

SONYA'S STORY



My pseudonym is Herman Lass—герман ласс—and if you read Russian, you can find the website I made for him. <https://www.stihi.ru/avtor/german78/> Herman expresses my male side of me. I write as a male and I feel it's not Sonya who is writing. He writes like he feels it and he doesn't care if somebody likes it or not and probably this is the main point of being Herman Lass because all my life I wanted to express myself but I was not allowed, I was afraid, I was threatened.

My whole life Sonya wanted to find her true self. I was afraid to be myself and you know sometimes I was very angry and I expressed myself through anger and even now sometimes through depression but in those moments I try to keep calm and write and meditate and listen to music. Probably I should free myself to be like Herman Lass with the freedom of expression. Probably it's the right way for both of us, Herman and Sonya.

Recently I found my old diaries and brought it here. When I was 15 till 28, I was so depressed. I wanted to kill myself and I tried to commit suicide but then I found what I call *small red paper notes*. And now I read this and I see it's Herman Lass's notes and he tried to help Sonya. I didn't write with the name Herman Lass till I was 30 years old, but when I read the notes I think, *It is his voice!* It's incredible because I was reading like he is saying *OK, what do you want to do today? You can drink today if you want to or if you want to be wasted today, OK, it's your show*. This different voice in the red paper notes was trying to keep me alive, but also he was like my demon. He was like pushing me doing such things like you can forget about everything, you can leave it to the last second, you can do whatever you want.

Where does his name come from? I'll tell you. Surname *Lass* comes from my favorite German phrase—*Lass mich in Ruhe*, which means *Leave me alone!* You say in English *Lass* means girl? What a mystic play with word! Two genders! *Lass mich ruhe*. Leave me alone, I don't care what they think about me! I'm a boy, I'm a girl! I took this name and you know there are no coincidences.

Well *German* was the name of a DJ and I met him when I was 16 and it was at underground parties in my hometown in Russia. In English, German is from the country Germany, so I think in English you would say the name *Herman*. So Herman Lass. German the DJ played music of my favorite bands there, like Sonic Youth, and he was very intelligent and he died at the age of 30 with overdose or something and I saw that people were struggling in my hometown because they always were underground and that's why they're killing themselves with drugs, with alcohol. Because they were different. In underground club, like literally underground, it was small community and architects, artists, and writers and there were gays there and there were lesbian girls,

and maybe this was my first time that I realized that I'm different and it's difference not only in my thinking but in my looking and my gender expression.

My family was a normal family. My mother was young and beautiful. My father was young and handsome and he was a really badass and he was a musician. I was raised by my mom's relatives, my grandparents, because my mom was young and she studied in medical university. My parents took me every weekend and every weekend my grandparents had to remind me that these are my parents because I couldn't remember them. My grandmother always said *Sonya, it's your father, it's your mother.*

My grandmother said I always wanted to escape. I never had the fear and I wasn't afraid of strangers. But it's not good for you if you don't have this ability. You need to know what to fear, to be safe, and through all my life I was naïve. I thought all people are good and are not causing me some bad things. I can't see evil. Yes, I trusted people and I thought they never could do me bad things and when they did, I was paralyzed and I couldn't help myself.

My second grandfather, I was with him till the first grade of school and then he took me every winter and summer vacation so I was raised by my grandparents and that's why I'm so spoiled and selfish. I never accepted delay. I want everything and I want it right now. Can you imagine? My first grade and my grandfather gave a gift from him. It was a Lego set. Oh! It was the end of '80's and it was impossible to get in Russia but my grandfather somehow from somebody who brought it from abroad got it and I was six years old in Russia and here is this big Lego and instructions in English and German, and pencils from Czech Republic and sneakers Adidas so that's why I was a brat. One side of my nature wants everything and luxury things and my second nature wants to express myself without any material things of this world and without any expectations.

Then I moved back with my parents. I remember my father took me on tour. He played maybe like hard rock, like Led Zeppelin, and when I was a child I remember Pink Floyd, Jesus Christ Superstar. He played piano, bass guitar, electric guitar. He taught himself without any education and then he quit, he quit everything. November 23 is the day, anniversary, of his death and I didn't feel a thing. I never missed him. I was very angry and actually I didn't love him. I didn't know him. I didn't understand him. He abused me. And all these things. He was like a stranger to me, this handsome stranger.

