was full of stars... nowhere else are there so many stars... Baku is my absolute favorite city... My absolute favorite, no matter what!

In my dreams, I often stroll through Gubernatorsky Garden and Nagorny Park... I climb the fortress wall... And from there I can see the sea, the ships and the oil derricks... I will never forget it! The smell of the sea and the oil... and the childlike cries of the seagulls. Mama and I loved drop in at the *chaikhana* [tea house] and drink red tea... (*There are tears in her eyes*).

Mama is in America. She is bored and cries a lot. I am in Moscow.

We lived in a big apartment house in Baku... There was a huge courtyard where a mulberry tree grew, yellow mulberries. So tasty!

We all lived together like one family—Azerbaijanis, Russians, Armenians, Ukrainians, Tatars... Aunt Klara, Aunt Sarah... Abdullah, Ruben... Silva was the prettiest—she worked as a stewardess on international routes and flew to Istanbul. Her husband, Elmir, was a taxi driver. She

was Armenian, he was Azeri, but no one gave that any thought; I don't remember anyone ever talking about it. The world was divided up differently then: good people or bad... greedy or generous... neighbor or guest... from the same village... city... Everyone had one nationality: we were all Soviets; we all spoke Russian.

The most beautiful holiday, our favorite one, was Novruz. Novruz Bayramy was the day we celebrated the arrival of spring. We waited for this holiday all year, then celebrated it for seven days. For seven days we did not lock our gates or our doors... day or night, and no locks or keys...

And we built bonfires... bonfires burned on roofs and in courtyards... The entire city was alight with bonfires! We would throw fragrant rue flowers into the fire and ask for happiness, murmuring "*Sariligin sene, girmiziligin mene*" "To you, all my afflictions; To me, all my happiness." "*Girmiziligin mene...*"

Anyone could visit anyone else—everywhere you went, you were treated as a guest, offered milky pilaf and red tea with cinnamon or cardamom. And then, on the seventh day—the holiday's main day—everyone gathered together... around one table... Everyone brought their table into the courtyard to make one long, long table. It was decked with Georgian *khinkali*, Armenian *boraki* and *basturma*, Russian *blini*, Tatar *echpochmak*, Ukrainian *vareniki*, beef with chestnuts in the Azerbaijani style... Aunt Klara brought her usual herring in a fur coat [with beets and mayonnaise]... And Aunt Sarah brought stuffed fish... We drank wine and Armenian cognac. And Azerbaijani. We sang Armenian and Azerbaijani songs. And the Russian *Katyusha*: "Apples and pears were blossoming... Mist floated on the river." Finally, it was time for dessert: *baklava*, *sheker-churek*... To this day I have not tasted anything so good! The best dessert of all was my mother's. "What do you have in your hands, Knarik? Such a light pastry!" The neighbors were constantly praising her. Mama was friends with Zeynab and Zeynab had two daughters and a son, Anar, who was in my class. "Give me your daughter to marry my Anar," Zeynab laughed, "and we'll be relatives." (*Closes her eyes.*) I don't want to cry... I shouldn't... I will not cry...

When the Armenian pogroms started, Aunt Zeynab, our dear Aunt Zeynab and her Anar... we ran, hid at the home of some good people... and at night they went into our apartment and took our refrigerator and television... our gas stove and our new Yugoslavian living room set... And once Anar and his friends encountered my husband, and they were going to beat him with iron rods: "What kind of Azerbaijani are you? You are a traitor! You live with an Armenian—our enemy!!"

A girlfriend of mine took me in and I lived in her attic... Every night they would open up the attic and feed me, and then I would go back upstairs and they would nail the door shut. If they find you, they'll kill you! When I left

there, my hair was starting to turn grey... white... I don't want to cry... I shouldn't... I will not cry...

I used to like Anar in school, he was a handsome boy. We even kissed once... "Hello, my queen!" he would call out to me at the gate of the school. Hello, my queen!

I remember that spring... of course it comes back to me, but less often now... not very often... Spri-i-i-ng! I finished high school and found work as a clerk at the telegraph office. The Central Telegraph. People would stand at the window: some would cry—their mother died, others would laugh—it was their wedding. Happy Birthday! Happy Golden Anniversary! Telegrams, telegrams. I would put through calls to Vladivostok, Ust-Kum, Ashkhabad... It was nice work. Not boring. And I waited for love... At 18, you are always waiting for love... I thought that love only came once, and that you would immediately know that it was love. But it turned out it was funny, very funny. I didn't like him when we first met.

In the morning I would walk past the guards—they all knew me, and no one would ask for my pass: "G'morning, g'morning." No questions.

"Your pass, please."

I was dumfounded. Standing in front of me was a tall, handsome young guy and he would not let me through.

"You see me every day..."

"Your pass, please."

But that day I had forgotten my pass... I rooted around in my bag... I didn't have any documents at all. They called in my boss... I received a reprimand... I was so angry at that boy! But he... I had the night shift, and he came with a friend to drink some tea. As if! They brought pastries filled with jam, the sort you can't find anymore—tasty, but you never know which side the jam is going to squirt out. We laughed! But I was offended and didn't talk to him. A few days later, he found me after work and asked: "I bought some tickets to the movie, you want to go?" They were tickets to my favorite comedy, *Mimino*, starring Vakhtang Kikabidze. I had seen it a dozen times and knew all the lines by heart. Him too, it turned out. We went to the movie, testing one another on our common obsession: "I'll tell you one smart little thing, only don't be offended." "How am I supposed to sell this cow, if everyone here already knows her?"

