

STUDY IN JEALOUSY

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Translated from the Russian by Marian Schwartz

. . . eyes . . .

The windows' lower halves were smeared, only heads poked out. Pale, eyes sunken, women pressed up against the glass, trying to get a look at theirs. Today was signout day. Brakes screeched on arriving cars, reception room doors slammed.

Pavel had already reported to his wife, and now, as she buttoned up the umpteenth item of apparel, he paced back and forth in the courtyard, swinging his bouquet like a cudgel. How should he act? First option: smile like nothing's wrong, give her a kiss, hand her the flowers, receive the child . . . or first receive the child, then hand her the flowers? Damned if he knew how it was done, and that was beside the point anyway. So, second option: Lilya, don't think you can kid me—and he chuckled despite himself: that's exactly what she was doing—kidding me. But if she thinks I think the kid is mine, she's got a surprise in store for her. So: Lilya, don't think you can kid . . . No, that's impossible. Just like that, out of the blue. The nurse or nanny's going to be right there. No, that's out. Third option: exceedingly gracious, zero emotion—greeted, gave, received, put in car, not a word en route, polite nod to the neighbor women, door locked in room, and—the whole truth, from day one, the facts, the figures, the lies, the certificate from the hospital, the note—yes, yes, the note too, written in her own hand. Sure, she was going to try to deny it, there might be tears, even hysterics, she'd call him the scum of the earth—let her! let her! The main thing was to get at the whole truth, quietly but firmly, to reach the point where, cry as you might, we're not going to live together. Help you out in the beginning? Gladly. Whatever you need—my pleasure: diapers, food, bottles, stroller, playpen . . . but the playpen's already bought, I picked it up yesterday, and I got paper diapers, thirty of them, your whole family could wet the bed—in general, any services, but that's what they are, services, understand, no sloppy sentimentality, no fatherly feeling, and in a month—that's it, we cut our ties, I go to my parents in Tushino (my father will have a heart attack; my mother will pass out), and . . . "Pasha!"

He shuddered and turned. Lilya was standing on the landing, holding onto the railing. Next to her a nurse's aide was puffing and holding something large and square-shaped, tied up in a blue ribbon.

"Pasha, what's the matter with you?" shouted Lilya. "I've been calling you and calling you, and you act like you've gone deaf."
"

He was flustered for a second. After all, he hadn't made up his mind. But it was too late to think it over, so he ran over to the porch.

"Ooh, what roses! Where did you ever get these in the winter?" Lilya presented her cheek to him and imperiously plucked the bouquet from his hands.

"Congratulations, Papa," said the aide, relieved to hand him the heavy aquarium. "You have a marvelous son."

"Thank you for everything, Anna Nikitishna. " Lilya smiled, dropping something into her pocket.

"Aw, sweetie, what are you thanking me for?" sang the old woman, dropping her hand into her pocket to determine the amount of the offering. "What are you thanking me for? I feel just like a mother to you, please! Only live in peace. You're young, beautiful, and before long it'll be our time to go. "

As they were driving away, the old woman made a cross over them. "University Avenue," said Pavel. "First building." The taxi jerked and water splashed out of the aquarium onto the floor. "This is an official car, too, by the way," said the driver to no one in particular. In any case Pavel responded: "I'll pay." I've been paying all my life. I often remember what someone said: we make our own hardships so that we can overcome them. That's me. I possess the rare gift of being wrong about people. My first wife, a theatrical makeup artist, captivated me with her domesticity, her almost primordial longing for the family hearth, I would say. A month later she'd run off' to Ufa with some touring artist. She offered to exchange the apartment, though. That's how I wound up in a communal on University Avenue, roped up, as mountain climbers say, to some female dinosaurs.

I was always drawn to women who were involved one way or another in the world of art. The reason being that I'm a stage tech myself. No, I'm content with my work, I get to travel around the country a lot, new people, change of atmosphere, what's bad about that? But, you see, there's something missing. You know perfectly well what kind of people are around you. That's why I immediately took Lilya's bait—a designer, book illustrator, no small potatoes. I wound up with her by chance, Vladik dragged me aLong. Like me, he prefers sensitive, artistic natures, which is why he sticks to high society. In short, he and I ended up on Maslovka, at some artists' place. They'd pulled out all the stops. At one in the morning, having wiped out all our liquid assets, we set our sights on Lilya's room at the Nikitsky Gates. And carried on there until three-thirty. Things settled down only after the neighbor went for a cop. I'd been about to be getting going, but Lilya snatched away my fur

cap so I had to stay. They put out the cot for me, and some Sveta and Igorek shared the bed with their hostess.

