



Compassion Without Borders

Fate sometimes picks us randomly. Just yesterday I was walking down the Champs Elysees, marveling at the infinite gallantry of French men and flawless Parisian elegance. Now I lay in a Moscow hospital on an operating table, wide leather belts shackle my hands with ruthless grip, and I am crying at the inability to survive losing my free will. Looking too closely into the icy eyes of death, I struggled to start life anew, thirsting for life, free from the husk of unnecessary problems.

My trip to Paris nearly coincided with the phrase : "See Paris and die"

But, let me start from the beginning. Everything started very well - a tour to the city of light was a gift, the tickets were purchased and a suitcase packed. The first bad signs came with the number 13. I was leaving by the train number thirteenth at thirteenth of December in the car № 13, in what else - seat 13 !

My heart throbbed with apprehension, but what do I do ? In the train my traveling neighbor was a very handsome young man, a student, Meskhetian Turks, he said. We had a fun evening, but at night I awoke with a sharp pain in my side. The pain grew by the hour, and the next day the train doctor called a team of emergency medics to a station at Ryazan - an old Russian city some four hours east of Moscow.

A middle-aged woman doctor arrived and examined me, then invited me to leave the train and go directly to the hospital for further examination. I listened to her words and though only this is impossible! I am for the first time going to Paris, but instead the kind doctor tells me I have to go to the hospital from this small station!

- I gathered my thoughts and replied: Please, understand me, I've never been to Paris, and I'll be there tomorrow. I can not go to the hospital now! - I said with uncharacteristic harshness.

- The Doctor replied slowly and quietly: I understand you. But you are very sick and it is very risky to travel to another country in such a state, and I saw her eyes were full of sincere and wise compassion.

Seeing my desire to travel on she saw I wanted so badly to press on and said: Well, then in Moscow you must buy antibiotics and painkillers and maybe you will be alright. She smiled and touched my arm saying - Take care of yourself !

So I flew to the city of boulevards and cafes, and charming Parisian chanson. In Paris, I gave myself an order not to ache until the end of the trip. Once I allowed myself to ask a guide, a beautiful Parisian from Russia, what I have to do if I will be quite bad. She replied : Call doctor – but be prepared to pay € 100, and further payment too according doctors demands!

In her eyes I saw the icy cold, which instantly froze my desire to try the mastery of French Aesculapius.

My body obediently followed my order to remain under control, I returned to Moscow but my relief at finding myself almost home came to an abrupt end. That night I was taken by ambulance to the hospital in extreme pain and despair over my condition.

At the hospital, the decision of the Moscow doctor was certain and unquestioned – I was placed immediately on the operating table and prepared for surgery. I tried to convince him that I could be OK if I can only return home to Chelyabinsk – a city some 36 hours by train from Moscow over the Trans Siberian Railway.

- You will die on the way! - The doctor replied.

Left with little choice death continued to stalk me in Moscow. The surgeon saved me that night and I thankfully gave him the few remaining rubles I had left. However, the anesthesiologist, whom I could not pay, had not cleared the airways after surgery and left me to care for myself unconscious and alone in an empty room with a closed door.

Eventually, my breathing became more difficult and became loud enough to attract attention from the corridor. My death rattle raised concern among those caring passersby and a doctor was urgently summoned. So I came back to life.

While I barely returned to consciousness a woman with natural maternal skills constantly raised me and eased my suffered breathing with her kind and caring efforts.

Gradually, I recovered and gained enough strength to introduce myself and learn her name.

Her name was Lyudmila Borisova, in her appearance I sensed something of the air of weightlessness, when weight does not destroy impulsive ease of movement. Despite her own serious heart condition, from the first day I was moved to another ward, she took care of the ten other patients including me, running to smooth bandaged arms and other limbs, to adjust pillows and blankets to make those lying in the beds more comfortable. In this hospital, like all others in Russia, there is an atmosphere where everyone easily tells casual ward mates intricately tangled personal life stories. Usually, these stories revolve around life's ordinary events, but what she told me was so remarkable I remember every detail even after these many years.

Lyudmila's story was a life injection for me, it pushed me out of bed and gave me energy to take the pen and begin to write this wonderful and truly extraordinary story. Lyudmila leisurely told me how it happened that one day she became a mother of four babies of different nationalities at once. Today we would call them all persons of Caucasian nationality.

She began her story so casually it was difficult at first for me to appreciate the significance of her experience.

Her story began like many other tales of young love. It so happened that my husband stole me – kidnapped me actually, she began.

I came to the village of my parents on a vacation after my second year of coursework at Tomsk State University. In the evening the village arranged

social dances to allow young people to meet and enjoy the spring season. There I met a cadet named Victor Borisov. The next evening he invited me to a concert. On the third – he called me to meet his family at their home. I was embarrassed because I was not ready to meet with his family. But he said his family will celebrate the birthday of his favorite aunt and we are going to congratulate her. At a long table with all of Victor's relatives seated and anxiously considering my suitability for some role I was beginning to understand, he introduced me and suddenly announced, "She is my fiancée." We agreed to get married!" I broke out in surprise, wanted to run away, but all were very pleased at this joyous news so I had little choice but to smile and absorb the well wishes of Victor's family. Victor's father said: "We know Luda, she is a good girl ... But she will not marry you, I think because her parents will be against it." Victor and I have agreed before that if my or his family will be against our decision about our future, we'll run away. And so it happened. Once the evening arrived I threw a touchstone in the calm lake of the parent's mood, the big storm has started. "You know him just for three days, you are still a student, so how are you going continue your study?" I quickly went back down, ran into the bedroom, saying that I was joking. Then in the very early morning I opened the window and with my suitcase, quietly moved into the arms of Victor. My alert grandmother had spotted my manipulations with the suitcase and squinted suspiciously, but as soon as she relaxed her usual vigilance, I followed after my luggage through the window. An hour later I was with Victor on a train, rushing us to Uzbekistan. Thus began my new life. A military wife - always a nomadic life, moving, keeping the ability to pack up in an hour and follow after her husband in another city, republic, country.

