
Her Smile
DIANA REYN
Её улыбка

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Standalone

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An English translation of a Russian-language original.

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“Have you seen my phone anywhere?”

“Sorry, no.”

“Oh, right — of course.”

She laughs, gives my hair a playful ruffle, and snatches up the phone lying on the table right in front of me. Then she’s off, calling back over her shoulder that I’d better not fall behind. But I’ll never catch up with her anyway — she’s always a few steps ahead. And she knows it.

“Grab my bag! It’s there — I left it on the armchair.”

Her voice drifts from somewhere far away, and a moment later the front door slams. She is forever misplacing her things, scattering them all over my house. Perhaps she imagines that trailing after her, picking everything up, is my very favorite pastime?

I find the bag quickly enough, but I hadn’t allowed for the fact that it was — as usual — unzipped. Everything spills out over my feet: a water bottle, a thick notebook, and one other weighty thing I can’t identify. I gather it all back in, spend an age patting around under the armchair in case anything has rolled beneath it, and at last I’m free to follow. Outside, a car horn is already blaring.

“Come on, slowpoke!”

Barging in unannounced, littering my house with her belongings, dragging me off into the countryside without a by-your-leave — and then blaming me on top of it all? That’s Keri for you.

She snatches the bag from my hands impatiently, throws it into the car in a single motion, and before I’ve even buckled my seatbelt, we’re moving. In all the rush I can’t recall whether I switched off the kettle, locked the door, or changed out of the T-shirt I sleep in. Too late either

way — we're already hurtling down the road, and the wind lashes hard against my face.

On the way, Keri's phone rings, and she chats away for ages, laughing loudly and tossing out suggestive jokes. It's probably Hal — her new acquaintance, picked up at some party. I've never met the man, nor would I want to, but I suspect he suits scatterbrained Keri perfectly. In which case she ought to be riding with him right now, not with me. But her actions have never bowed to logic, so I simply count myself lucky that she brought me along. It's not often I manage to escape anywhere.

Keri slams on the brakes, and I very nearly fly through the windshield. On every side is fresh wind, swarms of insects, the pungent smells of grass and flowers. Keri rummages frantically, shaking her bag, and I realize with horror that I did, after all, leave something of hers at home. And it's bound to be something important.

Then the commotion subsides, and Keri, without warning, seizes my hand and hauls me forward.

"Look, look — isn't this a gorgeous little spot! Down there is the lake I told you about, and from here you can see the wild ducks perfectly! There are seven of them — a mother duck and six ducklings. Nothing like those fat, sluggish gluttons in the park. Real, untamed nature!"

She whoops and spits away her own hair, which the wind whips about, plastering it to her lips. Strands lash against my cheeks and glasses too, but I leave them be. I gaze down at the wild ducks and smile.

"Do you like it?" Keri asks. "I absolutely love it myself. Oh, quick — look at that duckling..."

She doesn’t finish, and I never learn what becomes of the duckling. Strange. Keri doesn’t usually leave sentences hanging; she gives thought to what she’s blurted out only after the fact.

But she falls silent, and suddenly I feel her take my arm and press herself close against my side. I feel awkward — even a little afraid. I stand motionless, catching the sweet scent of her perfume, the smell of mint gum, hearing two hearts pounding.

“Tell me I didn’t drag you out here for nothing, says Keri, and I catch a shadow of guilt in her voice.”

Guilt? That’s a first. I’d never have suspected Keri capable of shame or remorse.

“Of course not for nothing, I answer awkwardly.” I’d never have found this lake on my own. I can even hear the duck family splashing about from here.

Keri brightens at once and resumes her chatter. She doesn’t let go of me, doesn’t step away, though through her chatter I hear the phone left in the car beginning to ring again. Well then — this time Hal goes unanswered.

I hear her waving her arms, pointing things out, laughing. She keeps tugging at me, offering a running commentary on the ducklings’ doings, though she knows perfectly well I can’t see any of it anyway.

And though I’ve never seen her smile — never seen Keri herself at all — I know she is the most wonderful girl in the world.

Paper Love

Do you still keep the letters I sent you? The ones with their rows of tiny letters, faint as a wren's footprints. I steeped the paper in coffee to give it a lovely hue and a pleasing scent. I thought of perfuming it as well, but that would have been altogether too vulgar. After all, we don't live in the nineteenth century anymore, thank goodness! I can't imagine what I'd do without the telephone and my records.

I wrote to you in the library, having built myself an impregnable fortress out of the Brontës, Shakespeare, Austen and Burnett. Those old books were destined for the recycling pile, but they served me one last time — they shielded me from prying eyes.

Yes, I know how upset it makes you to learn that young men speak to me. Your letters fill with mistakes, your words become jumbled, you say things that don't quite fit — and at once you grow so lost and so sorrowful that my heart aches for you.

You don't believe you could mean more to me than strangers from the library, the tram, or the market. I've told you so many times how frightened I am of unfamiliar boys, how I resent it when they speak to me, and still you grow distressed every time.

Don't. Please don't.

Do you still keep my photographs?

I never come out well in pictures, so I often hide my face behind books, scarves or flowers. Yes, I know — you've told me not to be shy of myself, that I'm very pretty and have a lovely smile. I'll try to be braver, and you shall have more photographs of my face.

I keep every single photograph of yours. You, your dogs, even the ordinary streets you wander through. You send me so many picture cards that I ought to start a separate album just for them! I tuck them between the pages of favorite books, into my diary, into the bureau.

And so I often see your face, stumble upon you here and there. It's lovely to meet you at least like that—at least from afar.

Have you forgotten my voice? How I wish I could record our rare phone conversations onto discs, to play them back before sleep like personal lullabies. Instead, I repeat to myself whatever you last told me, or put on the Frank Sinatra record you sent me, and for the hundredth time whisper: "In other words, please be true, in other words, I love you..."[8] If only I could believe there's a message in it from you yourself.

It saddens me that dried flowers sooner or later crumble into dust, and ink fades. The corners of letters and postcards grow creased, and one day folds appear in the paper. It's heartbreaking to watch the memory of you—like your words, like a piece of you yourself—decay and grow old. After all, your letters, cards and parcels are all I have. All that can prove you exist.

Doesn't it trouble you, having a sweetheart you can only read, and now and then hear, but never touch, never invite over?

It's astonishing how an entire relationship can fit inside one box. How an entire person can fit in one box.

I keep your letters, your photographs, your gifts in the box that once held a porcelain doll. There's still a little space left—only a little. Soon I shall need a new one. I wonder how many boxes I will have gathered by the time my life runs out? I would gladly surrender an entire room to them, but then... will there be anything larger than a box? It would grieve me terribly if my existence in someone's life were to end beneath a bed or in a closet, among yellowed paper, sun-faded snapshots and dusty records—faded, creased, forgotten.

How astonishing it is that you can miss someone you have never seen in the flesh, that you can even believe in someone as a living person when all you possess is a photograph and a phone conversation.

A photograph, and a conversation long since dissolved into the air, vanished forever. But no. You exist in the books you recommended to me, in the films you watched. In the music you hummed along to, in the names of the flowers you picked. That I cannot place in a box. That I cannot show my sisters. I can only carry it in my heart—invisible, untouchable.

Do you still remember me? Do you still keep me in your box?