In the morning Sveta and I drank our tea and left. The others stayed. I don't know what kind of bug bit me, but I wandered around downtown for three hours imagining what they were doing there now . . . , him . . . her. . . . I promised myself then and there that I'd never go near her place again. But that evening Lilya called, asked me if I'd gotten back all right, she was sweet, and I forgave her everything. Two days later we arranged to meet at an exhibit. Then we went for a walk. Then we went to her place for tea. That night she was extraordinary. She sat Turkish-style on the couch, so still, and recounted her disorderly life in an undertone. "You've got green eyes," I marveled. She shook her foot and a cloth slipper dropped to the floor. On the other side of the wall, in her neighbor's room, the clock struck twelve. "All right, time for bed," said Lilya, "or else we're going to sit up until morning again." I brought out the cot. Lilya turned off the light. The alarm clock ticked on the table. I didn't feel like sleeping. "Are you asleep?" I asked. "No." "You know what I'm thinking about?" "Well?" "Are you and that Igor having . . . an affair?" "An affair?" She laughed in the darkness. "You're exactly like my mama." The alarm clock ticked loudly in the oncoming darkness. "I can't fall asleep," I said finally. "Can I get in with you?"

That was a strange night. Only once did I accidentally touch her shoulder and snatched my arm back. Exactly like a heathen scared to touch his idol, no doubt. I fell asleep quickly, but she fidgeted for a long time and sighed, shuddering, several times.

We started seeing each other often. We would meet by the monument and walk up the boulevard. When we started to freeze, we stopped in at a cafe to warm up. Lilya's birthday was in early March. Hoards descended on her. This wasn't the first time I'd seen some of them, but I liked to think it was the last. I already knew which of them Lilya had been close to at various times. She talked incredibly easily about it, whereas I . . . I kept dragging more and more details out of her for some reason. That day Lilya was especially pretty. In her long, floor-length, dark-green flowered dress and her red bugle-bead necklace, she was a real . . . I can't find the word. As was to be expected, all hell broke loose, they were smoking and swearing at the table, clinking glasses. At three in the morning they sang one last "Lech- ayim, boyars!" and everyone rolled out the door accompanied by a great racket and rumble. While Lilya was soaking in the bath, I cleared two dozen bottles, aired out the room, and washed the dishes. Lilya came out in her robe and those same red beads. She came to me, unbuttoned my shirt, and

nudged me toward the bed.

Two months later we were married. She called the boy Karp. Pavel didn't like the name, and it didn't suit the baby at all, but he held his tongue. So it's Karp. In the final analysis, it wasn't his child. Karp was born pudgy and silvery-scaly, with a streak of green. Like all newborns, he was colicky the first few days, kicked around the aquarium, making incessant gulping movements with his mouth, and calmed down only when Lilya approached. He was hostile to Pavel: no sooner did he get close than Karp turned his tail to him and stood motionless like that in the water, rustling his fins. "What's the matter with you, little one?" Lilya would reason with her son. "This is your papa. Now now, be a good boy." But Karp refused to be a good boy. As for Pavel, he made it quite clear to his wife that as far as he was concerned the new member of the family did not exist.

Thus he chose a fourth scenario. Lilya had a good idea as to the cause of the change, noticing how he made a show of avoiding the aquarium, of frowning at each mention of the word "papa," but she was so tired of his constant suspiciousness, of his silent game, that she decided to shut her eyes to everything, whether she thought it was another quirk of Pavel's or out of tactical considerations. Pavel spent hours without raising his head from his drawings; Lilya knitted and watched television. He answered her questions like "Are you going to eat?" or "Aren't you going to the pet store?" in monosyllables: yes- no.

