

# rites of love by Vladimir Megré

Book 8, part 2 of *The Ringing Cedars Series*

Ringing Cedars Press • [www.ringingcedars.com](http://www.ringingcedars.com)

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2nd edition June 2008 • ISBN 978-0-9801812-8-9 (paperback) • LCCN 2008923354

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## THE BOOK OF HAPPINESS

### *Editor's Afterword*

“Papa, which do you like better — your computer or us, your family?” my daughter Lada enquired of me one morning as I was sitting at work in my home office.

“What? Of course I like *you* better. Why?” I replied, still glued to the screen.

“It's just that you spend all day long in front of computer, but I'd rather you played with me, or come see the pumpkins Mama and I've planted. Even when we go for a walk all together, all you do is think about your work — you barely notice us!”

“Well, that's true” I admitted. “But I do need to earn money, too — to pay for the piece of land we plant our garden on, for example. In other words, to afford things that are important in life.”

“Nonsense!” she protested. “It's all arranged like that on purpose — so as to make you think that everything important in life you can buy for money — to make you think money's the most important thing of all.”

As I turned to face her, Lada looked me straight in the eye and added, tugging at my sleeve:

“You know, Papa, I really feel you need to come with me to my tree house. I'll teach you three lessons on how to live happily ever after... without money.”

Seeing the seriousness of the issue, I rose from the desk. Lada took me by the hand and escorted me to her green 'classroom'.

Half an hour later, as she finished delivering her three lessons and made sure I grasped their key concepts, Lada surprised me with a fresh demand:

"And now, before you go, you must promise me that you shall never ever share what I have just taught you — with anybody."

"How come?" I queried. "If the path you outlined to me can really lead people to happiness, I thought you would encourage me to tell others about it!"

"Don't you know about what happened with *The Book of Happiness*?"

"What *Book of Happiness*? Never heard of it."

Lada crossed her hands on her knees, sighed, and began telling me the story.

\* \* \*

Once upon a time, in a large city with dirty, polluted air, there lived a man who had lost his happiness. It seemed as though he had searched for it everywhere — including behind the sofa and under his desk — but happiness was nowhere to be seen. It occurred to the man that his cat might have taken his happiness outside and hid it somewhere — so he searched all around his apartment block, but found nothing.

Exhausted by the search, he decided to spend the following day — his day off — in the woods, picking mushrooms. And so he did — he put on his big rubber boots and his backpack, took a knife and a large basket woven out of willow twigs — and headed off.

He had a very good day, and even forgot his grief over the lost happiness. By the time the Sun was setting, his basket was so full of beautiful large mushrooms it was hard to lift off the ground. The man was ready to go home, but now he couldn't find his way out of the forest. There was no visible path. He tried going in one direction — which he hoped would lead him out onto the paved road — but ended up in a swamp. He had no electric torch, no flashlight, and in the fading twilight it was hard to see the way, so the man decided to spend the night in the forest, and try to find his way home the following day.

He made a bed out of dry pine needles under a tall pine tree, put his backpack under his head for a pillow and tried to go to sleep. But the mosquitoes attacked him, putting sleep out of the question. So he just lay there, immersed in his thoughts. Finally he drifted off into a dream.

The man awoke suddenly in the middle of the night. The forest was dark and quiet all around, but far off in the distance, over to one side, he could make out what seemed to be a light glistening midst the branches. Thinking it could be a house, or a lamppost on the road, the man picked himself up and walked in the direction of the light, slowly making his way through the darkness.

After a while he found himself emerging from the dense bushes into a glade. There was no house or lamppost anywhere in sight, but in the centre of the glade there was a moss-covered hillock radiating a soft, golden light. As the man approached the hillock, he saw an old book in a leather binding lying on the top. The light was coming from the book!

The gold lettering on the cover read: *The Book of Happiness*. He opened it and began to read.

The book opened with a promise to show the reader how to find his happiness.

*Wow, this is exactly what I need!* thought the man as he hefted the heavy tome from the moss and hurried out of the glade, taking the book with him.

Perhaps it was the light coming from the book, or perhaps his own insight, but he now felt confident as to which way he should go. And, indeed, it wasn't long before he found the path, then the paved road, and began walking along the empty night-time highway in the direction of the town, his mushroom-filled basket in one hand and *The Book of Happiness* in the other.

Dawn was breaking in the sky when he reached the outskirts of the city and, soon afterward, his home. Despite his heavy load he felt neither tired nor sleepy. He put the basket down by the front door, took off his rubber boots, plunged onto the sofa and immersed himself in reading.

