

Can I Talk to Nina?

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“Can I talk to Nina?” I asked.

“This is Nina.”

“It is? Your voice sounds strange.”

“Strange how?”

“It doesn’t sound like your voice...it’s tense. Are you angry about something?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe it’s not a good time to call?”

“Who am I talking to?”

“Since when do you not know who I am?”

“Who exactly is it that I’m supposed to know?”

This voice sounded about 20 years younger than Nina’s. As it was, Nina’s voice already made her sound about five years younger. When you don’t know a person, it’s hard to guess their age by the sound of their voice. Voices tend to age before the person. Or, the voice just stays young.

“Ok. Listen, I’m kind of calling you on business.”

“Well...you’ve got the wrong number. I don’t know you.”

“But it’s me, Vadim...Vadik. Vadim Nikolajevic! What’s the matter with you?”

“Well, there you go,” Nina said as if she were somehow sad to end the conversation. “I don’t know any Vadik or Vadim Nikolajevic.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I hung up the phone.

I didn’t call her number back right away. Surely it was just a mistake. Maybe my fingers just hadn’t wanted to dial her number. So they dialed a different one. But why?

I found a box of Cuban cigarettes on the table. They were as strong as the cigars. Perhaps they were made from the cut end of cigars. Anyway, what could Nina and I really talk

about on business? Sort of on business. Nothing. I had just wanted to find out if she was home. And if she wasn't home, it wouldn't have changed anything. Maybe she was at her mother's, for example. Or at the theater because she hadn't been to the theater in a thousand years.

I called Nina.

"Nina?" I said.

"No, Vadim Nikolajevic," Nina replied. "You've got the wrong number again. What number are you calling?"

"149-40-89."

"My number is Arbat – one – thirty two – five- three."

"Of course," I said. "'Arbat' – is that a four?"

"Arbat is on the G key."

"Oh, well then I'm way off," I said. "I'm sorry, Nina."

"Don't worry about it," Nina said. "I don't have anything to do anyway."

"I'll try not to call you anymore," I said. "Things must have gotten mixed up somewhere, and it keeps transferring me to you. You can't really rely on phones."

"No, you can't," Nina agreed.

I hung up the phone.

I'd have to wait. Or call Information for the exact time. Whatever went wrong on the lines would be avoided, and I'd finally get through.

"It's exactly 10pm," said the woman at Information.

It suddenly occurred to me that if they had recorded her voice a long time ago, like ten years ago, she might occasionally call for information when she was bored or home alone just to listen to the sound of her own voice – her young voice. Although it'd also be possible that she had already died. And then her son or the man who was in love with her would call Information just to listen to the sound of her voice.

I called Nina.

"I'm listening," said Nina in a young voice. "Is it you again, Vadim Nikolajevic?"

“Yes,” I said. “Clearly our phone lines are intertwined. But don’t get mad at me, and don’t think that I’m joking around. This time I paid careful attention to the number I was dialing.”

“Of course, of course,” said Nina quickly. “I wouldn’t doubt you for a minute. And are you in a hurry, Vadim Nikolajevic?”

“No,” I said.

“Do you have something serious to tell Nina?”

“No, I just wanted to know if she was home.”

“Are you bored?”

“Well, if I have to tell you the truth...”

“Oh, I see. You’re jealous.”

“You’re funny,” I said. “How old are you, Nina?”

“Thirteen. And you?”

“Over 40. It’s as if there’s a thick brick wall between us.”

“And each brick is one month, right?”

“Maybe even each day is one brick.”

“Yeah,” sighed Nina. “Then that’s a pretty thick wall. What are you thinking about now?”

“Hard to say. Probably nothing at this point. I am talking to you, though.

“But if you were thirteen or even fifteen, we could meet,” Nina said. “That would be a lot of fun. I’d say: come to the Pushkin monument tomorrow night. I’ll be waiting for you at seven. And then we’d meet. Where do you meet Nina?”

“Around.”

“Like by the Pushkin monument?”

“Not exactly. Usually we met by the Rosija.”

“Where?”

“By the Rosija theater.”

“I don’t know it.”

“You know, it’s in Pushkin Square.”

“Hmmm...even with that I don’t know it. You must be joking with me. I actually know Pushkin Square very well.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said.

“Why”

“It was a long time ago.”

“When?”

