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Mesopotamia

Novel

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Part one: Biographies and Stories

Marat

Spring had come during the forty days since Marat's death. And it was on the verge of passing. They buried him on the Day of Rejoicing, at the beginning of April. By now green, blistering grass had consumed the hills. Summer was on its way. Over the past forty days we had managed to forget everything and settle down. But just then Marat's parents called and reminded us. And I thought to myself, 'yeah, it's actually only been forty days.' The dead don't make any demands of us, but the living keep us in check.

A few friends and neighbors buried him. The majority of his acquaintances (Marat had dozens of them in town) just couldn't believe that they had been invited to his funeral. But then, naturally, they apologized, came to the cemetery and looked for his plaque. That April was rainy; street dogs ran after the bus carrying the casket like dignified sentries, throwing themselves at the black wheels of the Volkswagen in the funeral procession and refusing to let Marat go to the kingdom of the dead. Solemn crowds of people walked around the cemetery, cresting the hills up to the low-hanging clouds, descending into the drenched valley and celebrating the best they could, mixing alcohol and rainwater. We were pretty much the only ones to accompany the deceased to the cemetery and we looked a bit unnatural—as if we had

come into a music store with our own piano. Easter mixed everything up, making our mourning somewhat out of place. Nobody dies on Easter. Quite to the contrary, people typically rise from the dead around that time.

Marat's death resembled his life—illogical and shrouded in mystery. It happened late Saturday night, early Sunday morning. Marat didn't go to church since he considered himself to be a spiritual, non-practicing Muslim, however in the middle of the night he went out to the kiosk for a pack of cigarettes—in slippers and with a bill clenched in his fist. They shot him down there. Nobody saw anything because they were all at church. The woman working the night shift in the kiosk said she didn't hear anything, but it seemed as though somebody was singing and car motors were roaring. Nevertheless, she wasn't sure, but she said that she could identify the voices, if need be, despite not being able to say precisely whether they were male or female. Somehow she was still able to write down the car's license plate number, however it turned out that those Zhigulis had been parked on the shoulder of the road by the student hospital for over a year and passers-by would stick empty bottles and pieces of cardboard found at local landfills in between the windshield wipers. We said to each other, "it's getting so rough around here, you'd think it's the 90's, who's next?"

Also, nobody could figure out why they shot him. Marat didn't have a business, didn't interact with the authorities and didn't have any enemies, although he didn't recognize some of his friends at first—but is that any reason to shoot him? There had been no shootings for ten years, minus cash-in-transit couriers, but they don't really count. Are you friends with a lot of cash-in-transit couriers? We could only guess what had actually happened.

Forty days had passed—time pushed on, the rivers had flowed over their banks and receded. The days got warmer. I didn't want to go. I had even decided to call his parents back, send my regards and bow out. Then I thought to myself, what's the difference? No matter what I'd be thinking about it all evening; it'd be better to do so when surrounded by friends and family. It makes more sense to lose your mind in a safe, secure place. I left my house, looped around the school, stopped by the kiosks and spent a while trying to pick out a kind of cigarette, but I couldn't make up my mind. I thought about just heading back home and kept going. I ran down the steep hill by the institute and then put on the brakes when I got to Marat's street. It was quiet. Sleepy bodies, the neighborhood dogs, were warming up in the late afternoon shade underneath the building overhang. Sensing my presence, the top dog lifted his head, cast a dark, attentive glance in my direction, hung his head and restlessly closed his eyes. Nothing had happened. Nothing had changed.

Marat lived just a few blocks away from me, closer to the river. Three minutes away, by foot. Pretty much everything was close by—the maternity hospital, kindergarten, music school, army recruiting office, stores, pharmacy, hospitals and cemeteries. One could live one's whole life without ever venturing off to the closest metro station. That's exactly what we did. We lived in old neighborhoods perched up above the river, grew up in rebuilt and remodeled apartments, ran out of our damp buildings in the mornings and retired in the evening under our unreliable, hole-ridden roofs that just couldn't be patched up all the way. Atop the hill the whole city sprawled out before us; in our neighborhoods we felt the stones that formed the foundation of it all. In the summertime they warmed up along with the weather, while in the winter they froze and we got feverish.

