

Valery Katsuba

MORNING

from the book "22 short stories with an epilogue"



London

In the summer of 2011, shortly before my trip to Chile, I was in London. And only there, in a rather old-fashioned store on Piccadilly, was I able to buy braces for socks. I remember that on the same day, late in the evening, Katharina Flor picked me up at the hotel in a taxi, a London black cab. Together we were to attend a private view of an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, which was due to open a few days later.

Katharina, my wonderful and lifelong friend, at that time worked as art director for the Fabergé jewelry company, for which I had done a photographic project, *Nijinsky and the Diamonds*. This project was to be exhibited at the Royal Academy as part of a superb event, the launch of the new Fabergé online magazine.

In the black cab, there was a fresh breeze from the half-open windows and there was lots of room. I stretched out my leg, about to lift the trouser-leg and show Katharina my new purchase,

those sock suspenders I was already wearing. But I didn't dare. I decided to put it into words. Katharina listened and laughed, cheerfully and openly, as only she could. And then she said: "Now you still need to shave your head and buy some shorts." "Why?" I asked, not understanding what she meant. "To be in keeping with your chosen style", she answered.

For a long time, I could not work out what style Katharina had in mind. It was obviously not the one I was thinking of. I had been inspired to buy my suspenders by a painting I saw once in one magazine. This work dated from the 1930s and showed girls and boys in underwear and dressing gowns, with neatly styled hair, or, more precisely, fixed with hair cream... and they were not wearing shorts.

Just what they all were doing together I did not understand, but the work nonetheless made a strong impression on me, particularly some details, among them the sock suspenders worn by the young men. For me, this painting was filled with sensuality and eroticism. Looking at it, I realized how I would like to create my own self-portrait, inspired by my impressions of the picture and of self-portraits by the artist Alexander Deyneka and others who often depicted sporting events or exercises, with figures in underwear and bathing suits.

From the Fabergé presentation in London, I remember most of all flower garlands suspended from the railings of the main staircase, my Nijinsky photographs displayed on easels amidst bouquets of pink, fragrant peonies, and Katharina receiving the guests.

Saint Petersburg

After the event, I left for St Petersburg, where I was planning to create my self-portrait wearing English sock suspenders. Even as I travelled from the airport to Zhukovsky Street, where I was then living, I realized that I would like this self-portrait to be set in the ghostly and mysterious light of autumn, as if I had just woken up and was dressing before leaving the house. The morning hours seemed most fitting, for it is then that we are leisurely, thoughtful, and natural.

At that time, I was living in St Petersburg in the home of my English friend from time immemorial, Katya Phillips. She had a spacious apartment in the old city center, with a huge dark blue bedroom furnished with antiques dating from the 19th century to the 1970s. Essentially, in this blue bedroom there was no obvious time or place, it was not clear what age was unfolding outside.

I chose a white sleeveless T-shirt from my wardrobe, boxers bought in Colombia (where, by the way, all different kinds of underwear are particularly admired). Socks, of course, and those sock suspenders. I invited a friend and fellow-photographer, Zhenya Sorokin, to help. When he arrived, I set the scene, climbing onto a high stool, placing Katya's little dumbbells beside me, and in "morning reflection" began to fasten the suspenders to my socks. Zhenya worked the camera.

I cannot say that the shoot was very successful. One of the problems was my facial expression. I find it very hard to pose. In principle, I have several facial expressions, or rather two, well, maybe three. None of them corresponded with the idea of morning fragility and thoughtfulness. Secondly, the suspenders, even though bought in an old-fashioned London store, were nothing like the ones I had seen in the painting from the 1930s. They did not create the impression of the sublime sensuality of the modern era, but rather, on the contrary, seemed to drag us into some bourgeois setting, into awkward, long forgotten times. That day, fastening my suspenders, I finally understood what kind of style Katharina had been talking about, back in that London black cab. She was referring to the style of the Boy Scouts.

A few days later I developed the films and scanned them. It was difficult to choose a single shot from our photographic session. My friend Anya Shpakova came to the rescue, or rather, traveled up from Moscow. Anya is an elegant girl and scrupulous in her attention details. Together, we were able to choose two shots from my morning self-portraits.