Nina didn’t want to end the call. For some reason, she just kept moving it along.

“Are you home alone?” I asked.

“Yes. My mom’s on the night shift. She’s a hospital nurse. She’s staying there all night. She could have come home today, but she left her pass at home.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well then off to bed, little girl. You’ve got school tomorrow.”

“You’ve started talking to me as if I’m a child.”

“No, you’re wrong. I’m talking to you like an adult.”

“Thank you. If you feel like it, lie down by yourself at 7pm. Good-bye – and it’d be better to not call your Nina again. Because it will just ring back to me. And that could wake me up, little girl.”

I hung up the phone. Then I turned on the tv and I found out that the lunar walk had surpassed 337 meters. The lunar walk was hard at work while I was doing nothing. The last time I decided to call Nina, it was already 11; I’d spent the whole hour spouting nonsense. I decided that if I was connected to the young girl again, I’d hang up immediately.

“I knew you’d call back,” said Nina as she picked up the phone. Just don’t hang up on me. Honestly, I’m so bored. I don’t even have anything to read. And it’s too early to sleep.”

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s talk. And why aren’t you sleeping this late at night?”

“I mean, it’s only eight o’clock,” said Nina.

“Your watch is really running late,” I said. “It’s already midnight.”

Nina laughed. Her laughter was pleasant, soft.

“You want to get rid of me so badly, it’s horrible” she said. “It’s October. It gets dark early. But you think it’s already night.”

“And now you’re joking for a change?” I asked.

“No, I’m not joking. Your calendar is lying to you just like your watch.”

“Why would it lie?”

“Of course, now you’re going to tell me that where you are it isn’t even October, but rather February.”

“No, it’s December,” I said. And for some reason, as if I didn’t trust myself, I looked at the newspaper lying next to me on the couch. Under the headline was written: December 23, 1972.

We were quiet for a moment, and I hoped that she would say “goodbye” right away. But then she asked:

“Have you had dinner yet?”

“I don’t remember,” I said honestly.

“Well then you’re not hungry.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Well I am.”

“And what, don’t you have anything at home to eat?”

“Nothing!” Nina said. “Not even if I searched with a flashlight. That’s really funny, isn’t it?”

“I don’t even know how I could help you,” I said. “Don’t you have any money?”

“I do, but just a little. And everything’s already closed. So what could I even buy?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Everything’s closed. Do you want me to go through my refrigerator and see what I have?”

“You have a refrigerator?”

“An old one. It’s the ‘North’ brand. Do you know it?”

“No,” said Nina. “And if you find something in there, then what?”

“Then? Well, I’ll take a taxi and bring it to you. You can go to the gate and get it.”

“Do you live far away? I’m on Sivcev Vrazik. House number 15/25.

“I’m on Mosfilm. Near the Lenin mountains. Behind the university.”

“Again, I don’t know it. But it’s not important. You’ve really thought it through, and I thank you for that. So, what do you have in the fridge? I’m just asking.”

“If only I remembered,” I said. “I’ll take the phone into the kitchen and we can look together.”

I went to the kitchen with the telephone cord curling behind me like a snake.

“And so,” I announced, “we’re opening the fridge.”

“You can bring the phone with you? I’ve never heard of such a thing in all my life.”

“Of course, I can. Where do you keep your phone?”

“In the hallway. It’s hanging on the wall. So, what do you have in the fridge?”

“Well, let’s see...what’s in this box? Oh, it’s eggs. Nothing interesting.”

“Eggs?”

“Uh huh, chicken eggs. Look, should I just bring you a chicken? No, it’s French, frozen. By the time you cooked it, you’d die of hunger. And your mom should be home from work soon. It’d be better to bring you some sausage. Or no, I found some Moroccan sardines – 60 kopeks for a can. And to go with them I have half a jar of mayonnaise. Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” replied Nina rather quietly. “Why do you joke like that? I even wanted to laugh at first, but now it’s just making me a little sad.”

“Why do you say that? Are you really that hungry?”

“Come on, you know very well.”

“What do I know?”

“You know,” answered Nina. She was quiet for a moment and then added: “But let it go! And tell me, do you have a red egg?”

“No,” I answered. “But instead I have fish fillets.”

“Ok, I’ve figured it out,” replied Nina firmly. “Let’s keep talking about things. It’s all clear to me now.”

“What’s clear to you?”

