

Unexpected Encounter

Misha left the main building of Moscow State University. Today the University was open to the senior grade high school pupils, and they were welcome to visit the lecture rooms and laboratories. Misha was dazzled and confused by the endless number of instruments, machines and facilities.

Outside, Spring was in full swing. It was one of those days in May when the land is flooded with bright sunshine and the young greens sparkle with emerald light.

Misha sat on a bench trying to clear his head. A young girl was passing by. She was beautiful — in a glance he took in her large dark eyes, long lashes, and lovely face. He followed her with his eyes thinking of making her acquaintance. It would be great, for example, if some hooligan tried to attack her and he, Misha, would come to her rescue. And the girl would give him a smile . . .

Suddenly Misha felt someone looking at him. Only now did he notice that he was sitting next to a gentleman in his fifties. Slim and tidy, he was staring at Misha with smiling eyes.

Misha flushed. He didn't like old people: they were usually very demanding and liked to interfere in everyone else's business.

“Young man, please do not look at an old and distinguished academic as if he's a dog,” uttered the gentleman kindly, but firmly, rapping out the words. “When I was your age I used to think that all people over forty were stupid old fellows who were out of their minds

and needed to be retired. As you grow older you start viewing age differently. In England, for example, people over 60 are considered to be middle-aged. Well, I have not introduced myself yet,” added the stranger. “I am Professor Leonid Andreevich Petrov. How should I address you?”

“Misha,” mumbled Misha, very confused by meeting a famous scientist and by his familiar yet respectful manner.

“Misha is a very good name,” said Leonid Andreevich. “Well, Misha, I heard you asking questions during the tour of the University. I liked your questions. Curiosity is very important in science, and so is the ability to ask questions, even if they are still not very sophisticated ones. Very often a fresh, inexperienced glance grasps more than the persistent and patient study of a professor who can’t see beyond the end of his own nose.

“Well, Misha, I am busy with an investigation where a keen, inquisitive and direct mind is required, and you seem to possess all these qualities. Therefore, I invite you to help me. The summer vacation has already started, so you may have some spare time. If you’re interested, please come tomorrow at ten o’clock in the morning to this address.” with that the Professor gave Misha a business card with his office address. “You’ll need to bring your ID card so that you can enter the building.”

“All right,” said Misha, and without adding anything else he shook the hand of the smiling Professor.

Next morning, at ten minutes to ten, Misha was standing at the entrance to a small building with an engraved plate: ‘Institute of Systems Studies of the Academy of Sciences.’ Misha gingerly entered the lobby and joined the queue of people waiting to be allowed in by the guard. Everyone showed him their passport and the guard, after a cursory glance at the name, took his time scrutinising a small piece of paper with something written on it. Now it was his turn: after a swift glance at his ID card, the guard carefully studied his pass as if trying to find some mistake, then handed it to Misha and said: ‘Room 201, second floor.’

The door of room 201 bore a nameplate: “Professor Leonid Andreevich Petrov.” Misha knocked at the door and opened it, but instead of the Professor he saw a young woman at a desk. The woman was pretty, but had an austere and discontented look about her. Misha was immediately reminded of his English teacher.

“Good morning, I was invited by Leonid Andreevich,” said Misha and gave his name. Suddenly the face of the young woman — and Misha understood that she was the Professor’s secretary — changed completely, expressing a warm welcome.

“Leonid Andreevich is expecting you.” She pointed at a huge oak door.

Misha opened the door and saw Leonid Andreevich smiling at him with a telephone in his hand.

“Here you are, professor,” joked Leonid Andreevich interrupting his conversation. “Take a seat while I finish my call.”

While Leonid Andreevich was talking, Misha examined his room. It was a rectangular room with two tables — a desk which was occupied by Leonid Andreevich and a large table with chairs for conferences. Opposite the conference table there was a blackboard and some posters. One of the posters, beautifully made, read: ‘Study of a pulsar’ and below there was some kind of a diagram.

“Hello, Misha,” Leonid Andreevich said merrily. He took a seat opposite Misha and said: “Yes, young man” — as if inviting him to start a conversation, and, quite unexpectedly, Misha asked “What is a pulsar?”

“That is a good question. Let us start with it.”

And he told Misha the following.