He was meticulous about his trips to the pet store. Little by little it even began to afford him some pleasure. Having always considered fish-breeding a variety of philistine idiocy, he could now stand for hours observing striped guppies go from one wall to another all in a school or a red perch blinking at the visitors. He bought a special baby feed and no more than one package, enough, figuring six feedings a day, for three days. Lilya fed Karp, naturally. At such moments Pavel went out to the kitchen for a smoke. Fully aware of the risk of being waylaid by his neighbor, who would never pass up a chance to inquire into Karpusha's health, he still went, on principle, if only to sting the traitoress one more time.

The day he picked his wife up from the maternity hospital, late in the afternoon, his father-in-law had dropped by. Wearing a luxurious French overcoat and a reindeer cap, he was, as always, irresistible. Behind his father-in-law, grunting from the strain and loudly stomping their feet, two workers crowded into the room carrying a heavy box in import packaging. The wrapping was removed to reveal a glass cube with unusual drain pipes. "A Japanese aquarium," the father-in-law said nonchalantly. "Got it through their consulate, kids. Well"-

kissing his daughter—"congratulations, you're great, and you—" slobbering his wet lips on his face—"you're not so bad either, seeing as you're directly involved, so to speak." He'd prepared his jokes beforehand.

The next day his mother-in-law popped in, having paid the young people this honor the last time a year and a half before at their wedding. The audience lasted three minutes. Lilya's mama, that forty-rupee duck, tickled Karp with two expensively ringed fingers, shook a rattle over the water, dropped it with a loud splash and, gasping dramatically, made her exit.

His parents came as well, but they managed without any particular emotions. Neither his father nor his mother approved of his second marriage, Pavel knew that. Nor had they the first. Nor would they all those to follow, one assumed. Talk had probably reached them about Lilya's frivolous life before marriage, or maybe she simply had made a bad impression—it was hard to figure. The fact, however, remained a fact: his folks didn't like to visit them and weren't too anxious to have them over either. In this case, of course, they did come, but clearly not out of any great love for their grandson, but to make an appearance.

Once or twice Marina, Lilya's best friend, dropped by. "What a doll," she sighed. "For some reason I thought it would be a little girl. . . ." And she pulled out of her bag a mass of useless things: a pink cap, rompers, a set of colored bibs, and a massive comb, which in no way would the child be needing for at least another ten years.

Of his friends, Vladik the Handsome and Burshtein came by. Burshtein—a fat, overstuffed-looking clodhopper who was, nevertheless, quite agile and bouncy—stood in front of the aquarium lost in thought, catching watery blips with his round, bulging eyes, the black pupils rimmed in gold, and said thoughtfully: "Good goin', small fry, I mean, little guy." As if he actually appreciated the praise, Karp happily flicked his tail. Vladik dished out the office news and they left. Everyone left. It seemed to Pavel that they left more often than they came. And his wife was beginning to go out somewhere. . . . That fear that Lilya was cheating on him was always there. When he got back from business trips he often had the urge to grill his old lady neighbors—well, how has my loyal wife been behaving—but his pride wouldn't let him. Sometimes he set subtle traps, slipping in sly questions by the by which she would inevitably cut her own throat on. Zero. She was no innocent bug, and he didn't make a very good fly swatter. By the way, about spiders. Once he read in a definitive dictionary that in the north of Russia a spider is a pavel. That pleased him no end for some reason, and that same day he brought Lilya a poem. It ended

like this: "Like a gudgeon that's caught on a hook, like a spider whose web never took, I teetered along on the brink—without you. " And the dedication: "To my enigmatic Lilit. " There was also a hapless sketch—a crooked oval for a face, a little nose, and so on. . . .

Left to his own devices, he would sit up close to the aquarium and watch. Karp would fidget, bury his head in the sand, or else scrawl flourishes in the water. But Pavel kept watching. And—comparing. For this purpose he had acquired a hand mirror. Taking advantage of a moment when Karp, chewing fastidiously, swam up to the front wall, Pavel caught both of their reflections in the mirror and feverishly considered. Not my lips. I have nervous, thin lips, and he's some fatlipped lout. And fair skin. My eyes are brown, deep set, whereas this one's pop-eyed. Nothing in common. Stop! What about that spot on his right side? Damn it all it is a spot. Pavel pulled up his shirt, checked. No doubt about it: just like Karp's, low on the right, in the exact same place, a black spot. Matching birthmarks, you can't fight the obvious.