Their neighborhood looked out onto the TB dispensary; a road, leading to the old warehouses, stretched out alongside. On the one side, in the valley at the bottom of the hill, beyond the roofs, one could see the embankment, bridge, the black industrial park, newly-constructed buildings and Kharkiv's impenetrable residential area. On the other side, at the top of the hill, one could see the city's main streets, churches and markets. I passed through the gate, distinctly sensing what I had lived with for so many years—the dust, clay and sand through which even grass couldn't grow. The yard was paved with cracked bricks and stones; during the past few years Marat had been threatening to pave it all with asphalt, but something held him back, so everything stayed the way it was. There were two ancient, pre-revolutionary two-story structures that were half-empty and hadn't been remodeled for a while. There were flower beds and gardens in the middle of the yard flowing into apple trees and the black, brick wall of the structure that looked out onto the neighbor's yard. His family brought out some tables and took out some chairs from the apartment. The neighbors came with their own stools, just to make sure they wouldn't be left without a seat. The apple trees glistened above the tables; the white light dropped onto the salads, giving them extra flavor and bitterness.

I greeted everyone. They nodded in reply—one of the neighbors took out an unoccupied stool and I squeezed in between two bodies warmed by the May sun. Somebody immediately started serving me quite generous portions, while someone else poured me a drink. I looked around, surveying the group and recognizing familiar faces. The whole crew was there—Benya, sitting across from me with his grey crew cut, gave me a peppy nod and then returned to the main conversation. As far as I could gather, they were talking about the weather. Why not? It's a neutral topic after all. At least nobody will start acting up. Kostik, sitting at the other end, waved at me, continuing to eat. The apple petals fell onto his white

dress shirt, dissipating like snow into a river in the winter. A skinny woman, who happened to live right above Marat, was gradually being forced out of her chair by Kostik's pointy sides. Sam stood off to the side under the trees, together with Rustam, Marat's brother. The latter anxiously paced along the cracked bricks in his rubber slippers and new track suit, talking with someone on the phone and trying to figure something out with Sam. Sam also wore a track suit—underneath the apple trees they looked like two marathon runners who had veered off the course and were now repeatedly calling the race organizers to find out where to pick it back up. The women kept the conversation going and it appeared as though soon they were going to turn on the music and kick off a party. From time to time the neighbors would call Rustam over to the table, but he'd sternly wave back, meaning, 'fuck off, you orthodox fuckers.' And he'd continue to talk in a passionate and dissatisfied tone as Sam nodded along, seemingly backing his every word.

I took a look at our crew. Over the past forty days little had happened in their lives. Moreover, little had happened in the past ten years other than the wrinkles that had cut deeper into Benya's mug, making him even more similar to Mick Jagger. The black sweater and expensive shoes—Benya strained to keep up a front, although I knew that he was living solely off of investments he had managed to save after being ousted from his company. It was clear that they wouldn't last long, which was apparently causing Benya to grow even greyer. What can you say, it's a sad time for the honest businessman. Kostik put on even more weight, although that had hardly affected his personality—it was as vile as it could be, so no changes would make any real difference. Kostik was posted at the South Railway Station and that job came with some responsibilities. I suspect he didn't even really know what they were. He got heavy and lost his sense of humor. He only hung out with the crew, his childhood friends. Sam had probably changed the most. I mean his new track suit. Well, that's it. The rest stayed the same—except for Sam, the old, experienced cabby who never let go of his car keys, distrusted all passengers and felt a fundamental hatred of patrol cars. As for me, I sensed a warm clump of growing fatigue brooding and rising somewhere in the middle of my body, between my heart and spleen, conquering even more space and forcing me to listen dolefully to what was going on in my soul. Underneath my clothes and under my skin. No 9-5 days and no professional growth could defeat that clump that simply ate away at my internal organs like a piranha let loose under my skin. Back in the day I decided not to stray too far from tried and true spots, taking a job at the factory right around the corner, two blocks away. Over the past fifteen years I even worked my way up to having my own office. However, the factory hadn't been operating for ten years or so and moving up the ranks was just like moving up the

ranks of a sinking ship—you can do it, of course, but from the outset your opportunities are a bit limited. We rented out old labs as office space and old production floors as warehouses. I made good money and wore an ill-fitting suit. Like my friends, I had trouble getting to sleep at night and my first gray hair popped up. I didn't complain about my troubles and I started cutting my hair short. Even the factory security guards liked it—they started to respect me or maybe feel sorry for me. All of Marat's friends had reached that age when life slows down, affording us much more time for being afraid and self-conscious. Marat made it to thirty-five; we had excellent chances at living a long life and dying a natural death. For instance, a natural death from dementia.

