

"The Idiot's Gospel" is a book about people with mental and emotional disabilities. This is the story of a mental illness that led to the development of a unique incredible talent.

THE IDIOT'S GOSPEL

by Yordanka Margaritova

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The Idiot's Gospel

YORDANKA MARGARITOVA

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Translated by Teodora Doncheva

December 22

“Shut up, you idiot! Get on with cleaning the toilets!”

I grab the two metal buckets placed behind the door of the church’s storage space. I shove one into the other. The cold rhythmical clanking coming from my hands calms me down.

Each church has its own idiot.

I am the idiot who picks up the candles that run down like tears, and habitually tosses them in the wax-smeared bucket. I collect the flowers left in front of the dark icons by brainless old women. I don’t like the sweets that leave crumbs softly crunching under my feet after baptisms, funerals and weddings. The faces of the young women, naively lifted up - to me this is the attraction of the big Holidays; the fragrance of unconscious desire to be touched that they carry along. I hand out all the leftover sweets and wheat to the Gypsy beggars outside the temple doors.

Once I tasted the holy water. It had some sort of feminine smell, as if I had caressed a woman in between her legs. I sometimes sprinkle the bathrooms with this water, so it doesn’t go to waste.

I stand against the tiny window, fogged up by cobwebs and dust. A trickle of dirty brown water flows down the edge of the toilet. I clean and disinfect the place where one stands. First I place my left foot down, the one wearing the worn out sneaker, then I step with my right foot. My skinny ass hangs down. I play with the tip of my penis. The stools quietly splash down the hole. It’s pleasant. I want to bite the button of my shirt with pleasure. My hairless hands unbutton it and fondle the chest, the belly, then slide further down.

The bell rings for liturgy.

I wipe the toilet clean real quick and run to the church's storage. I hide behind the sacks filled with wheat, squat down and start biting my fingernails and cuticles. I sometimes do that with my toenails as well. It helps the time go by faster.

“What are you doing, you idiot?! Bring candles for the evening liturgy! You lazy bastard!”

The priest and the churchwardens take care of me. Yesterday they changed my right shoe which only had half a sole left, with a worn out but strong sneaker. I hate socks. When it is cold I wear big rubber boots - so big that I can raise small birds in them. Under the eaves by the dome-like entrance where the mural of Jesus and his disciples is, there is a swallow nest. A few months ago, I agreed to eat up a live 2-week-old swallow for a shirt with no left sleeve. I can still taste the hardness of the crunchy giblets and feathers, smeared with excrements and blood. The shirt wore out so bad that I started using it as a rag. I mopped the floor with it. Then I threw it away.

I sleep in the church storage on top of the wheat sacks. I like watching the thin hairy arms of the hungry Gypsies when they unload the wheat from the trucks. They grunt as they bring it down and slam the brown sacks on the ground like hard pillows with feminine curves. Once I imagined what would happen if the earth responded by shaking and opening up to swallow their goat-like legs!

However, I have no time to think much, neither do I like it. I feel good in the night time - I sink into a dreamworld where I don't need to think in order to see.

Every day I sweep up the floor of the church, the yard, the offices. I wait for the end of the service and watch for the deacon's mood. If he is in a good mood, he invites friends over for a drink, we get into one of the offices and start our ritual. “Our own private liturgy,” as the deacon calls it.

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My happy times come during the Holidays when the church is filled with people. In one of the offices, there is a TV. I turn it on, my eyes start filling with the colorful images, and my ears - with people's thoughts. All kinds of thoughts. Of all kinds of people. I watch and listen with my mouth wide open, I almost can't smell the odor of unwashed decayed teeth. I sometimes spend hours like that. I don't think. I am happy. The sounds and images circulate through my blood and my brain, they fill me up to the limit. And when they go beyond the limit...

I'm forgetful. I like to forget. There are so many things I do not want to remember. Yet, I'm filled with so many thoughts inside.

December 21

I am gnawing my nails and gaping out the dusty window of the room. I am young. 11-or 12-year-old. I have no toys. I count the lines of the parquet on the floor. I count the cars passing by. I count my fingers. I count my father's breaths. I count the glasses of alcohol he drinks. When my head gets overwhelmed with numbers, I start rocking back and forth to calm myself down. Dad and I live together. I have a vague memory of my mother: dark shoulder-length hair like a gentle black waterfall when she tucks me in at bedtime. How old was I? Four or five. That is what I remember from my mother - the hair, the aroma of lavender and naphthalene, the full-toned, well-trained voice. She was a singer, but she never sang at home. Nobody explained anything to me when she disappeared. I don't know if she died, or left. With time, death and leaving merged into one.

