



David Klopić

*Another Day in a
Moldovan Supermarket*
Încă o zi într-un supermarket moldovean

A story

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“Moldova is the least visited country in Europe. And so I came to its capital city [Chisinau] to see why... It did not take long to find the answer. Years of theft and corruption by politicians has left the locals of the country tripping up on broken pavements and walking past abandoned buildings on their way to collect their 40 Euro pensions.”

bald and bankrupt, from “Nobody Visits This Country...Find Out Why”

Moldova is a country that nine times out of ten will fly over every tourist's radar. Its capital, Chisinau, once used to be a city full of colour and a promising future, only for the Soviet Union to fall apart and Moldova to gain independence which, unlike countries such as Estonia, has been unable to fully make use of. If you ask me, dear reader, I would never blame people such as yourself and I for this outcome; greedy politicians are to blame, driving around the city in their overpriced cars as elderly people have to tread across potholes, derelict hotel buildings, Soviet-style fountains that no longer pump any water out, and finally a wall of thieves so that they can collect their pensions worth a set of cooking pots.

People in the job market would be subjects of pays below average. Not everyone would make a successful surgeon in the country and even if they did, they would be long gone from Moldova before they found a job there. Those working in grocery stores had it worse than teachers and professors, while a mechanic could barely make ends meet despite the effort they put in fixing those previously mentioned vehicles. And we do not talk about people who have no other option than to sell their own hair! In other words, one could certainly think of countries with worse salary, but Moldova has seen better days.

One such day, a cold, foggy, humid day, it was time for Sergiu¹ to wake up. Out of several alarms he had set on his phone, he responded to the one at twelve o'clock, the last one; if he had not woken up after it, he might as well not have a job. His job, namely, was a supermarket employee. It was certainly not the highest-paying job, but "any money was still money", he would argue. For breakfast, he served two scrambled

1 /'serdʒju/

eggs on a plate and an apple next to it. In the bathroom, he washed his face and teeth. Back in his bedroom, he tidied up the bed and removed his cell phone from the charger. He ironed his uniform and folded it into a paper bag labelled Teşan², the name of the store where he worked, with a slogan that roughly translated to “the king of decent deals”. Right after breakfast, he spent a few minutes watching the news, after which the clock struck one. Sergiu strapped his messenger bag around his neck and on the shoulder, held the paper bag with his uniform in one hand and the keys to his flat in the other. He walked out of the flat and towards a half-busy road. It was Thursday, and he walked with quick steps.

Sergiu went past Hotel Național, which was now just another abandoned building in Chisinau that fittingly accommodated tourists in former times, when it had been called Intourist. Next to it was a fountain filled with rubbish but which had once welcomed tourists to one of the republics of the USSR. Sergiu also strolled by the wall of thieves, plastered all over with faces of people in the political sphere who showered their citizens with empty promises, in hopes that they specifically would be elected. Ten minutes of walking later, Sergiu arrived in front of Teşan, his workplace, a light blue building with tints of dark. The doors automatically retracted which led him into the office. While outside the store had some cracks and dark spots due to age, one could easily assume the interior belonged to a brand-new store. Their walls were pure white, showing no cracks or dirt; shelves were neatly organised and clearly labelled; the staff was well-dressed for the occasion, and the meat display of the store’s butcher was clear as day, and the meat within exposed to the public.

Inside the office, which however lacked any decent light, Sergiu greeted Sorina, who oversees him and his co-workers.

“Good day, Sergiu,” she said with a usual smile.

“Good day, boss,” he would reply.

He pulled out his employee card and punched it into a reader on Sorina’s table, leaving a small hole where the date was printed. Most

² /'te:ʃʌn/

businesses have done away with using traditional readers, instead investing into ones where one is only required to hold the employee card next to the reader to confirm their arrival. Sergiu went to the closet to change into his uniform and put aside his ordinary set of clothes. Sorina smiled again after assigning him work for that day.

“Good luck today,” she said, “and don’t work too hard.”

Sergiu thanked Sorina and left the office. He looked around the store to determine his starting point. His job that day was to inspect shelves and, as much as it would pain him, throw out any item which was past or close to its expiry date. Exceptions to that were school accessories, pieces of clothing and only a few technology items that the store sold. Sergiu began his shift close to the counters where, fortunately, he did not discover any expiring products. The fridge, taking up a considerable width of the small rectangular area attached to a larger, more varied space, also did not contain anything worth discarding. No sooner had he got to the condiment aisle than he noticed a few bottles of ketchup whose expiry date was on January 31. Sighing, Sergiu tossed the bottles into the shopping cart he retrieved from the entrance and continued to seek other products. The chocolate aisle by which he drove his cart was nearly empty, containing only a dozen chocolate bars that were still safe to consume. Meanwhile, a small group of Sergiu’s co-workers had gathered next to the chemistry aisle where Ivan, a prominent figure in the workforce, was telling stories to them.

“I saw our colleague the other day, running at the speed of light when a small rock got in her way and,” he stopped to wheeze, “she splashed her entire dress! Guess who had to take a bath that day?”

Barely any laugh ensued aside from a girl who laughed simply for the sake of it.

“Oh I got more where that came from, just you wait! Now, now, I guess we should get back to work...”

The group dissolved and its people scattered all over the store. As Sergiu was coming up behind another shelf of products, he bumped into Ivan.

“Hey, weirdo!” Ivan yelled. “Maybe you should watch where you’re driving!”

“Sorry,” Sergiu’s voice cracked.

“What are you doing, anyway? Interior work? Ha!”

Ivan pulled away Sergiu’s cart and ordered him to tidy up the warehouse while he takes care of expired products. Without saying another word, Sergiu rushed through the door, labelled “for employees only”, leading into the warehouse. Next to the huge door intended for trucks was a broom which he picked up and began swiping left and right, starting from the door to the store. As he got to the other door, he heard a truck driving backwards, so he set the broom down and swung the door wide open. Backing away, Sergiu watched as the truck drove a little more inside. Once the engine was switched off, a middle-aged man got out of the vehicle, holding a clipboard with a piece of paper attached to it.