Anya stayed on that visit in Katya's dark blue bedroom. The room suited her very well. Anya has a talent for making any place completely her own while she occupies it. And I thought that my self-portrait would only benefit if it was paired with Anya's "awakening". I told her about it.

Anya agreed to climb onto the high stool and to be honest, the photo with her was a success. That morning portrait of Anya proved to be convincing and it became the inspiration for all the subsequent portraits in the extensive photo story *Morning*. No matter how I twisted and turned our diptych, trying to make it into a separate, finished masterpiece or project, it was clear that no matter how much I wanted to, I needed to continue shooting "morning awakenings".

New York

The project *Morning* eventually became more than a series of photo shoots, but an emotional and supportive occupation. Let me explain. In 2011, for example, Amy Kouznetsova and her husband Vladimir invited me to New York to do my Air Flight exhibition at Amy's Sputnik Gallery in Manhattan. After the exhibition opened, Amy with Vladimir left for Moscow, but I stayed on in the city for more than a month with other talented and beautiful residents, both old friends such as Slava Mogutin and Nastya Boudanoque, and new ones.

I had a strong desire to photograph my friends, so strong that it made me restless, but I did not know how to go about it. And here *Morning* came to my aid. Through this series, I was able to save and remember my impressions of New York. I have said before that I want to take photographed impressions with me from each new place I like. I do not mean city views and people. I am talking about my feelings about the city, what we might call its inspiration, which I would like to remember. This may not seem entirely clear, but I captured my impressions of the city precisely through the portraits of friends there that I made for the *Morning* project.

Chile

In the same way, I have gone on to "preserve" my memories of London, where after my return to Europe from Chile in 2012, I spent almost two months, thanks to the hospitality and care of Katya Galitzine and her husband Nick.

I took pictures for *Morning* in Chile itself (a portrait of my friend Walter's mother Marcia, an elegant 75-year-old), then in Moscow, inspired by Svetlana Taylor and Volodya Dmitrenko; in St Petersburg, which I mentioned earlier and where, I hope in the future, I will still photograph the muse of St Petersburg artists, Irena Kuksenaite... I took photographs for *Morning* in Mallorca, in Mexico and many other places.

Mexico

Because of my admiration for the Old Masters, they influence me whether I want it or not. In Mexico, by the Pacific Ocean, I took a photograph of a nude young man with his long, strong body, elongated and unusual, and particularly attractive in this unusualness. Developing the films later, I looked at the result and, to my own surprise, discovered that in his body's lines and proportions, that young man reminded me of the heroes of El Greco's paintings. Through a photograph of a nude youth in Mexico I was able to understand how seemingly unrealistic aspects of El Greco's work can be perceived as realistic. I still find support in the Old Masters.

In Mexico City itself, I filmed in the Roma colony in the house where I was staying, where Luba was my Mexican inspiration. In the photograph, Luba was originally supposed to be drinking coffee, yet it was impossible for her to find a cup that matches her elegance. I decided to replace the cup in Luba's hands with the book by Gabriel Garcia Marquez that was my reading matter on my travels, *Of Love and Other Demons*. To my surprise, Luba refused to be photographed with the book.

I could not understand why, and then the girl explained that Marquez's book reminded her of the writer's grandson, whom she knew well, and whom Luba did not want to remember at all that day ... I had to use all my ingenuity to persuade her to pick up the book.

"Gabriel Marquez was a wonderful writer," I explained to Luba, "and his grandson is only his grandson, and not a writer at all as far as I know..."

For some reason, this argument seemed convincing to the model, and she took the book in her hand and I took the picture.

Mallorca

In Mallorca, Spain, I photographed Holy, a gorgeous Brazilian with a very beautiful figure, in her family house on a high cliff overlooking orange trees and the sea. I spent a week at the home of Holy and her husband Sven in the summer of 2021. Also visiting the couple at that time were two young girls from Berlin, one Venezuelan and the other of Colombian origin. I felt happy in that realm of Latin American female beauty. And, as usual, to preserve my memories of that splendor, I photographed these South American nymphs as part of *Morning*.

In the end, I did not include my own self-portrait in the project. Our diptych with Anya felt apart. That self-portrait, however, without the sock suspenders but with Katya's dumbbell, I sometimes use as the artist's photograph in my biography for exhibitions or books.

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