“That you’re hungry too. And what do you see from your window?”

“From my window? Houses, a factory that makes copiers. Right now, at half past midnight they have a shift change. There are a lot of young girls at the gate. I can see the Mosfilm building. A fire station. And train tracks. The tram is going along them right now.”

“You see all that?”

“The tram is far away, that’s true. You can only see a chain of taillights.”

“Oh, please, what a liar!”

“You shouldn’t speak to your elders like that,” I said. I can’t lie. I can be wrong. What am I wrong about?”

“You’re wrong about seeing a tram. You can’t see that.”

“And what, it’s invisible or what?”

“No, it can be visible, but it certainly isn’t shining in your window. I bet you’re not even looking out the window.”

“I’m standing right in front of it.”

“Do you have the light on in the kitchen?”

“So, I’d guess I can’t reach into the refrigerator in the dark. Especially since the lightbulb just went out.”

“There, you see? I’ve caught you for a third time.”

“Nina, my dear, tell me. What have you caught me doing?”

“If you’re looking out the window, then you’ve annulled the blackout. And if you’ve annulled the blackout, then you’ve turned off the lights. Right?”

“No, that’s not right. Why would there be a blackout? Are we at war?”

“Aha! How can anyone prove their own guilt like that? And what, do we have peace?”

“Sure, I understand – Vietnam, the Middle East...I’m not talking about that.”

“I’m not talking about that either.... Wait, are you an invalid?”

“Thankfully, I’m just fine.”

“Are you in the reserves?”

“Which reserves?”

“Well, why are you not on the front lines?”

At that point, I started to think for the first time that something was wrong. It seemed like she was trying to pull my leg, but she did it so matter-of-factly and seriously, that I was almost frightened.

“What front should I be on, Nina?”

“It makes complete sense. Where is everyone? Where’s dad? On the front lines with the Germans. I’m telling you this seriously; I’m not kidding. You say very odd things. Maybe you were even lying to me about the chicken and the eggs?”

“I’m not lying,” I replied. “There is no front with the Germans. Maybe it’d be better if I came to visit you.”

“I’m telling you, I’m not kidding!” Nina almost shouted. “Stop. In the beginning our conversation interested me and cheered me up. But now I don’t feel good about it. Excuse me, but you sound like you’re only pretending to tell the truth.”

“Honestly, I am telling the truth,” I said.

“I’m horrified by it. We hardly ever cook in the oven anymore. We only have a little wood. We’re in the dark. We have just one kerosene lamp. Today we don’t have electricity. I really don’t want to be sitting here alone. I’ve wrapped myself in all of the warm things I could find.”

And then she vigorously, almost angrily, repeated the question:

“Why aren’t you on the front lines?!”

“But what lines should I be on?” These jokes were going too far. “What front lines exist in the year 1972!”

“Are you taking shots at me?”

Once again, her voice changed in tone. It was disbelieving and tiny – barely a meter and a half off the floor. And before my eyes came an unlikely, forgotten picture – of what happened to me now many years ago. Nearly 30 years ago, when I was 12 years old. And there is a stove in the room. And I’m sitting on the couch, hugging my legs. And a candle is burning – or was it a kerosene lamp? And the chicken seemed unreal – like a bird from a fairy tale – the kind that people only eat in novels – even though I hadn’t been thinking of a chicken at the time...

“Why are you so quiet?” asked Nina. “Come on, talk.”

“Nina,” I said. “What year is it?”

“1942,” said Nina.

And then in my head I started piecing together the inconsistencies in her words. She doesn’t know the Rosija theater. She only has a six-digit phone number. And that blackout...

“Aren’t you wrong?”

“No,” said Nina.

She really believed what she was saying. Maybe her voice was fooling me? Maybe she wasn’t 13 years old? Maybe she – a forty-year-old woman – developed a mental illness back when she was a girl, and that it now seemed to her that she was still back there, during the war.

“Listen,” I said calmly. Just don’t let her hang up. “Today is December 23, 1972. The war ended 28 years ago. Do you know that?”

“No,” said Nina.

“But you do. It’s almost half past midnight. How can I explain this to you?”

“Fine,” said Nina calmly. “All I know is that you’re not bringing me a chicken. I could have figured out for myself that there are no French chickens.”

“Why?”

“Because the Germans are in France.”