The driver greeted Sergiu and the two opened the luggage of the truck and unloaded most products which the store had ordered. While they were sorting through the paper, Ivan came into the warehouse and, having seen Sergiu, tapped him on the shoulder and made him jump.

“You,” Ivan said, “this isn’t your job! Go back inside and do what your boss told you!”

After apologising again, Sergiu returned to the store while Ivan continued with paperwork.

“He was doing just fine, that boy,” the driver said to Ivan.

“He’s never done this type of work before,” Ivan replied. “He isn’t good with papers like I am.”

On the contrary: partly due to Ivan breathing down his neck more than his actual boss, the only job Sergiu never did was related to management; he did not even know the password to unlock Sorina’s computer. Anything else, however—whether at the counter, with a broom, on a cleaning machine, or while displaying new products, weighing fruit, vegetables and nuts, and even doing Ivan’s job of importing new products from the warehouse—he has done all of them, often times in quick succession.

While he was removing expired products from their shelves once again, an elderly woman approached him, asking him where the chocolate was.

“Follow me,” he said, walking ahead of her when he noticed she was moving much slower than him; “Take your time,” he added.

At the chocolate aisle, the woman requested a noisette bar from Milka. “Would you like 100 or 400 grammes, ma’am?” Sergiu asked.

“Four-hundred, please,” the woman said, further commenting that it had been ages since she was called “madam”.

She thanked him by gently bowing to him after placing the chocolate in her shopping basket. While watching her leave, Ivan approached from behind and made him jump one more time.

“Don’t you be slacking off!” He shouted. “Come on, those shelves aren’t gonna empty themselves!”

“No I was just...”

“Slacking off? Don’t talk back to those above you!”

Ivan tapped Sergiu’s back quite roughly before escaping to another corner of the store. Shaking his head, Sergiu returned to a wide fridge adjacent to the one he explored earlier.

“Sergiu! Over here!” His boss shouted from a distance as he pushed the cart towards her. “How’s it going? Where have you been?”

“At the warehouse,” he said.

“Wasn’t Ivan supposed to take care of papers there? What were you doing?”

“Nothing, just cleaning...”

Sorina pouted. “Are you letting other people take advantage of you again? I told you that your job is to check expiry dates and throw away products that are past it.”

“I know... I apologise.”

Having looked around the store, Sorina gently rubbed his back, told him to keep up the good work and then vanished into the office while, with red cheeks, Sergiu returned to work. His cart continued to be filled with a few more products, namely some detergents and other bathroom

cleaning liquids. Later, Ivan badgered him to go back to the warehouse as he noted the forklift not being clean enough, causing Sergiu to run back into the warehouse and wash the place, and to ensure that the forklift was not dirty.

This was a typical work day for Sergiu; Sorina would assign him one job, but would be ordered to do a different task by mainly Ivan, despite both being governed by the same person. It especially becomes a problem when Sergiu works in second shift, that is, until ten in the evening, which is what he was doing that day.

At exactly ten o'clock, most employees have left the store to get some rest, leaving out Sergiu, who was told to wipe the floor. As the cleaning machine was broken, he used a mop to undertake that task. Suddenly, a blinding white light shone in his face.

"Sergiu?" Sorina's voice echoed through the store. "Why haven't you gone home yet?"

Sorina took away the cleaning utensils and led Sergiu into the office. Almost all of the store's lights have been extinguished, creating one large, intimidating dark room, especially in the office.

"You need to stand your ground," she explained, both seated at her table; "If we are to suffer, we should suffer together, not alone."

"But... the guy told me not to t-talk back to him," Sergiu stuttered.

"It doesn't matter! You're a hard-working man and a bright future is ahead of you, but you have to learn to say 'no'. It's not a crime to say a two-letter word³!"

"You're right," Sergiu said, nodding.

"Next time, please don't let other people push you around, okay?"

"I'll try," was his response.

"In any case, you have a day-off tomorrow," Sorina said. "I told my manager what you were doing today and he allowed me to make changes to your schedule. Tomorrow, you should relax and do whatever you want."

"Is it really okay, boss? I only had a day-off five days ago..."

³ Context: "Nu" is Romanian for "no".

“I know, but you do deserve to rest, especially after today,” Sorina beamed. “When you change your clothes, may I drive you home?”

“It’s not far,” Sergiu said, “only ten minutes on foot. But thank you...”

“No problem, but don’t be afraid to ask for a ride if necessary. Enjoy your rest day, you hear?”

Sergiu punched his employee card into the reader for the second time to sign off from his shift. He and Sorina stepped out of the store without forgetting to lock the office first, followed by the entire building. Since they lived in opposite directions, Sorina wrapped her arms around Sergiu and wished him a good night. She, letting go of him, walked away from the premises, as did he. Ten minutes after the stroll, Sergiu took a quick shower and brushed his teeth before sliding under the blanket to watch an episode of “Marvellous mouthpiece” (seeing as one episode was almost one and a half hours in duration) on his television. As the episode ended, he switched it off, plugged his phone back into the charger and plunged into a slumber without worrying about the following day.

Having had breakfast at eleven, Sergiu set out on a stroll to the heart of Chisinau, whose few redeeming bits have been the shops. At a lonely stand in the city centre, he purchased a plastic glass of izvar⁴ costing around 30 Lei⁵ to keep himself warm during another cold, humid day, and a plate of cheese-filled dumplings for lunch at a restaurant he selected at random. While taking a detour back home, he stumbled upon yet another abandoned (almost demolished) building; it was once a high school which he attended. He climbed a flight of stairs leading to a music room where a piano was still in place, albeit nowhere near as functional, given that the keys produced an awkward, not at all classical sound. “Acest oras merită mai mult”⁶ was written on a wall that was on the verge of falling apart. Sergiu sighed after reading it and walked downstairs. He said goodbye to

4 Izvar /'i:zvʌr/ is a hot beverage with pepper, cloves and sugar mixed in red table wine (Cabernet and Merlot).

5 Approx. €1.50.

6 “This city deserves more”

the building and returned to an empty road, rambling to himself in Estonian. On his way home, he stopped by a supermarket (not Teşan) to buy a few groceries for dinner preparation: he wanted to try making cottage pie. Because he lived alone, he adjusted the measurements before purchase so that he would prepare only two servings. The end result satisfied him and he consumed one plate of the pie. He spent the remainder of the evening watching television and checking the news before he fell asleep at eleven. The television turned itself off an hour after he went to bed.