Alec and Raya Davidivna, Marat's parents, sat at opposite sides of the table as if they didn't know each other. Alec kept quiet, while Raya Davidivna primarily talked about the salads. And everyone wished she had kept quiet too. I sat there, adding to the conversation and remembering the good times. I put on a sorrowful face, addressed the deceased's mother and sensed how the humidity bounced off the river, touching the old neighborhoods packed with trees, gates and built up with towers and communal apartments. Sasha, Marat's father's brother, and Sam, stretched wires with two powerful lamps on them from the garages to the apple branches and the yellow electricity blending with the white light blanketed us with shades of color. At twilight everyone started getting ready to leave, said their goodbyes, planned their next get-togethers, promised to support each other and not forget, offered up their help, asked others to call upon them, if need be, sighed, kissed each other, exited through the gate and returned to their regular lives.

The woman neighbors left first—the two heavyset ones, who I had wiggled between, followed by the third one, the skinny woman I had seen being squeezed off the chair by Kostik. They left, carrying off their stools like Christmas presents. Zurab, the blind man who repaired shoes and wasn't invited, left next, although he definitely had nowhere to rush off to since he lived in his shop, a metal booth on Revolution Street filled to the brim with soles and bootlegs, and completely void of any light. He didn't particularly need it because he couldn't see a darn thing. Well anyway, he got ready and left. Then Marina, the woman with a deep voice and some sort of old-fashioned haircut and somebody's distant relative (nobody knew for sure whose exactly), left. She sold vegetables in the kiosk at the top of the hill, closer to the tax office, and had a good relationship with Marat's relatives. She was nearly the only one to genuinely and uncontrollably cry over Marat's death. Mark, her son, who wore white overalls with yellow paint stains, left since he had to go back to his workshop on Darwin Street (where he restored furniture) to repaint the veneer bookcase brought in by two

Armenians to make it look Polish-made. Zhora, the pharmacist and 24-hour store plunderer, who always raided the beer kiosks on Pushkin Street after the night shift, pulling the vendors out of a hazy, morning sleep and demanding attention and understanding, left next. He wished everyone the good night that was undoubtedly awaiting him and left. Tamara, our homeroom teacher, exhausted, but resilient, left next with a piece of pie wrapped up in a tabloid newspaper. She wouldn't have gone, but everyone was already worn out from trying to keep the conversation alive all the while listening to her blabbering, agreeing with her and not interrupting. Losing all interest in the conversation, she coldly thanked everyone and disappeared through the gate like a ghost. Pasha Chingachguk, along with his partner Margarita, filed out after her. They hadn't baptized any children, but Marat still called them godmother and godfather. The fact that Marat didn't have any children made it doubly strange. Pasha had a limp ever since his motocross injury. Meaning that he once crashed a stolen scooter. Sometimes it seemed to me that Margarita also had a limp, possibly because she always held Pasha under her arm, attempting to accommodate his floppy gait. That's just how they departed, like two merry, frail sailors discharged from a bulk carrier. After that Koshkin and Sasha Tsoy (despite being younger, they were our childhood buddies) laboriously plodded along and set off into the darkness. Koshkin cried and continuously poured himself drinks since a few days beforehand he had flown over to Philadelphia to pay his fathers' relatives a visit. Since getting bogged down in Philadelphia in the 90's they hadn't responded to any letters or other forms of communication, therefore his father, a devout Jew, decided that this ought not go on any longer and he sent his only son to track them down and ask them what the hell was going on. Koshkin even bought a cowboy hat adorned with a Hutsul ornament to blend in with the locals, as he pictured them. For him this was pretty much the first time leaving his home base, if you don't count summer camps. Well, one shouldn't really count them since Koshkin's father worked at the camps and during yet another camp session Koshkin Jr. felt like a repeat offender returning to prison where his familiar, friendly crew of wardens were waiting for him. Sasha had been dying to leave for a while now since he had some poetry club meeting at some literature café, but he didn't want to admit that. So he just sat there anxiously. He was the son of a Korean student who found himself here in the early 80's. Nevertheless, he and his dad didn't really get along; he lived on his own and wrote soulful poems. He had a grating personality, fought with other poets at the studio and consistently took a beating, but never gave up. Alka Akula, who we just didn't want to let go and didn't want to leave herself, followed our buddies, Koshkin and Tsoy, saying she had work, patients and a tight schedule. She probably was the most glad to see us

