

## Wildflowers

I grew up in the Russian city of Sochi, on the Black sea. It was beautiful, standing besides the shimmering blue waters, overflowing with blooming roses and elegant palm trees. Behind it rose rocky mountains, with white, snow-covered peaks enveloped in mist. In the spring, a carpet of pale wildflowers was thrown over their craggy sides. I remember watching the rays of the rising sun gently wash over the rooftops. It was the first day of September of 1969. As in every school in the Soviet Union, it was the day classes started. I could feel restless anticipation as I walked to school that day, wearing the dark brown dress and white frock that was the uniform for all girls across the country. The day before, I had bought new school supplies, breathing in the smell of notebooks with crisp, clean pages, and admiring the rich indigo of the ink. My younger sister Nina skipped beside me. She was ten and I was twelve, but most of our friends were the same, since we all played together in the yards and streets of the small city. We were very different: Nina was funny, active and social. I was academic, serious and solitary. We both had wavy, wheat-colored hair tied back with big, white bows. But she was round-faced and chubby, while I was tall and slim. Nina and I lived in a small apartment with our mother and *babushka*, or grandmother. As I walked into school, I knew what would happen on the first day. Traditionally, all the students were seated in pairs, and we were paired up in such a way that the stronger students were seated with the weaker, so that they could help them with their schoolwork. I was the top student in my class; I always got the highest grades, I was the best behaved, but I was also always seated with the most unruly, lazy boys in the year. (For some reason, the best students were always

girls, and the bad ones were always boys). This year, a boy called Viktor would be in our class. He was a year older, but he had failed last year and had to repeat. Viktor was known to be the most uncontrollable child in the neighborhood. He came from a nice, quiet family, but he kept running away from home, getting in trouble with the police and he was an awful student. I was not surprised when I was seated with him. Viktor spent the whole day scowling at me. He never said anything, but I could feel his resentment. Viktor had light blond hair that was cut short and dark eyes that never met mine. I sighed. I was used to this: I had spent years dealing with boys like this... The bell sounded, and everyone jumped up and rushed towards the exit. As I was about to leave, I heard the teacher call me:

“Elena Pivovarova, could you stay for a moment?”

I paused and turned around.

“I would like you to work with Viktor. Help him with his homework, and try to talk to him. Find out why he behaves so badly. Maybe he will listen to you when he will not pay attention to teachers or his parents. Can you do that for me?”

It was not really a question that needed to be answered. It did not matter if I wanted it or what Viktor thought.

“I will try.”

I walked home sullenly. Was it fair that I had to work with a rude, ill-mannered villain just because I was smart and hardworking? Viktor didn't even want my help. The whole idea was pointless.

I still came to his house later to help him with his work. His mother, a kind, smiling woman in her forties, ushered me in. I had seen her before, because she worked in a small shop I went to sometimes. Viktor was sitting at his desk building a tower out of cards. He pointedly ignored me, even when I sat down next to him and opened up our history book. I looked at his stubbornly set face. This was not going to be easy.

But as weeks passed by, I felt the cold barrier between us melting. I came to his house often to help him with his work, but after some time, we began meeting each other just to talk, to play. I discovered that he was actually very bright; he understood all of the concepts we studied in school, and I was sure that if he studied, Viktor would get excellent grades. I was also surprised that, unlike some other boys, he was never deliberately nasty or mean. Viktor could be incredibly fun, in his own reckless way. He began to trust me, and his scowl was increasingly often replaced by a grin. We hardly noticed how we became friends.

The school year passed by quickly. Spring came. One day I went away with my family, and we only came back home in the evening. I walked into my room and gasped. It was overflowing with a sea of pale flowers, with glittering droplets of dew clinging to their petals. There were sweet-smelling lavender blossoms and the snow-colored bells of lily of the valley. They covered the floor and furniture; the whole room was filled with their fragrance. I buried my face in the wildflowers I saw every day on the mountains. Even though I never asked Viktor, I knew it had been him. And I soon found out how he had done it. Or, rather, my grandmother did. We lived on the second floor, and our apartment had a railed balcony. It wasn't hard for an agile person to climb onto it, but we

almost never locked the door into the living room. Once, my grandmother saw a pair of white-knuckled hands gripping the railing, and then a boy swinging onto the balcony. Viktor got scolded, but that didn't really bother him. His smiling face as he clambered over the fence became a common sight for me over the years to come.