A new day dawned and Sergiu woke up at six to commute to Teşan. He changed into his uniform and punched his employee card at Sorina's table.

"Did you rest well?" Sorina asked.

"That day-off meant a lot, thank you," he replied, displaying a smile.

"Aw, look at you! Now, remember what I've said... By the way, your colleagues are discussing something at the chemistry aisle. You should join them!"

"I will," Sergiu said while putting on a cap.

"Now go out there, and don't work too hard!" Sorina quickly blew a kiss from her desktop.

Sergiu hurried over to the chemistry aisle where he, indeed, saw his co-workers gathered in a circle.

"Took you long enough," Ivan greeted, "now come listen!"

Having assumed his position within the circle, Sergiu quietly listened to Ivan speaking.

"I've gathered all of you here because a certain holiday is fast approaching," he began. "Do you know what it is?" He stopped for a bit. "Indeed, it is Valentine's Day! And more and more people in our country celebrate it by buying lots of chocolate. Issue with that is, our store has most of its chocolate past the expiry date. So I've come up with an idea: to make more money, I will take out all the expired chocolate and label them as discounted at twenty percent off! Like, come on, it's just chocolate, what could go wrong?!"

Sergiu looked away for a moment.

“And,” Ivan continued, “I need you to assist me in creating a few stands which will hold all this chocolate. Does anyone object? Oh, silly me, of course not...”

Before finishing his sentence, Sergiu, after quietly inhaling and exhaling the store air, raised his hand. He sensed his heartbeat slowly increasing.

“Leave it to the kid to make an objection... So what is it?”

Sergiu disregarded his heartbeat and spoke:

“I... I... I don't really... celebrate Valentines.”

“Cool story,” Ivan replied, “so what does that have to do with anything I said?”

“So... Also... Isn't expired chocolate b-bad for you?” Sergiu spoke as his muscles tensed up.

“Hey, I had a *lot* of chocolate that expired long ago... and guess what? No diarrhoea, no problem! So what's wrong with selling it to people?! What, do I *have* to listen to workplace guidelines all the time?”

“M-maybe...”

“*M-maybe...*” He mocked Sergiu. “Maybe *you* do, but this is good for all of us! But I know, you already make 6,500 Lei⁷ a month!”

“You didn't have to mention his pay, sir,” a female co-worker whispered. “There is a reason why it's so high...”

“Shh, I don't care!” Ivan exclaimed.

“No, she's got a point,” Sergiu said in her defence. “Why do we gotta compare each other based on how much m-money we make? Like it matters in this country where buildings are slowly crumbling away and th... thieves run this place!”

“Who said a thing about thieves and our country and buildings?!” Ivan replied, clenching his fingers. “Are you participating or not?”

After taking a deep breath, Sergiu leaned over to Ivan and told him:

“N... No!”

⁷ Approx. €328.

Still tensing up, Sergiu ran away from Ivan and towards the office where Sorina was still working on her computer.

“B-boss... may I please use the restroom?” He asked while his voice cracked.

“What’s wrong, are you alright?” Sorina asked, lifting her eyes from the computer screen and placing her hand on his forehead. “Hm, it’s not a fever or anything... Will ten minutes be OK with you?”

“Yes! Thank you, boss!”

Bowing to her, Sergiu left the office and to the bathroom that was part of a sports cafe next to the store’s entrance. Inside the restroom, he washed his face once before looking at himself in the mirror.

“It’s OK, Sergiu... You made the right choice. You will not take part of Ivan’s scheme... You will continue to work as usual... And you will be all right.”

He finished another business in the restroom before washing his hands and heading out, on the way letting Sorina know he was returning to his duties, namely more janitorial work which was not as intense as the previous night.

“Did you guys hear how he spoke to me?” Ivan said after some time. “Ooh, the nerve! We should be working as a team, right?”

“But choco...”

A female employee opened her mouth to utter a sentence, but quickly closed it and hid behind another employee.

“You guys are up for some teamwork, correct? You’ll help me realise this Valentine’s Day sale, won’t you, people?”

“Yes, sir,” all employees replied one by one.

They scattered once more to complete their tasks, leaving Ivan to talk quietly to himself:

“Who does he think he is, anyway? He’s just a mere employee! *Oh, he works so hard...* Do they not know that my work is the most beneficial to the store? Ooh... We’ll see how hard you’d be willing to work with a little discipline...”

Sergiu enjoyed a relatively quiet work day as he cleaned the floor and a few shelves for later restocking (with the sole exception of the still half-empty chocolate aisle). As his shift drew to a close, Sergiu put away the mop and bucket after rinsing both in some water from the sports cafe bathroom. Once his watch displayed 15:15⁸, he entered the office to punch his card into the reader.

“Good work today!” Sorina said. “Are you tired?”

“I’m fine... If anything, I’m not sure what to do after this,” Sergiu said, laughing.

“I always take a nap when I go back home,” she rested her head on the table.

“But aren’t you working all day, boss?”

“Not always! Some days I’m able to go home earlier like you do. Speaking of which, are you going to rest? You seemed in distress earlier. Are you alright?”

Sergiu smiled. “Thank you... I’m okay, I promise.”

“If you say so,” Sorina nodded. “See you tomorrow!”

“One more thing,” Sergiu stopped to say; “This office begs for a renovation. Or at least a wall reconstruction... I don’t mean to sound harsh or anything...”

“So you noticed... True, it is hard **not** to. No worries, I will discuss this with the manager.”