as she reminisced as much she could, filling in the gaps that nobody remembered, telling us about her life plans, assuring us she had closed that carefree chapter in her life by getting a job in medicine, as a nurse, thanks to Marina. Also, now she has an interesting life; the only bad thing is that patients die often, but everything else is fine. The electric light made the wrinkles under her eyes gentle and pulsating and sparks of fire ignited her dyed-blond hair. When she bent over the table to whisper someone warm words of gratitude her hair slipped into the wine glasses, becoming pink and damp. For a while there she couldn't get situated, wouldn't let anyone get a word in and acted like it was her own birthday party, demanding kind words, happiness and rounds of drinks. But eventually she left too. The closer she got to the gate, the deeper she sank into the night and the gloomier the wind became above her head, as if she had to breathe in ashes and clay and talk with the deceased who hid in the clay, where the range of the yellow lamps ended. I watched her fade away and I suddenly remembered that she was actually Marat's first woman, as it happened. And Benya's too, by the way. Well, and Kostik's, obviously. And Sam's, if we're being honest with ourselves. And if I'm totally honest, she was my first too.

Rustam's two girlies were nearly the last ones to leave. They left, hand-in-hand. Kira, the older of the two, was upset with the younger one, Olia, since she'd had too much to drink again. Olia gently tapped Kira on the back giving her goose bumps—her shoulder blades were almost ringing from the cold and her eyes were tearing up. We were all tearing up and laughter was crackling on our teeth. Suddenly we noticed that everyone had dispersed—only Marat's family and I were left, just like the good old days when we got together at Marat's for somebody's birthday party or some other family gathering. I thought to myself that we mostly got together on holidays; perhaps that's why one could detect an odd and incomprehensible celebratory mood, a mood that suggested upcoming fireworks, that something was on the verge of happening over the neighboring roofs that were turning lilac-colored and gold from the evening sun. The sun that was still burning atop the hill, but here, above us, the air had become still and brisk. We were also getting ready to leave when Sasha stopped us. He rolled on over here from somewhere in the suburbs, especially for this occasion. He was planning on staying the night at his relatives' house, but he didn't want to go to sleep yet, nor let us go, that's for sure.

"That's no good," he said seriously, "that's just not done. We can't just go home. We need to remember our deceased friend, otherwise he won't rest in peace."

Somehow his words helped us immediately regain consciousness and we started boisterously interrupting each other.

‘Sash, what are you talking about? Naturally we’re not going anywhere. Where could we even go? Who would be expecting us?’

Marat’s parents merely let out a deep sigh, but they didn’t turn us away. They just said they were going to bed since Alec’s kidneys had been aching since the morning and Raya Davidivna had to watch the news—supposedly she was expecting something, so they left us by ourselves, asking Alina, Marat’s wife, to bring us something from the kitchen. Without uttering a word, Alina got down to business. Only now, when everyone had gone their separate ways and when it had become quiet and empty, did we remember her and notice her presence. Only now did we see her, although she had been nearby this whole time, bringing something into and out of the house, putting up with the neighbors’ wailing, jotting down baked carp recipes, calling taxis for Sasha and Margarita and kissing everyone goodbye. Meanwhile, she appeared to be off by herself, standing aside, on the far side of the conversation and on the other side of the darkness. I only now noticed that she had a different haircut—she now had short hair that she was still trying to tuck away out of her eyes, out of habit. She was wearing a short, black dress, black stockings and slippers. Everyone there was dressed casually like beachgoers. The dress made her look trim and the slippers made her steps inaudible. She hadn’t taken off her wedding ring—she didn’t wear any other jewelry. Also, her hair was black, her skin was dark and it seemed as though it was just about to fade away into the night. I felt awkward—we were always nice to her and despite all of her and Marat’s antics we never treated her with disrespect and one must say that she was patient and flexible with us, although oftentimes we didn’t deserve it. Back in the day when Marat introduced us to her he warned her that we were his friends and she must be nice to us. She remembered those words. Generally speaking, she remembered everything Marat told her. And it just turns out that we forgot about her. I noticed that finally the rest of the crew also paid Alina some attention, possibly too much attention. Benya ran after her into the kitchen, carrying some plates and losing them along the way. Kostik dashed to clear off the table, mercilessly knocking dishes onto the floor. Even Sam forced Rustam out into the open as he was intimidating someone over the phone and yelling something about a pharmacy. And when everyone gathered around Sasha attempted to take control of the situation.