I began talking to him. I could not understand why Viktor was constantly running away and in trouble with the police. He finally confided in me one evening when we were sitting near the beach. Viktor looked at me, and his dark eyes were suddenly very serious.

“Can I trust you?” he asked quietly.

“You know you can.”

Viktor gazed at the grey waters of the sea reflecting the orange sky and setting sun. He seemed sad and tired.

“My mother steals from the shop she works in. My father's no better. They only seem like quiet, good people. Really, they are just a pair of thieves and criminals. I can't hand them over to the police... They're my parents. But I can't stand living with them. The things they do make me sick. – He paused, resting his chin on his knees. – I have a dream, Elena. I want to leave, to go far away where no one knows me. To another town, another city. I've tried so many times, but the police always find me.”

I had never seen anyone look so forlorn, and yet at the same time I saw grim determination burning in his eyes.

“But I will keep on trying. They can bring me back, but they can't make me stay. I want to be free from all this.”

It was getting dark. We walked home in silence until we saw his house. Viktor stopped.

“I’m going to run away again tomorrow. I’ll try to get to a train station, board a train...” his voice faltered. “I’ll miss you. Please, promise you won’t tell any of this to anyone.”

“I promise.”

I watched Viktor turn around and jog towards his house. I stood there for a while after he was gone, shocked by what I had learned, thinking about how deceptive appearances could be, and the terrible mistake everyone made who tried to judge Viktor.

He did indeed disappear the next day, but was soon caught by the police. After that, we got closer than ever. Viktor always told me when he was planning to run away and where he was going. When he vanished, I was asked if I knew where he was, but I never told anyone. Once, Viktor told me he was going to leave again. A few days later, I was sitting in my room studying. My whole family had left for the evening, and all I could hear was the wind howling outside and the rain hammering against the windows. Then I heard the doorbell ring. I opened the door and yelped. Viktor looked terrible. He was soaking wet and shivering. His clothes were torn and he was filthy, covered in grime and mud. Viktor looked as if he hadn’t eaten or slept since I had last seen him. He managed a weak smile:

“Plan didn’t quite work out. Can I come in?”

His plan hadn’t worked out at all. Viktor hadn’t been able to get anywhere, and his parents had alerted the police that he was missing again. The police were searching

for him, and he had nowhere to hide or run. And he did not want to be dragged back to his thieving parents. So I decided to hide him.

“Get under there.” I hissed. “My mother could be back any second.”

Viktor crawled under my bed and looked up at me.

“Thank you.”

I hid him there for days, smuggling food to Viktor when no one was watching. But my grandmother was too observant; she found him after noticing me handing bread to someone under my bed. She wasn't even especially angry as she pulled Viktor out of his hiding place. *Babushka* just sent him home with his parents.

Years flew by incredibly swiftly, one season following another. The day we dreaded came too quickly. For others, it was usually a joyful event. For Viktor, his sixteenth birthday was nothing to celebrate. Until that time, he had not legally come of age, and the police could not really do anything to him. But as soon as he turned sixteen, Viktor was an adult. The next time he was caught running away, the police took him to a camp, or prison, for young criminals. I never saw him again.

But I never forgot Viktor. I always remembered the way he would swing onto my balcony, his lopsided grin. His bored face as I tried to make him work, and the way I hid Viktor under my bed. His serious face as he confided in me. And the flowers. The blanket of aromatic blossoms from the mountains covering my room. Everyone who judged him was wrong. They only saw the bad grades, the running away, the problems with the police. But they didn't know the reason. Viktor reminded me of the knights of old. He was noble: the only reason he ran away was because he couldn't live with the crimes his

parents committed. Yet his filial feelings wouldn't let him hand them over to the police.

Viktor was kind, he valued loyalty, he was determined and steadfast. He was the most decent and honorable boy in the class, and no one knew. I mourned when I learned where he had been taken. If anything could deprave a child, those camps certainly would. That evening, I stood on our balcony watching the last rays of the dying sun shine on the mountains covered with wildflowers.