Saying goodbye once more, Sergiu exited the store. On his way out, he noted how high surveillance cameras were fixed on the ceiling and how they did not record anything that could be heard; their one and only concern was movement. He hoped they would not catch any thieves, or people trying to sabotage the store or its equipment.

Valentine’s Day approached two days later. The day before, Sergiu experienced another ordinary day at work, whereas the other day began seemingly ordinarily, aside from a substantial increase in customers.

“Lots of work to be done today, huh?” Sergiu said to Sorina in the office.

“True, I’ve never seen this many people before! But I’m sure you will do great like always,” Sorina said while straightening a few bits of paper against the table.

That day, Sergiu was responsible for customer service and work with meat and dairy products, slicing salami into pieces and cutting cheese for grating at home. Having shown one customer the way to the chemistry aisle, he was approached by Ivan who, as always, tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey you,” he said, “there’s something wrong with the cleaning machine again. I tried turning it on but it just won’t work... Could you check it for me, please?”

Nodding, he followed Ivan to the chemistry aisle where the cleaning machine was sitting to the right of the passage into the aisle. Sergiu climbed on top, flipped the key and held a button for ignition, but the machine made a sound as if it were delirious with a sickness, coughing repeatedly and refusing to ignite.

“Wasn’t this *just* refuelled?” Sergiu asked.

“Maybe the fuel is bad,” Ivan replied while covering his mouth; “Not every gas station has decent gasoline. Can I get some for you?”

Sergiu pondered for a moment while Ivan slowly distanced himself from him. After being reluctantly given the green light, Ivan ran out of the store at an athlete’s pace.

“Heh... You fool! The fuel was just... too sweet!”

The nearest gas station was five minutes on foot, but only two when running. Holding an empty container, Ivan requested five litres of diesel oil. Luckily for him, some gas stations still allowed filling containers instead of just motorised vehicles. The gasoline was paid for and Ivan sprinted back into Teşan to assist Sergiu in cleaning the tank and giving it a refill, then getting the machine back up and running.

“This gasoline looks... blurrier than the usual unleaded kind,” Sergiu remarked.

“Oh, you don’t know? The harder it is to see through it, the better it powers an engine!”

“Really...? That’s news to me.”

Ivan stepped away from the machine, allowing Sergiu to climb on top and attempt to ignite the machine. The moment it happened, however, was when Sergiu felt a sudden jerk of the machine...

“Are you sure you got the right fuel—”

Suddenly, the machine took off, without any hesitation. It launched straight into a shelf of fruit, but Sergiu managed to steer it away. However, it was no use; the machine was moving at the speed of light, and Sergiu would only be able to steer it for so long. Behind him, he left a trail of brown goodness which Ivan melted into a liquid that was easy to spread and hard to clean up afterwards.

“The die is cast... Work hard now, little man!”

He was clicking a few buttons and flicking through levers that triggered absolutely nothing when, unbeknownst to him, the machine pushed a shelf of soup and condiments so fiercely that the shelf was flipped ninety degrees, with one customer just barely making it out. Sergiu struggled to get off of the machine as it really had been speeding into whatever he tried to control it towards; the next shelf contained pickled vegetables and marmalade, a worthy opponent. The pickled water splattered everywhere, most jars shattered the moment they hit the ground. Moving the machine to the right, he avoided colliding with the other two shelves holding snacks and drinks respectively. Alas, he instead toppled over the chocolate shelf (still begging to be restocked), but due to its proximity to other shelves, they all dropped down like a row of dominoes. Customers were evacuated to the counter while the play was unfolding. After bringing down canned food and smashing a good chunk of the wide refrigerator, the worst was yet to come: the steering wheel ceased to function and Sergiu was headed straight for the meat stand. The butcher cowered in the corner of his counter as the machine built up last bits of speed before crashing into the display, shattering even more glass. Sergiu finally stood up from the machine, which writhed for a couple of moments more before it shut itself due to being low on fuel.

The play was over, and the end result made Ivan smile from a mile away. As if everything had been set up proper, a harsh voice echoed throughout the store, calling for Sergiu to collect himself and hurry into the office pronto.

“Look at this place... It’s in shambles!” It was the voice of the Manager, the one who oversees the entire store, including Sorina.

“How dare you!” The Manager yelled his guts out in the office. “I thought you were better than this, Sergiu, sir!”

“B-but it wasn’t m-me...” Sergiu’s body was shaking like a cocktail being prepared.

“Stand your ground, then! Who did this?!”

“It was... it was... it... I... Iv...”

“I object,” Ivan said, appearing out of nowhere and bursting of confidence as he showed the Manager his phone and played a short video of Sergiu wrestling with the cleaning machine. “Look at the mess he’s made,” he giggled.

“Oh, you don’t need to tell me, I have eyes,” the Manager retaliated, adjusting his rectangular spectacles. “Well, Sorina? You got anything to say in defence?!”

In a cold sweat, Sorina replied: “I do not believe this! Sergiu would **never** do that!”

“She’s not lying! I... I would never—”

“And yet, the proof exists that you did just that... Oh, the horror!” Ivan said in the lowest form of wit. “Oh, good Heavens, what are we to do...? Surely, you aren’t going to...?”

The Manager screamed bloody murder to fire him, and the entire office shook violently from the shout. Ivan giggled. Sorina and Sergiu both gasped. The Manager repeated the words, putting emphasis on the first word and stretching it like an accordion playing a traditional folk song. Swinging her arms all over, Sorina reached for a piece of paper, prepared the printer and the document for dismissal, which she shakily held in front of the Manager, who grabbed a stamp and vigorously slammed it onto the bottom right corner of the paper and one more time

with another stamp. He tugged the paper from her and shoved it into Sergiu's hands before aggressively showing him the closet door, then the exit. When he changed into his standard clothes and with a frown on his face, Sergiu said goodbye while Ivan whispered "good riddance" to himself. The Manager returned to his regular duty of doing nothing while Sorina spent the next few hours also sitting in front of her computer and browsing a Romanian piano-breaking forum.