And... love began...

His cousins were important guys, they had a flower business. Abulfaz always brought roses when we met: white, yellow, red... blue and black... There are even lilac-colored roses that look as if they are painted that color, but they are real.

I dreamed... I often dreamed of love... but I didn't know that my heart would beat as if it wanted to jump out of my chest. We wrote letters to each

other on the beach... in the wet sand... "I love you!!!" in big letters, and ten meters on, "I love you!!!" again.

At that time, there were vending machines all over the city that sold carbonated water. There was one glass in the machine and everyone shared it. You'd wash it, then drink. We go up to one machine and there is no glass. And the same in the second machine. I need a drink! We sang and yelled and laughed so much on the beach... I need a drink! Lots of extraordinary things happened to us, unbelievable things, but then it stopped. Oh, this I know... lovers are all sorcerers and psychics. But it is true! "Abulfaz, I need a drink! Think of something!" He looks at me and raises his arms to the heavens, then speaks something for a long, long time. And then, out of nowhere, from behind closed-up stalls and a fence overgrown with grass this drunk guy appeared and gave us a glass: "Pre-e-e-ty gir-r-rl, anything for you..."

And the sunset... Not a soul anywhere, just us... And the fog from the sea. I walked barefoot on the asphalt... fog seeps out of the asphalt, like steam. Again, a miracle! Suddenly, the sun appears! Light... illumination... like it was the middle of a summer day... My summer dress, damp from the dew and fog, dries instantly. "You are so beautiful right now!" And you... you... *(There are tears in her eyes.)*

I don't want to cry... I shouldn't... I don't like crying or singing when it has to be done quietly. I don't like being afraid. I remember everything... everything... But I hear fewer and fewer voices now... fewer and fewer... I had such dreams then... Yes! Yes! I was flying! Only... It didn't work out that way. We did not have a "happy ending": white dress, Mendelssohn's march, a ring... a wedding... "Bitter!!" Soon... Very soon... *(She stops.)*

There was something I wanted to say... Something... Emotions keep me from remembering the simplest words... I wanted to say that soon, very soon... They hid me in basements, I lived in attics, I turned into a cat... into a bat... If you can understand... If you can... If you but knew how horrible it is when, at night, someone screams. A lone scream. When a lone bird screeches at night, it is frightening. But if it is a human being?

I lived with just one thought: I love... I love and I will love once more... I could not have survived any other way. How else... it was so horrible! I only came down from the attic at night... the blinds were thick as a blanket... Then one morning they opened the attic up: "Come out! You are saved! Russian troops have entered the city..."

I think about it... I think about it even in my sleep... When did it all begin? 1988... Some people or other gathered in the square, all dressed in black, dancing and singing. Dancing with knives and daggers. The telegraph building was right on the square; we saw everything. We swarmed out onto the balcony and watched. "What are they saying?" I ask.

"Death to unbelievers! Death!"

This went on for a long time, a very long time... several months... They started chasing us away from the windows: "Girls, it's dangerous. Sit at your places and don't be distracted. Work."

At lunchtime, we normally drank tea together, and suddenly one day the Azerbaijanis sat at one table, the Armenians at another. It happened in a moment, you understand? And there was no way I could understand it, no way. But it had not hit me yet... I was in love... I was consumed by my feelings... "Girls! What is going on?"

"Haven't you heard? Our boss said that soon he will employ only pure-blooded Muslims."

My *babushka* survived the Armenian pogrom in 1915... before the revolution... She told us stories... It was as if I were hearing her voice from beyond the grave... from my childhood... "When I was a little girl, like you, they slit my father's throat, and mama, and auntie... And all our cattle..." *Babushka's* eyes were always so sad. "They slit the neighbors' throats... they had been good people before this... we drank wine together on holidays..."

Babushka died, so I couldn't ask her. I ask my mother: "Mama, did you see the boys in the courtyard? They are not playing at war, but at killing Armenians? Where does this come from? Who taught them this?"

"Be quiet, daughter. The neighbors will hear you."

Mama cried all the time. Sat and cried. The children dragged some sort of stuffed bird into the courtyard and began stabbing it with sticks, with childish daggers. "Who is that?" I asked little Orkhan, the grandson of mama's friend Zeynab.

"It is an old Armenian woman. We are killing her. And who are you, Aunt Rita? Why do you have a Russian name?"

My mother came up with my name... Mama loved Russian names... Her whole life she dreamed of visiting Moscow... Papa left us and lived with another woman, but still he was papa. I went to him with my news: "Papa, I am going to get married!"

"Is he a good boy?"

"Very. But his name is Abulfaz."

Papa is silent, he wants me to be happy. But I have fallen in love with a Muslim... he has a different God... Papa is silent.

Abulfaz came to our house: "I want to ask for your hand."

"But why are you alone, without your father? Without relatives?"

"They are all against it, and I don't need anyone but you."

Me too! I don't need anyone either! What are we to do with our love? What was going on outside had nothing to do with what was happening within us... Not at all... Not the least bit...

At night it was quiet and scary in the city... deserted... Oh, I could not go on this way. How simply horrible! In the daytime, no one was laughing or

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