I remember the first time my father bathed me. He wasn't drinking yet so his hands were cold and didn't tremble. The water he washed me with was also cold. He quickly soaped my back and with slippery hands spread the soapy foam to my bottom, legs and arms. He left the shower running over my head for a long time. I think he might have even forgotten about me while he was washing his hands. I reached for the faucet and turned it off to stop the water. My father slowly turned to me. He took the towel hanging on a nail, which we used for everything - hands, face, head, threw it to me, and said:

"You are washing yourself from now on!"

I was trying to remember the feel of my mother's touch but I couldn't. Then my father found a lover – the brandy. He got obsessed with her and in our family, I became number three. I could only witness how the thing I called "father" was losing weight, staggering, screaming, hitting, wallowing on the floor, slamming objects, and hating me. I never knew what would happen next. Then sometimes he would sit all sodden on the old worn out easy chair with one leg missing, and he would smear snot on the arm rests while watching sports on TV; that's

when I prayed for the time to stop. Unfortunately time kept going, and I was trying to forget, to not see and not hear how it was passing by.

One such evening, the door bell rang. “Mom”, my heart thought before my brain did. My father put the half drunk water glass filled with brandy on the blue-and-yellow-squares oilcloth-covered table. He put down the fork which he used to poke the slippery wilting cucumbers in the salad bowl with. He would sometimes poke the table cloth as well. Out of boredom. He had sold the TV set. We both remained still for a few moments, lending an ear to the echo of the doorbell. Then it rang again. My father leaned his hands against the armrests and slowly, very slowly got himself up. He stuffed one foot into the brown shabby slipper.

“Stop looking at me as if you’ve been struck dumb! Put my slipper on,” he said when he didn’t succeed in putting the second slipper on.

Then he slowly straggled to the door. He opened it without saying a word. I quietly crawled on the floor stained with cheap beer, and peaked through the slightly open door of the room. We never closed that door as it didn’t have a knob.

My father was silently examining a tall heavily built Gypsy woman from top to toe. The Gypsy’s lips were stretched as if to smile, but her eyes were scanning him over as if she was about to buy him. She was wearing a few dresses on top of each other. Her hand, with four cheap shiny rings on, was clutching a plastic bag filled with old clothes and crumpled greasy papers. Her bright yellow socks had slid down her ankles. Sequins were gleaming as mixed up little suns at the edges of the magenta kerchief she’d wrapped around her head. I had seen her often, she lived one story below us. I could never count her children, but I think there were about twelve people living in three rooms.

“Give me your child”, she said without a preface. My father looked at her goggle-eyed. I quieted down even more.

“He’ll make good money,” she went on. “10 to 12 hours a day. I will give him bread and feta cheese. Every night after work you’ll get 20 leva!”

My father was silent.

“You’ll have to give him to me! You have no job!”

“He has to go to school,” he answered with a hoarse voice. By the tone of his voice I knew that he had decided to give me away. He was just trying to up the amount she had offered.

“Ya, right! School!” She laughed and a golden tooth treacherously shined under her upper lip. Her bracelets dangled while she was scratching her unwashed body.

The shouts and hullabaloo of the Gypsies, mixed with music turned up to the max, often came through to our semi-empty apartment. The Gypsy family had a successful business - begging. They would bandage either the arms or the legs of the kids with filthy bandages, gave them crutches, and sent them off to wander around the city all day long. I saw them sometimes, at the junctions where the cars were waiting for the green light, whining imploringly by the opened front windows.

They always had food to eat. They had drinks to drink. The Gypsy was looking for someone to make money but also to keep an eye on her 13-year-old daughter cause “since she grew up and got her menses, she’s been out of her mind.”

My father continued to keep silent and look her in the eye through his half-shut eyelids. I was trying not to breath.

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“All right, caring daddy,” she said sarcastically. “After school! My daughter and I are picking him up at 1pm and bringing him back to you at 10 or 11pm.”

My father didn't need to respond.

December 20

On the next day, I quickly came back home after school. My father wasn't drunk yet. He acted as if yesterday's conversation hadn't happened. When the Gypsy and her daughter rang the doorbell, he said without looking at me:

“Go with them and do as they say!”

It was cold outside and I was skipping alongside the young Gypsy. Her skin had stale milk smell, her eyes were dark green as damp moss, her hair - uncombed and unwashed. She was teaching me the tricks of the trade calmly, with no rush, in a low deep voice.

“You will only wear old clothes. Ragged ones. You will walk slowly, you'll limp a little, you'll tremble. You will first ask with a quiet voice: “Please give a few coins! May God bless you with good health!” If you meet their eyes, they are yours! Don't let them get away!”