Teşan was forced to cease operations as early as five hours prior to standard closure time, and all customers had to be kicked out. These five hours were dedicated exclusively to cleaning. However, Ivan had sneaked out of the store and left his job to the rest of his co-workers. Regardless of a shorter opening time, the Valentine's Day sale proved to be a success—the store had sold almost two-hundred bars of expired chocolate without anyone batting an eye. Out of all the chocolate, three bars were missing, but that was because they were melted by Ivan to be used in his "social experiment" with Sergiu, who was the same as he has been three years ago, as if he was still in university and unable to apply for a job at all.

Sergiu arrived home and boiled some water to make lavender tea. He turned the television on to catch a glimpse of another "Marvellous mouthpiece" episode, but missed the majority of it because he fell asleep under the effects of lavender. When he woke up again, it was almost seven o'clock. He put on a jacket and went shopping for some more food. While browsing, he ogled some red wine which he purchased along with a fresh bowl of gnocchi with mushroom sauce from the express restaurant. Sergiu found a cold bench just outside the store and sat down to unwrap the plastic fork and knife, and to crack open the wine bottle. He chugged a mouthful of it, then began eating the food with a runny nose and one or two tears running down his cheeks. He ate helplessly and stopped one more time to consume some wine. As he was finishing up and was just taking another sip from the bottle, he heard a familiar voice:

"Sergiu...?"

He turned away from the person and sprayed wine all over the pavement.

“B-boss?” He replied, looking back at Sorina. “Well... I s’ppose yer not me boss any more. Got outta work fur t’day...?”

“Yes, the manager said I could go home. Everyone else is cleaning up...”

“Um... um so sorry... Twas me whodunnit... who caused this mess...”

Sergiu swallowed some more wine.

“No way!” She picked up Sergiu by the shirt. “You and I both know this isn’t your fault!”

“Buh... buh the cam’ras... c-caught me in 4K...”

“They should have caught any other troublemakers that caused you to lose your job, you’ll be fine,” Sorina reassured him. “Want to go to my place for a bit? It’s cold here.”

Sorina offered to carry his wine bottle while Sergiu wanted to finish his plate of gnocchi before strolling by a trash can where Sergiu tossed it after emptying it. She lived in a flat, just like him. When they arrived, Sorina told Sergiu to climb the stairs to the second floor. Meanwhile, she hopped down to the boiler room where she threw a couple of logs in the furnace for flames to consume them. She walked up to the second floor, unlocked her place and pointed at the open door. It was a modest accommodation. The bathroom was the only room on its own; the rest of the place was one giant room where she slept, made food, dined, and watched television. Sergiu sat on the couch, hugging a pillow, and Sorina served them a cup of tea each. She sat down and rubbed his back, telling him that everything was alright.

Before the thought escaped her head, she picked up an envelope with Sergiu’s name on it from the low table in front and gave it to him, not moving an inch away from the couch. He unravelled it and revealed eight one-thousand Lei and two five-hundred Lei banknotes⁹.

“My manager gave me this before I left,” she continued. “It’s compensation for your previous hard work, he said.”

“R-really? Did ‘e really mean ta give this t’me...?”

⁹ Which totals up to approx. €453.

“He calmed down after some time passed. Didn’t you know he has anger management issues?”

“Oh... *kurat*. How woulda know that...”

Sorina opened her eyes while consuming tea and shifted her gaze to Sergiu.

“*Vabandust?*” She said curiously. “Was that *Eesti* I just heard?”

Indeed, Sergiu spoke a word not commonly found in a Romanian dictionary, nor in colloquial speech.

“*Täpselt*,” was how Sergiu confirmed his answer; he was speaking Estonian. *Kurat* was a curse word, *vabandust* was “pardon” and *Eesti* both referred to the country and the language.

“Tell me more,” Sorina said, rubbing her chin; “But tell me in *Eesti*.”

Sorina was partly pulling his leg when she said she wanted to hear Sergiu speaking this foreign language. It came to a pleasant surprise to her when she found herself understanding many words that Sergiu said as he talked about his future life. Sorina, too, had spoken the language to a decent degree. In exchange, he also discovered that Sorina was only twenty-six years old, making her one of the youngest bosses in the history of Teşan.

“Oh, I wouldn’t brag about that,” Sorina laughed. “I’d rather say that I’ve become the first boss to pay any employee 6,000 Lei! You know who I’m referring to, right?”

Sergiu’s cheeks became red again. “Ah think ah do.”

Sorina pinched his cheeks, stating how red they were and complimenting his looks when drunk. She released him and leaned back on the couch.

“So you said you wanted to get a language diploma?” She asked, now in Romanian. “What level are you aiming for?”

“C1,” Sergiu replied after a sip of tea.

“C1? You must be quite confident in yourself! You could get away with B1 at least if you’re considering a citizenship... You’re not too drunk, are you?”

“N-no... Ah really do mean tu take the C1 exam.”

“If you say so. But I did notice you had a good way with words, so I don’t doubt you’ll succeed...”

She then turned towards Sergiu all of a sudden and held his hands. She confessed her thoughts: Sorina yearned for more than just a straightforward visit to Estonia. In fact, as she pointed at a framed document on the wall, she explained that she had taken a B2 examination in Tallinn, the capital, two years ago, and that she had been waiting for a perfect opportunity to leave the country ever since. To put it in plain Romanian, Sorina suggested a getaway for both of them once he passed his language test.

Taken aback by the sudden decision, Sergiu spent a few moments in silence. It was true that he would not live in Moldova forever; veritably, he had been trying to save money to start living in comfort and making money in Estonia, just like Sorina. He studied their language just as hard as he had sweated in Teșan for a pay-check, through books and online television. In reality, a larger sum of money was allocated to a commercial VPN service¹⁰ to allow Sergiu to view foreign shows, and not just news. He mentioned to Sorina how due to that incident, he ought to take the Estonian language examination two years earlier. Ultimately, Sergiu put an end to his wait; a chance to seek better life has come into view. He replied with a resounding “yes”. Sorina could hardly contain both her excitement and her tears; she squeezed Sergiu tightly. Her wait also ran its course.