“There haven’t been any Germans in France for a long time. There are only tourists. But you know, German tourists come here too.”

“How is that possible? Who lets them in?”

“And why wouldn’t we let them in?”

“I guess you just don’t want to tell me that the Nazi’s defeated us! Are you going to turn out to be some kind of terrorist or spy?”

“No, I work for the CMEA – the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. I deal with the Hungarians.”

“You’re lying again! The Hungarians are fascists.”

“The Hungarians expelled their fascists a long time ago. Hungary is a socialist republic.”

“Oh, I’m afraid that you’re really going to turn out to be some kind of terrorist. And even with that you just make things up. No, don’t deny it. You need to just tell me before it happens. Choose whatever you think you should tell me – just as long as it’s good. Please. And I’m sorry that I talked to you so rudely. I just didn’t understand you.”

And so I didn’t argue with her anymore. How could I explain? I once again imagined sitting in that same year – 1942 – and longing to know when our troops would conquer Berlin and hang Hitler. And to further know where I lost my food voucher for October. So I said:

“We will defeat the fascists on May 9, 1945.”

“That’s not possible! That’s still so far off.”

“Listen to me, Nina, and don’t interrupt. I know this better than you. We will conquer Berlin on May 2nd. There will be a medal for the Capture of Berlin. Hitler will commit suicide by drinking poison and he’ll give the same poison to Eva Braun. The SS will then take his body to the court of the Reich’s office, pour gasoline on him and burn him.”

I wasn’t talking to Nina. I was talking to myself. I dutifully recited the facts: if Nina didn’t immediately believe me or understand me, I’d come back to it when she asked for more explanation. I almost lost her when I told her that Stalin would die. I regained my confidence when I started talking about Yuri Gagarin and the new Arbat. I even made Nina laugh when I told her that women would be wearing bell bottoms and short skirts. I also mentioned that our troops would cross the border into Prussia. I lost my sense of reality. The little girl Nina and the young boy Vadik sat on the couch in front of me and listened. But they were starving. And Vadik was in an even worse situation than Nina; he had lost his food voucher, and so until the end of the month he and his mother had to make do solely with her food voucher – her worker’s voucher – because Vadik had lost his voucher somewhere in the yard. And it wasn’t until 15 years later that he suddenly remembered how it happened, and he suffered over it all over again because the voucher was found within one week. It’s true: what happened was that it fell out into the cellar when he threw his jacket on the barred window and went out to play football with his

friends. And then I said, a little later, when Nina was tired of listening to what she still thought was a good story:

“Do you know Petrovka?”

“Yes, I know it,” said Nina. “Didn’t they rename it?”

“No. So...”

And I explained to her about how if she went through the arched entrance there would be a yard. And that at the far end of the yard, she would find a cellar with barred windows. If it really was October 1942, in the middle of the month, then in the cellar, there would almost certainly be a food voucher. We had played football in the yard, and I lost the voucher there.

“That’s horrible!” Nina said. “I wouldn’t survive anything like that. You’ve got to go there right now and look for it. Don’t wait.”

Now she was starting to want to play the game and we lost reality somewhere. Neither I nor Nina fully understood what year we were living in – we floated out of time but were closer to her year of 1942.

“I won’t find the voucher anymore,” I said. “Too much time has passed. But if you can, go there. The cellar should be open. Worst case, you could say that you’re there because you’re the one who lost the voucher.”

And at that moment, our connection was lost.

Nina disappeared. There was a squeak in the receiver. A woman’s voice said:

“Is this 148-18-15? I’m calling you from Ordzhonikidze.”

“You have the wrong number,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” the woman’s voice said indifferently.

And the receiver made odd noises. I immediately redialed Nina’s number. I had to apologize to her. It was also necessary to laugh with the girl about it all. Things had started to get really stupid...

“Yes?” said Nina’s voice. The other Nina.

“Is that you?” I asked.

“Ah, is that you, Vadim? What, can’t you sleep?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m looking for the other Nina.”

“What?!”

I hung up the phone and dialed her number all over again.

“Have you lost your mind?” asked Nina. “Have you been drinking?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I hung up the phone again.

There was no point in calling now. The phone call from Ordzonikidze had put everything back in its place. So, what was her real number? Arbat – three, no, Arbat – one – thirty-two, thirty...No, forty...