He told us a strange thing. He said that this is Marat’s last day with us, therefore we absolutely had to say some nice things about him. Otherwise, he just wouldn’t leave so easily. We were all for it. And we even started fervently recalling some stories, however we didn’t make any sense, we were merely fighting, interrupting and yelling over each other. Then Sasha asked us all to be quiet. Silence ensued and I suddenly saw how cold, sticky fog was

inching its way into the yard from the gate. It rose from the bottom of a black riverbed that the summer hadn't had time to dry up. I was creeped out immediately and that creepy feeling spread to the others. Everyone started to realize what Sasha, hunched over the table and flashing his cell phone to pour us drinks, had been warning us about—he had been warning us that Marat was somewhere nearby, standing behind us, and he wouldn't leave us until he heard the right words. What an unpleasant feeling—listening intently to sense your dead pal breathing down your neck. Your dead pal still has something to say and you know so many stories about him that it'd be easier for him to choke you to death than to count on you keeping them a secret. And at that moment someone cautiously and briefly tapped my shoulder. I shuddered and abruptly spun my head around—Alina was standing behind me, bashfully smiling and handing me napkins. I also broke into a smile, grabbed those damn napkins that immediately slipped between my fingers. I cursed them up and down, bent over to pick them up and banged my head on the table on the way up, thereby releasing everyone from the trance they seemed to have fallen into. And then everyone started talking all at once again, with Benya being the most vocal, so everyone started listening to him. At that instant Alina froze, standing behind me and listening closely. That clearly stressed Benya out—it was evident how painstakingly and carefully he was choosing his words so as not to insult the widow. He spoke, peering into our eyes, as if he was asking for our backing and understanding and providing an explanation, 'well, you understand what I mean, support me, confirm my story and remind us about what actually happened.' We did the confirming and reminding. Alina stood by for a bit, leaned over towards the table, gathered the empty lipstick-tainted wine glasses and looked to be heading back into the house, but something stopped her; something forced her to listen to a story that continuously trailed off and picked up at a different place. The fog crept even closer, quietly and persistently approaching her warm, dark body.

"I'll tell ya," Benya started a long build-up. He stood under the lamp and held a shot glass as if he was saying a toast. The toast was primarily addressed to Sasha who had become completely dark, hook-nosed and imperceptible in the twilight, "the thing I liked most about Marat," Benya rolled on, "was his manly nature."

He surveyed the crew, expecting to receive our backing, however we didn't quite understand what he meant, so Benya addressed Sasha once again.

"I'd like to say," he clarified, "that Marat always acted like a real man, a mature and responsible man."

Everyone agreed, and Benya continued, “we went to the same school, right? We’re peers. When Marat signed up for the boxing team I signed up with him.”

“Me too,” Kostik added.

“And me too,” Sam and I added in unison.

“Yea,” Benya continued, “but they cut us. I know that,” once again he turned to Sasha, “in your neck of the woods, in the Caucasuses, every other guy is a boxer. Or a sambo wrestler.”

“Or a mountain climber,” Kostik added, a bit off topic.

“But Marat was a real fighter,” Benya kept plowing ahead, “he never partied or drank. Even when he started dating Alina,” now Benya turned to Alina, “he never skipped practice.”

“Yea, yea!” we all chimed in.

Alina tensed up as the empty wine glasses clinked together in her hands. Everyone got quiet.