Sergiu and Sorina came together frequently in both their flats to discuss their future, mainly in Estonian. Sergiu had fully sobered up and barely touched the wine bottle since he first visited her. Besides brushing up on his speaking skills, he read some Estonian texts which Sorina had prepared and he answered questions related to them; she tested his writing by making him conceive a review to the most recent film he had watched,

¹⁰ VPN (Virtual Private Network) is an encrypted connection over the Internet from a device to a network (according to Cisco). People use it to secure their connection with another website (although HTTPS already ensures security), but in most cases it is used to circumvent censorship and geo-blocking (in case of Sergiu, to allow him to view copyrighted content).

and lastly they watched a news programme to exchange views on current affairs in that country.

February was drawing to a close, and Sergiu had submitted his application to take on proficiency examination in Tallinn. Nevertheless, a return ticket was not cheap, but Sergiu was fortuitous to afford a 4,280 Lei¹¹ ticket to Tallinn and back. Sorina was still occupied with keeping the store in business as it was back to regularly scheduled busywork. After her shift was over, she offered him a ride to the airport just outside Chisinau. When his flight was announced from the speakers, Sergiu and Sorina shared another hug.

“Edu, Sergiu! Break a leg!” She shouted while shaping a heart with her hands. Sergiu raised his hand, showing a thumbs-up while riding an escalator to the next floor. Once fifteen minutes went by, he walked through the door to be enplaned for Tallinn.

The examination took place in a grammar school, on a Monday, consisting of all parts he had practised for, all spanning around four hours. He needed ninety minutes to write a summary from bits of information and a 260-word essay based on a few clues; forty-five minutes to answer seven open-ended and ten multiple-choice questions after listening to two excerpts from a radio programme; sixty minutes to read two articles and an extract from a novel, having to circle the correct answer twenty-two times, plus the best summary for one of the articles; finally, for the speaking part, twelve minutes were dedicated to Sergiu introducing himself to the jury, and he participated in a discussion about technology aficionados for another eight minutes. His concentration dwindled around the speaking bit, but not so much that it proved to be a distraction.

Nonetheless, the results did not come out immediately. Sergiu had only booked a hotel for less than a week, so he confidently concluded his exam that day, spent two days sightseeing and getting acquainted with the people and the cuisine, and returned to Moldova on a Thursday. He made sure to provide an e-mail address so that he would receive his results. While waiting, Sergiu thought about the incident on Valentines and

¹¹ Approx. €216.

remembered something important: something that might shed light on what had occurred behind the scenes. Standing upright and with a low heartbeat, he walked into Teşan where he requested to see Sorina in her office. While one of the employees tried to get her permission, Sergiu sprinted towards the infamous chemistry aisle. “It’s there,” he whispered to himself before setting aside a hoard of toothbrushes and unveiling a hidden camera, silver and yet hardly noticeable. Its battery had almost died, but that was the least of his worries. When he bounced back to the office’s front door, the employee guided Sergiu inside a fresh new office; even the employee card reader had been confiscated in place of a smaller one, scanning cards by simply placing them nearby.

“How did your exam go?” Sorina said, standing up to embrace him.

“I hope I’ll get positive results next week or two,” he replied; “The score won’t be perfect, but nothing in life is.”

“I like that attitude! To tell you the truth, I passed with 87%, and that’s at a lower level,” she chuckled.

Both sat down across one another.

“So, while we wait, I’m assuming you have something else on your mind?” Sorina asked.

“Yes,” he replied, “and it has to do with the Valentines incident. Specifically, I’m referring to... Ivan. He still works here, right?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“How so, do you dislike him?”

“Nope, but still far from likeable.”

Sergiu asked for a USB type B cable which he powered his camera with. After scrolling through very few images, he found some footage to present to her.

“I’ll spill the beans: Ivan has misbehaved at work, and I hope I’ve managed to capture that.”

When Sorina pressed the “play” button, the video began and, after some time, the chatter ensued.

“...People celebrate it by buying lots of chocolate. Issue with that is, our store has most of its chocolate past the expiry date... For us to make

more money, I will take out... expired chocolate and label them as discounted at twenty percent..."

However, after Sorina witnessed Sergiu speaking his mind, the footage exposed something else:

"...We'll see how hard you'd be willing to work with a little discipline! That machine is always out of order... But this gives me another idea... I could... the machine and add... so that... goes berserk... no trouble for me... Hahaha... Say goodbye to... salary..."

The video was breaking up.

"Sorry, I should get a new camera soon," Sergiu said, bowing down.

"This is... I cannot believe it," Sorina set the camera down. "I will get his attention in a second. Oh, and I will also see if the manager can make it in time."

Sergiu moved his seat next to Sorina while she made a phone call to the Manager who agreed to come for a few minutes. Then, she pressed a button to activate the microphone which furthermore played a tone through the speakers outside the office.

"Attention, Ivan and all other employees except cashiers, report to the office immediately! I repeat..."

In a second, the office filled up with most of the employees, with Ivan and the Manager both arriving last.

"You!" Ivan exclaimed as soon as his and Sergiu's eyes met. "You people ain't reinstating him after what he did, are you?"

Sergiu shook his head.

"He appears to be uninterested in returning," Sorina said, "but you, sir, have some explaining to do. Now, tell me... What happened on February 14?"

"Valentine's Day, of course!" Ivan responded, bending his right hand.

"I will repeat the question one more time... What happened... on February 14?" Sorina's smile disappeared.

"I..." Ivan uttered; "I have no idea what you're talking about, boss."

“Oh, you don’t? What kind of sale did you organise? What did you sell?”

“What sale? Was there any sale on Valentine’s Day?” Ivan said, smiling nervously. “Time sure flies...”

An employee stepped forward.

“I think it was... a chocolate sale,” she said.

“Expired chocolate sale, dear,” an older employee added.

Ivan jumped. “Huh? Silly Bogdana, where did you hear that from?”

“*For us to make more money, I will take out... expired chocolate and label them as discounted at twenty percent...*” Sorina made the camera replay what she just heard.