From childhood I thought if I were a male, I want to be like this handsome stranger but during my years growing up I realized I don't want to be like my father. He was self-destructive. I was not allowed to express myself, my gender identity in my own way. I tried suicide. And sometime it's not like hang oneself or shoot oneself. It's just like a slow killing. But male or female, it doesn't matter, my whole need was against the feeling of identity I had with my father. Now I realize if I don't want to be like he was I need to do the opposite things, because like him I always start things and I don't finish them. But at the same time—am I bragging if I tell you?—I have great willpower.

So I was born and lived in a city in Russia but I was always thinking that my hometown is New York. I'd never been there but from childhood I was watching American movies and my favorite movie was with Bruce Lee and Woody Allen movies. I was eight, nine, and my father paid money to our neighbor who had a video recorder and tapes—pirated movies with Russian translation with the man behind the screen translating, and I could hear the English speech. That's why I started to learn English.

At school I studied German and English. My favorite writer is Henry Miller. It's my favorite favorite because I found that he expresses the same as I was thinking before I read it. I was thinking *Oh! I want to be a writer too, we have the same thinking*. When I was reading Henry Miller it's exactly like that *Yes!!! Yes!!! Yes!!!* I like Russian classics,

like Chekhov's plays and Dostoevsky, and my favorite Russian writer is Nabokov short stories. Some people fall in love with people. I fall in love with words. I read *Lolita* when I was 12 and I was so so angry with Lolita and I was very sorry for Humbert Humbert yes, because he was very lonely. I was always on his side. Then I read it again when I was a student and then I could see the beautiful sentences. When I'm reading Nabokov I'm thinking I can never be a writer, no, no I can't do it, or my favorite Brodsky poems. I think I can't do it but then I read Henry Miller and I understand that I can express myself.

Many people think they are artists and they want to express themselves and they want to sell it and they want to be famous and that's OK. Sonya wants to be famous but Herman doesn't want to write something for selling. Writing is to express yourself, it's not a job and Sonya and Herman can't have regular job in office. They don't want it at all, it's like to kill everything inside. I think I'd like to work in kitchen or doing dishes and I would have time for writing or maybe for internship in some studio. I don't know what to do in my life yet, I'm 37 I'm like a baby going nowhere. I'm a newcomer I don't know what to do with my life now because I'm free, happy, and depressed and stressed and thinking *oh! what should I do now?* My sin is vanity, this is the worst side of me, of Sonya. I think, OK, I can work in a bookstore but my vanity nature goes, *You're going to work your whole life in the bookstore? I want to conquer the world!* For Herman, the true artist should be free. Absolute freedom means you can express yourself not thinking about your peers, not thinking about how to sell this, not thinking about this is your job. Only you are expressing yourself. Now I can feel that I have this freedom inside of me.

The first time I came here to United States was as a student in an exchange program. I wanted to improve my English and I work in a YMCA camp in Michigan and all that I did because I wanted to go to New York and see NY. So finally I visited New York.

Then I was crying in the plane that land in Moscow and the man seated next to me asked me in Russian, *Oh, you are crying because you are happy you are in Russia again* and I was really angry. From that point began all those years of understanding that I can't live there because I was threatened by the people. Death threats. I couldn't stop it. I couldn't stop all the tortures. I couldn't stand it and I remember some thoughts helped me to be alive. Instead of doing something to myself, when something happen, when they hurt me, I'm thinking *OK, this is an errand, my hometown is New York, this is a longterm errand and one day I should go home and my work in Russia will be finished here*. Yes, really, that's why I was free inside because I thought *OK, this is a very terrible nightmare but this is my job, this is an errand, another obstacle, this is my chance to get special work in New York*. My "errand" continued for 17 or 18 years and I told myself this and didn't know that one day I could really come here and live here.

Back in Russia I was broke, without anything. I was living in Anya's apartment. She was already living in LA and she sent me money for food and then she said OK, let's do it. She said she'll send my ticket. I said they will never give me visa. For five or six years I was never abroad and I don't have a good job and they won't give me visa. She said just let's try and I promise we will be together somewhere in any spot of our planet and then I realized that this is my person that I should be with in my life. She helped me with everything. She bought me tickets, she paid for everything because I had nothing and I was in despair.