As I listened, her story was very romantic but hardly anything different from ordinary Russian country girls and boys coming of age in the late Soviet era. But as Luda pressed on her tale it transcended usual stories of young lovers escaping and finding their way in the world.

Luda continued: It happened in Kazakhstan - in Shymkent, where she lived with Victor, now a Major in the Soviet army and their nine year old daughter Irina. Shymkent, was the capital city of South Kazakhstan Province, the most populated region in Kazakhstan. In 1988 a terrible earthquake struck the Armenian city of Spitak. The earthquake wiped out everything that could be demolished, so much so that the city was rebuilt eventually at another site altogether. But, at the time of the disaster the ruins drew rescuers and military forces to help those who could still be saved, or to bury those for which help arrived too late.

My Victor was among the rescuers she said proudly. A few days later he came back from this trip severely shaken and deadly tired, his eyes overflowed with pain. He stepped into the apartment, holding a big cardboard box, placed it on the table and almost guiltily looking at his wife, said: "They had nowhere to put them now. Everything is destroyed. Our helicopter was leaving quickly, and I had to take them with me. Anyway please, have a look," as he somehow hastily left the room. Lyudmila looked into the box and immediately her heart raced and nearly stopped at what she saw. There were four babies inside with scratched and dirty faces from tears and sweat mingled with bloody bruises all around their tiny bodies. They squeaked slightly. Among their clothes were sewn labels with names and dates of birth for each baby.

So in their house the sudden massive family expansion happened. The Borisov family added new members: the Georgian boy Grisha, an Azerbaijani girl Leila, and Armenian brother and sister Sasha and Angela. As relatives of these children were unknown at the time, adoption was not possible, so Borisov took custody of the children.

- How did you raise them? - I asked, because I have twins also, and I well know how much care falls on mom during feeding, nursing, educating multiple infants at once. For example, it is impossible to give the breast to two babies at once, so you take one girl, and while she enjoys having milk and socializing with her mother, another stays unhappy and desperately cries complaining to the world that she was left to starve.

Lyudmila continued, everything was pretty simple so long as they did not know how to walk. It was enough just to feed them - they remained satisfied and always on the spot, under control. But when they learned to move around, it was not a joke. They fled in all directions, and I was in a wild panic, always trying to find them. We had to tie them with string, trying not to lose any of our new babies. Of course, people in the garrison helped us a lot. The garrison commander received a lovely three-bedroom apartment for his family, but conceded it to us in a fit of generosity as our family was growing quadruplets. Our daughter Irina accepted these children as her little brothers and sisters; she liked the role of older sister. She could be strict, children obeyed her implicitly, though the characters of all the kids soon emerged in traditional Caucasian fashion - testy, and very hot tempered.

As the children grew and entered school, Victor, carefully checked diaries, asked about events at school, and then, after dinner, sat down to play

backgammon with his children. Those were happy times. We lived very amicably. My husband once said, "I hope, you were not offended that I took upon your shoulders such a big load? When I was taking these kids home, I thought," Luda loves children. She will take care them." He himself loved them truly. You should have seen his face when he took the boys on a motorcycle for fishing trips. So, twelve happy years passed but this life was to end abruptly. We never hid from our children the secret of their appearance in our family. We understood that they may eventually look for relatives, and they could be willing to change their life. But still, it all happened so suddenly. First, an uncle of Leila came and took her. We said goodbye to our thin black-eyed easy going - like a baby deer - Leila, rejoicing that she had found relatives, and weeping with bitter separation.

Later in our house a very old grandmother came on crutches for our Georgian son Grisha. She was the only survivor of his family, and again we collected a bag for our boy for his trip home, saying goodbye and hiding tears. Then, Sasha and Angela left us for their home. Again hugs, tears, and goodbye, maybe forever.

So once our home emptied of our children's voices, the house stood silent. This all happened within two months in the spring of 2000. Relatives of the children came with big bottles of Caucasian wine, with cheese heads and fine carpets - gifts in gratitude - and took away those who became our sons and daughters. Tears and hugs of joyful meeting, tears and hugs for goodbye.

Lyudmila told this story sparingly, almost without color, and I soon knew why. Immediately after Sasha and Angela left, Lyudmila was taken to the hospital with a massive heart attack. Her heart was not able to accept such a devastating blow to her family. She did not know how to live just for herself, as many other women do with trips to the beautician, shopping, massage therapist and psychiatrist. Her whole world revolved around her children, set her own destiny as a generous gift, and then suddenly her meaning was taken away. Of course, these children do not forget their Russian Mom and Dad. Letters come from Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Numerous relatives from the Caucasus arrive to Moscow, where her daughter Irina lives. Tired from endless travel from town to town, from place to place as military life demanded, the Borisov family settled in the Tver region, and Victor was finally able to do what he had dreamed all his life – care for a private garden and a small farm. He likes to get up early in the morning to

care for his home, and is very proud of the success, which he manages to achieve in this little world of cares.

The story is indeed remarkable. It shows clearly the closeness that existed between multiple nationalities and ethnic peoples of the Soviet Union. Lyudmila's story is typical of the best monument for the USSR, and I am sure it must be honored by a monument someday. An artist should embody in stone the figure of a woman holding in close and safe maternal embrace babies bestowed with her destiny. I am sorry I did not have a picture of this beautiful woman I met by chance in a Moscow hospital some 16 years ago now.

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