“Now you just wait a minute!” Ivan shouted. “Where does that sound come from?”

Sergiu raised his hand.

“I hid a camera behind a box of toothbrushes to catch any *accidental* (he said this word in quotation marks) slips of the tongue, including his other plan.”

“How come we didn’t notice it?” An employee asked. “We thought surveillance cameras were high up in the ceiling...”

“And what’s that plan, ye who knows it all?” Ivan mocked.

Sergiu briefly told the story how the cleaning machine had been tampered with, and that he had found clumps of sugar at the bottom of the tank while emptying it. He had also suspected that he refilled the tank with diesel instead of gasoline. However, even though Ivan dismissed such “silly” accusations, a few employees stood up to Sergiu and made Ivan’s history known. In fact, one of the employees complained to have seen Ivan outside the store when she fell into a water puddle, but completely ignored her; another employee confirmed having born witness to Ivan’s gossip about that person in question. Then, the Manager disclosed another “preposterous” claim: Ivan was not doing his work, to which he jumped again and immediately demanded proof. While Sergiu’s camera was deficient in showing Ivan’s slothfulness, there had been other cameras that caught exactly that, and thanks to them, the Manager had even compiled

various footage into a single, ten-hour video. Of course, it would make no sense to watch it in its entirety, and the Manager did skip through it, but it seemed that Ivan's position at the chemistry aisle did not change even after all other employees returned to work; he went on to slack off throughout most of the footage, only barely did everybody get to see him leave the spot and go to the warehouse. The footage showed dates from a while ago: all the way from June of the previous year. After he wrapped up, Ivan asked why they did not fire him any earlier, to which the Manager simply said:

“I wanted to see if you'd go any further with your laziness, dear sir.”

Suddenly, he also mentioned his wife, and Sorina asked what it had to do with anything so far, but when the Manager illustrated how Ivan provoked him to become enraged for the prank to fully succeed (obviously, Ivan never revealed this prank to anyone), that is, how he claimed to have seen his wife with another man, the room suddenly became quiet. Even Ivan did not dare to break this silence. The one who did, however, was the Manager himself, who picked up the telephone laying on Sorina's table and rang a seemingly random number. He whispered something to Sorina before becoming engrossed in the phone call with a large figure at an employment agency in Moldova.

“Well, Ivan... This is the first real complaint I got about you,” Sorina said.

“Hey, don't blame me for being assigned simple paperwork!” He broke her train of thought.

“Simple paperwork, you say? You do know that knowing the exact number of products we purchased is the single most important task of all, do you not? *And why doesn't Sergiu do it*, you wonder? Actually, he *did* get to count how much of everything was delivered to the warehouse... And guess what? He didn't sleep one bit! Ever wondered why your pay was as low as it was? I feel like the manager was onto something when salaries were concerned. Oh, what is it, manager?” She asked after he tapped her on the shoulder. He whispered to her again. “Oh, excellent! The manager has reached a compromise with the employment agency we

are working with. So, let's get this over with..."

Having pulled out a document from the printer, Sorina signed it and turned it towards Ivan.

"You are fired for ignoring your duties and bad manners. End of story. And, for you to really take this lesson in, you will also be forbidden from seeking a new job for six months. I think this is pretty generous punishment considering our cleaning machine finished at the scrapyard thanks to you, and for causing a hard-working employee to get fired because you insulted his wife..."

Sorina sighed in disbelief before telling him to change his clothes and to leave the store without a word. Even if he could, Ivan hardly had any energy left to hurl an insult at poor Sergiu, and he ran out after leaving his uniform in the closet, never to be seen again (at least in Teşan). Sorina sighed again and the Manager hung up the phone. The employees were asked to pick up where they left off before being invited to the office. Sergiu breathed out as well, holding a hand next to where his heart is. He bid her goodbye and walked out the door, leaving her to her office labour.

Since then, nearly two weeks had passed. While Sergiu was cleaning up his apartment, he heard a ping coming from his phone. Upon unlocking it, he read that new mail had just come. Quietly joking that he received a ban from employment, he opened the e-mail; it was issued from an address ending in eksam.ee, notifying him of the results. Alas, the mail was only a teaser. The actual results have been posted on a web page and sorted by first name and family name initial. When he found himself in the humongous row of other examinees, he covered his smiling mouth: he earned 98% on the examination. That surely placed him in the top three, sharing the same result with an examinee called Borut, while another one, Aamu, was just below with 95%. Feeling reinvigorated after reading up, Sergiu went on with his cleaning and filling his suitcase thereafter.

He ringed up Sorina if they could go out after work, to which she consented. It was three in the afternoon when she exited the market. Without delay, Sergiu shared the news.

“Seriously?!” Sorina raised the tone, holding her hands at her mouth to hide the biggest smile she conceived. “You’ve almost got a perfect grade! I’m a proud woman, you hear!”

He and she shared a warm hug in front of the market, not noticing that a group of female employees had gone out from work. They made a positive remark having witnessed an embrace between the two. Sorina led the way to the heart of Chisinau to treat themselves to a wholesome meal, salad and dessert included.

In the following weeks, they have accompanied one another in determining what to carry to Estonia, while the other had been responsible for investigating jobs and a place to stay until they got a hold of something more permanent. A month in the future, Sorina resigned from work and let the Manager briefly take over. Meanwhile, Sergiu had confirmed their residence, as well as new job, in Tallinn, and everything had been settled. He spent a night with his parents, promising to return to them and thanked them for the support they provided. He assured them that it would not be in vain and that part of his earnings would be rationed to them. On the day of the trip, Sergiu bid them farewell and wished them good health. Sorina drove by and they shortly returned to Sergiu’s house for a final look at the place, and to take his suitcase. At long last, the wait was almost over: Sorina first left her car back at her parents’ house, instead hiving a taxi to Chisinau International Airport. As the plane was taking off, Sorina and Sergiu, sitting together, waved at the airport below and watched as it slowly dissipated from their view. In just a few hours, their plane would no longer be flying over Moldova. Despite the overwhelming emotions, they took a nap for as long as the trip lasted.