He finished the whole book that same day and it delivered on its promise. It brought him his happiness back. His happiness turned out to be lying behind the bookshelf — the only place he had not looked when searching for it. Presently he remembered that at one time he had indeed put his happiness on top of this bookshelf to save space in his small flat. Then he had added more books on top, which had apparently pushed the happiness over and caused it to fall behind.

When the man — following the instructions from the Book — regained his happiness, it was all covered in dust, hair and cockroach feces, but he wiped it clean and it began to look like new once more.

So as not to lose it again, he decided to carry it with him all the time. He attached it to a watch chain he bought specifically for this purpose, and now carried his happiness in his pocket.

For days and weeks he found himself in a state of bliss and joy. But seeing the unhappy people all around him — on the sidewalks of the streets, in offices and shops — he could not help but go back in his thought to the very last statement contained in the Book, namely:

*You shall not show this book to others.*

*But just why, he thought, can't I share The Book of Happiness with others to make them happy? This can't be fair — seeing how much suffering and injustice there is in the world!*

Gradually, as he contemplated the world around him, his feeling of happiness began to give way to a sense of disquietude, which over time became unbearable. Eventually the man resolved to try sharing the Book with just one man — a fellow-worker who had spent his week compiling some sort of production reports on his computer and who looked particularly lean and unhappy.

And so one day he brought the Book with him to work and, toward the end of their shift, entered his workmate's cubicle. Explaining its significance, he lent the Book to him for just one night, on his earnest promise that he would return it the next morning. That night, as he was going to sleep, lying in his bed and clasping his chained happiness to his chest, he felt blissful and fulfilled once more at the thought of sharing the path to happiness with even one fellow-human being.

The next morning, however, a sticky feeling of unease crept into him when he saw that his workmate he had lent the book to the night before was not in his office. The man managed to bear this uncertainty until noon, trying to console himself with the thought that his friend must be finishing the last page of the Book at home and would appear at the end of the corridor any moment.

As this did not happen by the lunch break, the man obtained his colleague's home address from the manager (who had been trying to reach him by phone the whole morning, without success) and ran over

to his place. There, he found the door of the apartment wide open, and his workmate gone. With him was gone, too, *The Book of Happiness*.

At first the man found it hard to live with the nagging thought that he himself had not heeded the Book's warning and was now to blame for its disappearance. But as the days turned into weeks and weeks into months, the sensation of loss gradually wore down, and life returned to normal.

Then one morning a year later, as the man was walking to the office, he sensed a strange agitation in the air. Everywhere people could be seen shouting and running, and a huge queue had formed in front of the neighbourhood bookstore. With a dark feeling of foreboding the man made his way through the crowd to the bookshop window where, lo and behold, a hundred copies of the latest sensational release were on display. He gasped as he read, in large golden letters on the cover of each book — *The Book of Happiness*.

At this moment the store window lost its ability to withstand the pressure of the human bodies leaning against it and it shattered. Pieces of broken glass showered down on the crowd. A moment later a flood of people rushed to the display case and emptied it. Dozens of people were now running away from the bookstore, each clasping a volume to their chest. One of these people was the man who had found this book more than a year ago in the forest.

He rushed back to his apartment and leafed through his prize. There was not a shred of doubt left — this was an exact reprint of *his* Book, apparently made from the copy stolen a year earlier by his workmate. Strange as it may seem, though, the man did not feel angry at him, but rather quivered in excited anticipation as to what would come next.

For the next few days the whole city was caught up in a reading frenzy. Nobody seemed to go to work or even go outdoors. The whole populace, young and old, were staying home and reading the amazing yet simple revelations of *The Book of Happiness*. And yes, more than one soul puzzled over the last sentence in the Book:

*You shall not show this book to others.*

They questioned themselves as to why this restriction was imposed and, more importantly, why the Book had gained such tremendous circulation despite this reservation. But the general welfare resulting from the wide distribution of the Book and its ideas was so palpable that these questions were soon forgotten.

For the next two weeks, few businesses were open in the city, as all citizens joined in a spontaneous festival to celebrate their new awareness and congratulate each other on the new era that the discovery of this remarkable book had ushered in upon them.

And when the people did return to their workplaces, they were so overfilled with happiness that they took to their routine tasks with joyous enthusiasm. The bakers were baking tastier bread, the builders were laying stronger foundations for new buildings, and the policemen became more polite than ever before (!) — while not just crime, but even traffic accidents seemed to completely disappear overnight.

Weeks passed, and the whole city and the surrounding countryside were transformed in such a remarkable, beneficial fashion that everyone was going to bed with smiles on their faces in excited anticipation of what new joys the next day would bring. And only the man who had originally discovered the Book seemed to have any recollection of the warning it contained in its final line. Yet the warning, even for him, seemed to pale into insignificance.