Pavel stood up and started pacing around the room. So, was it his or wasn't it? Had she cheated on him or not? And if so, then with whom? He didn't have a clue. No, that's wrong. It wasn't entirely clear whether she'd cheated on him, but it was clear as day that she'd changed. He just had to recall Lilya's first abortion a month before the wedding. Who was the father then? Him? Maybe Igor, that time he'd stayed? There was a whole other story with the second abortion, a year later. Pavel had been called up for six weeks to the army base. Barracks life weighed heavily on him. Moscow was so close, an hour's drive, but they wouldn't give him a pass, and the only respite were conversations on the pay phone before evening roll call. They could have . . . Every time, one of their neighbors came to the phone and with a curt "she's not here" hung up. After ringing off Pavel tossed and turned, imagining the most unbridled bacchanalia. All this in color, on high quality film, the most successful frames—from above, slow motion. The circle of partners kept expanding. There were artist friends, and the bearded neighbor on their stairwell, and Igor, and Vlad, and total strangers, too, whose faces flitted in the crowd. But the heroine was always the same: Lilya, Lilit, his black-haired Magdalene.

When he got back from the base, scrofulous from dust and angry at the whole world, his wife took him aback with the news that, well, she was six weeks pregnant. No sooner had she said that than all his nightmare visions came into focus. His eyes must have made it immediately clear to Lilya. There were no more conversations on the subject, and on Friday, when he came home

from work, he found her in bed, exhausted from tears, all the blood drained from her face, and understood everything. For about two weeks she avoided him like the plague, even started talking about divorce. He was eating himself up, cursing his suspiciousness, and tending to Lilya like a baby. Then they went to the Crimea, where they spent a wild three weeks scarcely showing their faces outside their dilapidated cabin, where it smelled of algae and creosote, and all was forgotten.

All right, so he'd made a fool of himself, fine, but this! This was as plain as the nose on your face. After all, here it was one on one, there was no possibility of error. He'd already figured it out on paper a dozen times, recalled the details of their conversations. No, he had it all exactly! Iron logic. Then why not leave her? Silence. Pavel glanced at the aquarium. Karp, standing on his tail, was greedily gulping air. His gills were puffing out like a smith's bellows. Pavel shuddered at the unexpected thought and began pacing faster between the couch and the window. So why not leave her? Because there was one, albeit illusory chance. What if he were wrong? Or if not him—then the doctors? Or if not the doctors—maybe she'd lied? One chance in a hundred. Laughably slight and at the same time scarily great. Once again he sits down at the aquarium with his small hand mirror and looks and looks. . . . And again he tells himself: I've got to get a grip on myself. Fuck all those old calculations, I've got to start fresh.

So . . .

When Karp turned one, Lilya decided to have a small family celebration . Since she had lost all her Maslovka friends by then, Pavel invited his co-workers. Yura and his wife came, the gloomy Burshtein came. Vlad the Handsome stumbled in an hour late, but with fabulous carnations. Everyone "shook hands" symbolically with the birthday boy and sat down to the table. The birthday boy himself was given party food, and now he was lying on the bottom, lazily digging in the sand with his pink caudal fin. He'd put on a lot of weight in one year. His movements suddenly had a kind of substantialness and staidness. Pavel extolled him as no less than a true civil councilor, and going up to him with a bag, bowed low and said; "Will you be so inclined as to dine, Your Excellency?" Karp ate silently, ignoring these attacks. He did not like Pavel and saw no particular reason to hide his feelings.

At dinner Pavel was distracted, drank a lot, and listened with half an ear. Lilya had already kicked him a few times under the table to stop him from pouring himself one after another, but Pavel didn't give a damn. Vlad and Burshtein were grappling. Burshtein had been sitting gloomily all evening, hadn't joined in on the conversation, had just chowed down on Lilya's salads.