“And at this point,” Benya said after catching his breath, “I’d like to tell you a story. Maybe you haven’t heard it yet.”

So he started telling the story. According to him, Marat’s father gave him his first pair of gloves before Marat could even stand up straight. That’s to say that at first Marat learned to respect his parents, then box and only after that did he learn to walk. Inspired and persistent, he boxed everywhere and all the time. According to Benya his punches brought his opponents to the ground, as well as fame and triumph to his club. The coaches immediately noticed that and picked him up without hesitation, without asking how old he was, where he went to school and what religion he followed. They should have known better, claimed Benya, since Marat’s faith was a matter of great pride. He always carried around the hallows Benya brought him back from the Sinai Peninsula—the fact that nobody had ever caught a glimpse of them could be explained by the Olympic Committee’s strict ban on taking them into the ring. Moreover, Marat said all the Namaz-e-Tawbahs, kept the Sabbath, didn’t eat meat and paid the tithe. Benya didn’t clarify to what church exactly—he cited pure numbers instead. Undoubtedly, the coaches understood who they were molding at their club, what kind of person they had been lucky enough to cross paths with during their good-for-nothing lives. So, they clung to Marat as if he was their last chance, which was perfectly understandable. Who wouldn’t want to mold an Olympic champion? Everyone does. They trained him to be a champ—second place wasn’t an option. He sensed that, so when they tried time and time again to take him back to his roots, the Caucasuses, he always said they were molding him here and that he’d reach his fullest potential here. Ambition always invigorates us. Conscientious, daily effort, gruelling workouts and brute determination. All of that combined

just had to produce results. Marat transformed from a simple Chechen boy into an athlete all of Kharkiv counted on.

“There weren’t any opponents,” Benya stated a bit pretentiously, “well, of course, in his weight class,” he corrected himself, “who could even last five rounds against our Marat!”

“I’d like to recall,” Benya started recalling, “how he prepared for fights. Depriving himself, leading an ascetic existence, praying, meditating, being submissive and confident,” Benya had apparently lost his train of thought, “over the years his skin toughened and his bones became strong and cold. And when he fought for the regional crown the city’s founders stood planted in the stands, mesmerized by his smooth, graceful motion and victorious steps!”

“That’s the truth,” Sasha confirmed, and a blue tear trickled into his cognac.

“Win after win!” Benya continued his speech, “winning every fight! Triumph and success at every training camp! The blood of his enemies was caked on his hair and their wails fueled his progress! The most beautiful women fell at his feet!” at this juncture Benya remembered Alina and he faltered a bit, “well, I mean the women from the boxing federation,” he clarified, “all that union work and HR stuff.”

But then everyone felt a bit awkward, so Benya continued talking since he couldn’t come up with anything better to do.

“Well, the story I’d like to tell you actually happened at the training camp in Yalta. I’m telling it in such detail because I was there. The other boxers were no match for Marat’s agility and stamina. Nobody could put up a good fight against him without sacrificing their health. Nobody doubted that a great future lay before him, besides Chorney. Now I couldn’t tell you how he got his nickname. Actually,” Benya paused pensively, “what’s there to tell? Everyone just called him Chorney. He wasn’t from around here—his parents moved from somewhere out East or out West. I can’t remember. As a boxer Chorney has been long forgotten. Nobody really paid any attention to him back then—all the talk was about Marat. One time Chorney let loose at training camp. They lived at camp—they weren’t allowed to go into town because of their rigorous schedule and morning calisthenics. Well, they called up all the coaches for some meeting. All the coaches. Right then Chorney got rambunctious. At first he started drinking by himself. Then he got the massage therapists drunk. Then he went for the youth boxers. Marat was the only one who didn’t drink with him! For two days Chorney tried breaking him down, tempting him for two whole days. To went to such lengths! He sent the massage therapists over to him and egged on the juniors to get Marat to drink. But it was all futile! So I’d like to propose a toast,” Benya was trying to somehow wrap up this long-winded story, “to our pal, Marat, for his manly nature!” I noticed that Alina had stopped

listening and she went inside with the brisk fog caressing her calves as she moved across the lawn, “for his willpower!” Benya just couldn’t contain himself, “for his commitment to the sport and real male friendship!”