Months went by. As he came out of his apartment block one morning into the blossoming of the Spring, his ears were blasted by the sound of nearby police-car sirens, which no one had heard for a very long time. He hurried around the corner just in time to see two policemen shove an arrested felon into a patrol car and take off. The elderly lady left standing on the pavement was explaining to passers-by that a young delinquent had assaulted her and tried to wrench her happiness from her. Her attacker had complained that she possessed more of it than he himself...

The next day similar incidents started to take place all over the city, as more and more people began to suspect their neighbours, colleagues or just passers-by of usurping a larger portion of happiness than they were entitled to.

Before long, all hell broke loose. Shooting began in the streets and neighbourhoods. People were murdered for the tiny pieces of happiness they were desperately trying to cling on to. The police department was overwhelmed. Days later, the police themselves joined the trend and raided homes to carry out whatever happiness remained — “for government needs”. Rumours had it, however, that police were keeping the confiscated happiness for their personal greed, and even fighting over it amongst themselves.

A large portion of the populace fled the distressed city, most of the businesses closed, and of the few individuals who remained, nobody so much as cared even to remove the rotting corpses of the slain men, women and children from the streets and squares that just a few weeks ago had been home to — as it had seemed at the time — boundless happiness.

As the man who had originally found *The Book of Happiness* in the woods was making his way stealthily along a completely deserted avenue leading to the city's main square, he suddenly heard the squeaking of brakes, a lone gunshot, the clapping of car doors, and the receding noise of a motor. When it finally died away in the distance, he mustered his strength and turned the corner into the plaza where the incident had happened only moments earlier. There, by the fountain, lay the man who had stolen the original of the Book a year ago and — in a pool of fresh blood nearby — the hefty leather-bound volume, opened to the last page.

*You shall not show this book to others — read the final line.*

Centuries went by. Wind and water had eaten away stone, concrete, and metal; paved streets and squares had given way to trees and meadows. Virtually nothing now betrayed the traces of the former city, concealed as it was in a lush, dense forest. The few ruins that remained had been fenced off and designated as historical monuments, occasionally drawing the odd tourist group from a faraway urban centre.

One day a visitor with a basket woven from willow twigs separated from his group and, lured by the most beautiful mushrooms he had ever seen, wandered deep into the forest, off the beaten path. Late in the afternoon, as he was crossing a large glade on his way back to the tourist camp, he stumbled over something in the high grasses. He reached down and brought up a thick book in a leather binding with gold lettering. *The Book of Happiness*, read the title.

*Wow!* thought the man. *This must be a real oldie — and probably worth a fortune.* Hiding it from his companions, he returned to the camp and when alone in his tent, took out the book, opened it and started reading.

He read all through the night, feeling no drowsiness nor fatigue. When he emerged from his tent in the morning, the world presented itself to him in a new and happy light. *There's only one thing I cannot grasp*, he thought as he watched his fellow-campers busying themselves around a fire. *Just why does it say: "You shall not show this book to others"?*

\* \* \*

Lada finished her account, and we spent some time sitting there quietly without saying a word, listening to the breeze ruffling through the treetops and the crickets chirping in the grass.

"Do you know what the surest way to keep a secret is?" Lada finally asked, breaking the silence.

"No idea," I confessed. "What is it?"

*"To forget it!"*

Then she opened the palm of her hand in which, it turned out, she had been clasping all the while three little round clumps rolled from some kind of herb.

"But I have an even better solution, one especially for you," she continued. "This is a special kind of grass that helps keep secrets. You go ahead and eat these clumps. If you eat enough of them, you will still be able to remember the three lessons I taught you, but you will not be able to share them with others. But if you eat too many of them, you will forget everything I told you — either way you won't be able to share them with others."

"And how much is 'enough'? If I eat all three, will I still remember the lessons myself?" I inquired.

"That," Lada observed, "you will find out for yourself after you've eaten them!"

Noticing our prolonged absence, my wife Ira came looking for us in the far corner of the garden.

"And just what might you be doing here?" she asked with a smile, finally spotting us under the tree.

"We... ah..." I hesitated, looking at my wife and daughter by turns as I swallowed down the last bit of the third clump. "We... were playing tree house!"

"Aha, I see," Ira gave me an understanding look and started on her way back to the house. "Come when you're hungry, lunch is ready. Though I gather you've just had some snacks!"

"Hey, Mama!" Lada called out after her. "D'you happen to know, what's the most important thing in life?"

Ira turned and confidently replied:

*"Life is!"*

"Wow, you got it right this time!" Lada jumped up and clapped her hands for joy. Then she turned to me, beaming with pride and delight at the degree of mutual understanding our family had achieved.

I hope the three clumps were just enough.

Maui, Hawaii, USA  
19 December 2007

Leonid Sharashkin

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