*

Sergiu was helping other customers find their way around the store, and in return received compliments for his Estonian language. Same could be said of Sorina, who was, at that moment, restocking chocolate. Sergiu walked upon her and placed each chocolate bar into the shelves with her.

“Selver seems a lot busier than Teșan, don’t you think?” Sorina asked.

“It’s true!” He agreed.

Sergiu and Sorina had found their workplace at Selver, a large Estonian market chain, situated in an even larger shopping mall. Their home was a little further afield, in Maardu. While they have been saving up for a car of their own, they relied on public transport that functioned similarly to Chisinau’s, except with less bubblegum underneath seats and, surprisingly, with central heating in each bus. Luckily for them, a bus stop was close to their temporary home.

They grew a bit older: Sorina was now twenty-seven while Sergiu was still a year younger than her. Next to their language diplomas (Sorina took hers out of the picture frame while Sergiu received it upon his arrival), they got their hands on the citizenship examination certificate, which they set aside as they still had five years of residing in Estonia before they were to consider applying for a citizenship. Still, despite Sergiu leaving Moldova because of its poor state, he was unsure about the state of his citizenship: he did not want to give it up so easily. He ventilated this worry with Sorina. Moldova was not an ideal country to be born in, but “it could always be worse”, they both argued. Even so, the issue resonated with Sorina as well, but they agreed that this should not be their primary worry.

Their timetable was slightly offset from the one they had in Teșan, namely, by one hour. Selver was open from eight in the morning to eleven in the evening, which was longer than all other shops in the mall of Tallinn, though their store was undoubtedly the most beneficial.

As for “Marvellous mouthpiece”, it was brought to light that Sorina also indulged in that twenty-episode wonder, with the final episode airing on both Moldovan and Estonian public televisions. Through a game of rock paper scissors, they settled on viewing it as residents of Estonia.

Fifteen minutes after eleven struck, Sorina and Sergiu withdrew from the mall. They walked for twenty minutes to the north and boarded a bus labelled 172.

“Good job today,” Sergiu whispered. “We didn’t work too hard, did we?”

Sorina giggled and whispered back: “A little bit. Thankfully, tomorrow’s a day-off for both of us.”

“Do you have anything planned?” He asked. “I was wondering if... we could go out for lunch.”

“Sure!” She answered. “Any reason for it? I hope it isn’t the dishes...”

“I washed them before work today,” he murmured. “It isn’t a chore any longer because of a better stream. Now, about our date...”

“Date?”

Sorina leaned her head against the cold bus window, but in a moment, she gazed back at Sergiu.

“Wait... has it been a year already?”

“It has,” Sergiu said, blushing, “since we first kissed.”

He covered his mouth while he yawned, as did Sorina. After forty minutes, they walked another three until their flat, and took turns in the shower. They brushed their teeth together and switched off all lights and spun the handle on the radiator to produce less heat for the night. They lay on the bed, each taking up its half. Before they fell asleep, they snuggled into one another’s arms and mumbled to each other.

“Should we go to the restaurant from our first date?” Sergiu spoke.

“In SÜSI? How can I say it...”

“You want to recommend a place this time?”

“Precisely,” she said, gently touching his nose. “I suggest dining in Old Town. I know a perfect spot!”

“I’ll let you lead the way tomorrow. Can’t wait...”

Sergiu yawned one more time, followed by Sorina doing the same. They looked at each other, shuffled close together and their lips made contact for a brief moment. They were close to returning to their edges of their bed, but could not help but share another, longer kiss, and a sweet “I love you” in both Romanian and Estonian. The room they were in was certainly too warm for them to fall asleep in each other’s arms, so sticking

to their side of the bed was a reasonable consensus.

On the following day, after devoting some time to spruce up their living space, Sorina and Sergiu came out of the flat and ran along small patches of snow, wearing winter jackets. The bus stop was barren, but a bus showed up packed with people and which transported its passengers to the heart of Tallinn. Inside the bus, Sergiu pulled something larger than his head out of his jacket, wrapped in paper.

“I got this for you,” he said, smiling softly.

After unwrapping Sergiu’s gift, Sorina unveiled a photo album with them on its cover. Nevertheless, they were on images other than the cover. She leafed through the album, reading captions underneath each image, courtesy of Sergiu’s sense of humour (or rather, lack thereof). One such image was of Sergiu taking a picture with sleeping Sorina with makeup all over the face, though in moderate quantity, with a caption playing on the word “makeup”, while a few pages later she has got “revenge” on him by doing exactly the same thing. The one she raised an eyebrow for, more in positive light than negative, was a picture of her, Sergiu and, of all people, Ivan, hanging out at a bar in Chisinau.

“I didn’t see this one coming at all,” she replied, pointing to Ivan. “I almost forgot that he even framed you back then!”

Sergiu nodded: “He seems so much more relaxed now that he’s doing printing on demand. Good for him!”

When Sorina closed the album, she showed her gratitude by giving two kisses on his cheeks, one on the nose and two more on the lips. In the same way the book was revealed, Sorina hid it in her jacket. Before long, the bus reached a bus stop just outside Tallinn Old Town. Holding hands, the two took off from the bus and into the streets filled with tourists as well as locals, with Sorina in front.

Without a shred of doubt, their day-off would turn their legs into jelly, but at least they would not have to replenish any more products, and especially chocolate, in any supermarket, Moldovan or Estonian, for as long as they worked.

END

“Another Day in a Moldovan Supermarket”

Written by

David Klopić

Quality control

David Klopić

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There is no day like Valentine's

Sergiu works at a supermarket in Moldova, undertaking whatever job happens to align with his shift, from cleaning to emptying shelves. He is unable to get along with his co-workers, mainly because Ivan always bosses Sergiu around without anybody to stand up for him; Ivan is also envious of Sergiu because Sorina, the real boss, pays Sergiu the highest.

When it is time to organise a Valentine's Day sale, he sets himself up for trouble by, ironically, standing up for himself and rejecting Ivan's idea.