“I’ve been sitting at home all night,” she said. “I thought that you’d call me and explain to me why you were acting so strangely yesterday. But clearly, you’re still completely crazy.”

“Clearly,” I agreed. I didn’t want to tell her about the long phone calls with the other Nina.

“And what other Nina are you looking for?” she asked. “Is that supposed to be a metaphor? Are you suggesting that you would like to see another one?”

“Good night, Ninka,” I said. “I’ll explain everything to you tomorrow.”

The most interesting thing was that this strange story had an even stranger ending. The next morning, I went to visit my mother. I told her that I’d finally start working on cleaning her attic. I had been promising her I’d do it for three years, so I finally showed up. I knew that my mother never threw anything away. It’s because she feels like she’ll be able to use it at some point. For an hour and a half, I rummaged through old magazines, textbooks, and sorted volumes of Niva magazine. The books weren’t themselves dusty, but they smelled like old, warm dust. Eventually I was able to find a phone book from 1950. The book was full of cards and papers tucked between its pages, the corners of which were torn and dirty. This phone book seemed so familiar to me that it was strange – if it hadn’t been for the phone call with Nina, I wouldn’t even have remembered that it existed. And I was a little ashamed, as if standing before a uniform that had served honorably, only to be turned over to an old man upon his death.

I remembered the first four numbers. G-1-32. And I also knew that the telephone – if neither of us had been pretending or if someone wasn’t just taking shots at me – had been used on Sivcev Vrazek Street, at house number 15/25. There wasn’t even the slightest chance of finding that phone. I sat down with the phonebook in the hallway, on a stool that I’d brought out from the bathroom. My mother didn’t understand what I was doing, and as she walked by, she just smiled and said:

“That is so you. You begin taking out books ten minutes after you started. And then the cleaning is over.”

She didn't notice that I was reading the phone book. And I found the phone. For the past 20 years it had been used in the same apartment as in 1942. And it was under the name of K.G. Frolov.

I agree – this was stupid. I was looking for something that could not exist. But I considered it quite probable that about ten percent of fully rational people, if they were in my shoes, would do the same thing. So, I went to Sivcev Vrazek Street.

The new occupants of the apartment didn't know where the Frolov family had moved to. If they had ever lived there at all? However, I did have the right house. The elderly recordkeeper remembered the Frolov family; with her help, I found everything I needed from the directory. It was getting dark. Snowflakes were falling in the new district between the towers of the uniform blocks of flats. In a regular two-story shopping center, they sold French chickens in clear packaging covered with hoarfrost. I felt tempted to buy a chicken and bring it, even though it'd be thirty years late. But I was glad I didn't buy it. There was no one at the apartment. And since the doorbell sounded so loud, it seemed to me that no one even lived there. They had left.

I wanted to go, but I'd already come such a long way, that I rang at the door next door.

“Excuse me, is Nina Sergejevna Folov your neighbor?”

The boy in a t-shirt with a smoking soldering iron in his hand replied indifferently:
“They've gone away.”

“Where?”

“They traveled north a month ago. They won't be back until the Spring. Nina Sergejevna and her husband.”

I apologized and started walking down the stairs. And I thought that it was quite probable that there was more than one Nina Sergejevna Frolov living in Moscow who was born in 1930. And then the door behind my back opened again.

“Wait,” said this same boy. “Mom wants to tell you something.”

His mother immediately came to the door buttoning up her bathrobe.

“And who are you to her?”

“Just, you know.” I said. “An acquaintance.”

“You're not Vadim Nikolajevic?”

“I’m Vadim Nikolajevic.”

“Then please,” said the woman, moving into the hallway. “You almost missed me. She would never forgive me for that. Nina told me exactly that: I won’t forgive you. She left you a ticket in the door. But likely the children tore it down. I mean, it’s been a month. She said that you would come in December. She even said that she’d try to come back, but, you know, it’s far...”

The woman stood in the doorway, looking at me as if she were waiting for me to reveal some sort of secret to her about unlucky love. Surely, she’d also asked Nina: what do you have with him? And Nina would have also said: “He’s an acquaintance.”

The woman took her time, but when nothing happened, she pulled a letter from her bathrobe pocket.

Dear Vadim Nikolajevic!

I’m certain now that you’re not coming. After all, who would believe a child’s dream that we recognize to be no more than a dream? Except that back then, I actually found the food voucher in the exact same cellar you told me about...