Now I understand despair sometimes gives you more strength. Yes, when you are in despair or bored to death, as Camus said, these things they awaken consciousness and that's why you start to realize that you can do something, that you *are* someone, that you *mean* something, not to the world, but to yourself. Out of despair

you awake your consciousness and you want to move forward, not to go back and you want to conquer the world.

I'm here in LA from February 2015 because LA is where Anya is. I like LA but here is too shiny and low energy. I like more New York. I feel I am a native New Yorker.

Recently, I was feeling nostalgia. I was here in LA and I realized that right now, right away, I want to be with my mom in our apartment and I was so lonely. Yes, I have my partner here but my mom is very old, deathly ill, and she can't travel. She's not allowed to travel by train, by plane, so I can't stand it. Maybe I never see her again. I love her with all my heart but I decided to leave my country without any chance to see my mom again alive. We write letters to each other, real letters, not emails. I wrote her, *Mom, we did great things for each other. I can't change who I am and now you're missing me so much you're sad, you're thinking about your last days and death but don't do that. Just think about the time we can see each other. Probably if we go beyond our comfort zones it will lead us to something new and it will lead us to a miracle if we can believe that we're doing the right things.* My mom is so ill and was dying twice and twice in reanimation and the doctor said, *We don't know why she's alive. Probably because she loves you girls so much.* She is a doctor and she understands very well and that's why I wrote my mom, *It's a struggle, but if you lead us to miracle, the Kabbalah says if there are changes and obstacles it's a gift from the universe and we need to overcome it.* The miracle is that I hope that my mom will live for seven or ten years more.

I studied Kabbalah a little bit there in Russia and I studied little bit here. On my mother's side, my relatives are Jewish from Poland. When we were growing, she was always wondering who will take after this side and then she thought, *Yes, I knew for sure it would be you. You have all the features and characteristics of your grandfather.*

Yes, something inside of me wanted to learn and know Torah and Zohar, it's always with me, I can scan it, it's on my tablet and I can show you.

And she says I'm still naïve and I will be naïve till the end of my life but some people say I'm indifferent, even cruel, and I think probably this is because I try to hide this naïve thing. Indifference is like my secret shelter, a special pose to say to everything *I don't care, I don't care*. If other people think bad of me, so what? Then I was thinking maybe it's the real me. When I try to pull off the mask, maybe it's not a mask. Maybe yes, maybe no, who knows? So I say, *I don't care*.

I want to see my mom but I don't want to go back there. People never change, you know. I can't change who I am and they won't change. I think it will take decades to change there because it's impossible, it's like in the Middle Ages, and recently the past three or four years it became more severe. I can't even describe it in words. I don't want to recall all those times that happened to me, my history, my past, I don't want to go back. I spent the main years of my life there and it's maybe the Russian mind, the Russian culture. I don't know how to explain it but it's in their mind that if you're different in any way... If I go back there in one or two years I will do the thing I've tried before—suicide. This thought is always on my mind but now instead of thinking of doing to myself something if I'm depressed I'm thinking about escaping to New York! I want to disappear? OK, disappear to New York!

Some people they move and they travel and they always bring the self to any place and they are thinking *I can start new life*. But you can't start new life with old self. So now I'm here and I'm still in the suitcase. I haven't unpacked myself. Yesterday I was sitting in our apartment and I was thinking *OK, I like our apartment and things here and table and mirrors but I'm still in my suitcase, I haven't unpacked myself. Everything is OK, I'm safe now, we're in LA, but I'm still in the suitcase because I'm afraid. I don't*

know what to do. My mistake was that I was thinking about my past. I haven't unpacked yet. I opened a little bit the zipper. I see inside and there's sunshine.

I tried to find the sunlight because the darkness, it's the most wonderful time of the 24 hours. The evening, the night, I love this time and all my life I was in there. I didn't realize that I lived my life in the darkness and then I decided I want to see the light and I realize that light is inside of me, it's not outside. But I don't know yet how to use it.

One time in the store they asked me, *Oh, you moved here?* I said, *I live here.* They said, *Oh, you are American?* Hmmm, American? Russian? *OK, I say, actually I'm from the planet earth.* I think in general labels are not good. I mean if you label something I think you're a narrow-minded person. I don't like all the names like cisgender, transgender, gender, gender-queer, Russian, American. Why? I don't care about it. It's *people* and that's it. The main thing—is the person bad or good? You treat a person like a person. A human being. That's all. I think I'm not American, I'm not Russian. I choose any city where I can be free.

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