Obviously, Handsome had stung fat-bellied Burshtein, who'd rolled his black Jewish eyes and talked excitedly, waving his fork with the potato still on it. "All we know how to do is shout!" screamed Burshtein. "Initiative! Energy! But where is it, this energy, I ask you? Raise dust—that we can do . . ." And despite himself he demonstrated just how that's done in Russia. In those moments, raging, with his disheveled beard, and the stolen dormitory trident in his right hand, he looked like Samson reducing the horde of Philistines to trembling with his terrible jaw. Olga and Yura sensibly moved back. "No," thundered Burshtein, "we, ladies and gentlemen, have energy for a ruble, a blow for a kopek, as you know. A mountain gives birth to a mouse!"

"Calm down." Lilya was exasperated. "Look, you've frightened Karp." Everyone turned toward the far corner. And truly, Karp was tossing around the aquarium, flying into the thick walls as if he were blind. Lilya got up from the table and went to quiet him. "All right, boys," Olga intervened. "Time to do the right thing. It's half past midnight, we're getting up early tomorrow."

They started standing up. Pavel came to and stared at the guests. When they all had their coats on, he too suddenly pulled down his coat, tripped, and fell. "Drunk as a skunk." Lilya frowned squeamishly. Pavel wanted to answer with something witty and insulting, but his tongue wouldn't obey him. When they'd rolled out the door, he realized he'd left his cap. "What, are you crazy?" said Burshtein. Pavel waved him off, and the five of them started walking toward Lenin Prospect to hail a taxi. Pavel returned home slightly sobered up, although there was still a ringing in his ears. He couldn't fit the key in the lock right away. Actually, the door was unlocked. Evidently someone had thrown the bolt after he'd left.

There was no one in the room—Lilya was washing dishes in the kitchen. Pavel, still in his coat, walked up to the glass cube, illuminated under four lamps with light blue bulbs. Karp was sleeping, his little nose poking into the sand. Pavel rapped his nail on the wall, but Karp didn't even stir. Then Pavel turned toward the door, locked the room from the inside, got down on his knees in front of the couch, and fumbled for the bucket they used for household chores. He put the bucket on the floor under the drain pipe set millimeters from the bottom and pulled out the clamp that served as a waterlock. An even stream poured out. Karp woke up instantly. At first he didn't understand a thing, being only half-awake, but when he saw his ill-wisher, he could tell right away something was wrong and he started to race about. Time passed. Pavel was sitting on the floor watching the water level fall with a gaze that lacked any expression

whatsoever. Another three or four minutes and the aquarium would be empty. Burshtein's idiotic question stuck in his mind: what, are you crazy? "What, are you crazy?" he repeated out loud, to whom he didn't know. Toward the end Karp went mad. It had all become perfectly clear to him. He fluttered his silvery little body and kept swimming to the surface every second to swallow some air. Pavel didn't seem to see him. He was sitting on the floor in his coat and mumbling something. Three fingers of water were left in the aquarium. At that point someone started jerking the door. "Pavel, what are you doing?" He could hear Lilya's voice. "Why have you locked yourself in?" He didn't answer. Didn't want to? Didn't hear? Lilya pressed her ear to the door, and in the silence the resilient sound of falling water distinctly reached her ears. "Pasha! Pavel!" she shouted. "Don't you dare! You're out of your mind! Don't do it, you hear!" Scrambling was heard on the other side of the wall, it was one of their neighbors waking up. A door slammed somewhere. Another. Slippers started shuffling. The last drops were pouring out of the drainpipe. Karp was lying on his side, his mouth gaping unnaturally and his tail flipping desperately against the glass. The door to the room shook from the weight on it. The old ladies' shouts and an incomprehensible whining reached him. Whether the old ladies were begging or threatening, he couldn't tell. Although, what did it matter anyway? At the bottom of the aquarium lay a silvery heap that looked at Pavel with glassy pupils. Suddenly Pavel, who until now had been sitting like a statue, began rocking slowly. Forward and back, forward and back. It was like a hypnotic trance. An incredible quiet fell, like after removing the seventh seal. And in the ensuing silence, somewhere far far away, at the other end of Moscow, the bells of Lykovskaya Trinity began to peel. What marvelous bells! the thought occurred to him. He smiled. And then he remembered. It was all so easy, just look: the same, round, bulging, the black pupil and golden iridescence, huge, biblical-