I wiped my snotty nose with my hand, and continued listening to her carefully.

“If they don't give you anything right away, start speaking louder, begin to cry, say you haven't eaten for two days, say your mother has died.”

“I think she died for real. I almost don't remember her,” I interjected quietly.

“That your father is beating you,” she continued without paying attention. “That he drinks all the money. That last one won't even be a lie,” she laughed, and green lights flashed in her dark moist eyes.

At the beginning, I was trembling more out of shame rather than cold. With time, I got used to it. The business was going. The Gypsy was

sticking the bills she scrounged in her socks or in a secret pocket, sewn on the inside of her frowsy underwear. She spent part of the money - for food, cheap lipstick and wine.

“Don’t you dare telling the old hag,” she was squinting her eyes and giving me the threatening look of a she-wolf while she was grabbing her own throat - to show me what would happen if I started squealing on her.

I could eat all the bread and feta cheese I wanted, and my father always had alcohol to drink. However, it was never enough for him.

“We won’t make it on 20 leva! You’ll bring the money home, to me! You won’t give it to the Gypsy! Do you hear me? All the money, every penny - to me!”

I couldn’t hide the money I scrounged, the Gypsy was always watching me closely, and her mother was checking my pockets every night. She’d even stick her dirty black finger in my mouth.

My father thought I was lying to him and hiding the money. When he was sober, he usually just yelled. In the night time however, when I came back from work, he was always drunk.

“Are we going to fry meat balls tonight,” he would ask while giving me a probing look. I would press myself against the wall, wishing that the concrete opens up and swallows me. The pan on the gas stove filled the apartment with the smell of burnt oil.

“No-o-o-o,” I’d scream at first, then stop because the screams made the pain worse.

My father would harshly grab one of my hands and dip it in the boiling oil.

“I have no money,” I’d state the truth through tears, but then I’d clench my teeth and start writhing in pain. To hell with the truth! I wished I could tell him more than the truth, if my boundless fantasy that was exploding like a firework in those moments, could stop the pain...

Years later the priests in the church were going to wonder how to unleash my imagination. Had they known that pain and humiliation were the key to my brain, they would have probably been trapping my toes under the solid wooden settee while fucking me from behind. They could have been nailing my hands on the wall and castrating me. I would have then shouted out a hundred versions of the Bible, with additions and commentaries, plus a rework of the Koran and Bhagavad Gita from the point of view of Christianity. They could have saved so much money on hashish! But how could they have known?! The imagination of a priest can be quite meager.

“Why, very professional,” the Gypsy exclaimed with admiration when she saw the burnt blistered tips of my fingers. “Remove the gloves!”

She made me stick my fingers in peoples’ faces. I didn’t have to talk. The money tripled.

So I was growing up as a rental child.

Sometimes in the evening there was no food at home. Then my father would send me to the nearby pub to buy brandy. He’d fill up a water glass for himself, and for me - the bottle’s cap.

“Drink!”

“I don’t want to, Dad!”

“Drink I said!”

“Please, Dad!”

“Drink”, and he swallowed noisily. “Drink if I say so!”

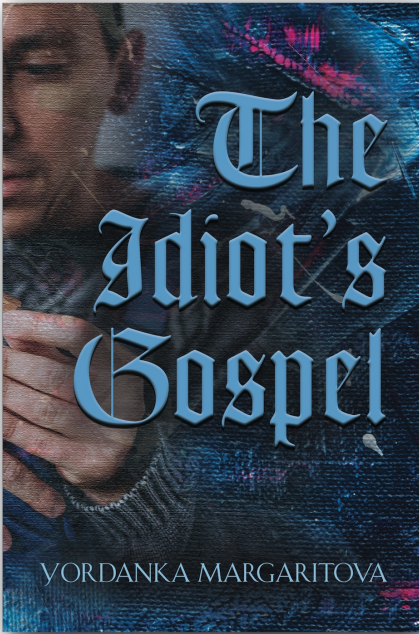
Then he would add:

“You know son, we are one. You, me, and the brandy...”

I'd drink it up real fast, then throw up in the toilet. I kept quiet. Not only was I not arguing with my father, but at one point I stopped answering. Either way, he never heard me.

In the winter time, school was letting out earlier. I told my father that the teacher wanted me to do extra work after the classes, otherwise I'd have to repeat the grade. Those few hours that I was able to snatch, I spent at the school library where I read everything in sight. Didn't matter whether it was physics, chemistry, geography, biology, or fiction. I was thirstily drinking up the books and stuffing my head with stories and facts. Not that that was making my life easier, but at least I was disappearing in another time and space.

I was carrying so many fruitless stories in my mind, like a dead baby in a womb.



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