

“Everything I love about Lara Vapnyar’s vision and voice—her blazing intelligence, skewering wit, and exuberant prose—is contained in this wild and witty novel. I don’t know how her work manages to feel absolutely timely and perfectly timeless all at once. *Divide Me by Zero* is an inventive page-turner that explores familial and romantic love, passion, the inevitability of grief, and the ways we manage all of those things in compassionate and wonderfully surprising ways. I was so sorry when I finished and I’ll think about this book and its characters for a very long time.”

—CYNTHIA SWEENEY, author of *The Nest*

“Lara Vapnyar is one of my very favorite writers: funny and true and with the rare talent to assemble one ideally telling scene after another. She is also one of the few writers I would recommend to all my friends, with all their varying tastes, because the charisma of her storytelling is unmissable.”

—RIVKA GALCHEN, author of *Little Labors*

DIVIDE ME BY ZERO

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DIVIDE ME BY
ZERO

ONE

One week before my mother died, I went to a Russian food store on Staten Island to buy caviar. I was brought up in the Soviet Union, where caviar was considered a special food reserved for children and dying parents. I never thought of it as extravagant or a romantic delicacy. My mother would offer me some before important tests in school, because it was chock-full of phosphorus that supposedly stimulated brain cells. I remember eating caviar before school, at 7:00 AM, still in my pajamas, shivering from the morning cold, seated in the untidy kitchen of our Moscow apartment, yawning and dangling my legs, bumping my knees against the boards of our folding table, holding that piece of bread spread with a thin layer of butter and thinner layer of caviar.

I did eat caviar in a romantic setting once. With a very rich Russian man who I agreed to marry even though I was still married to Len and still in love with B.

“Caviar,” I said to the sullen Russian woman behind the fish counter, and pointed to the smallest plastic container. She

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had blonde bangs pushing from under her white cap, uneven skin, thin lips with the remains of the morning's lipstick in the creases. Most probably she was a recent immigrant who had had to leave her family in Ukraine or Moldova and come work here so she could send them money. I imagined how much she must hate her well-to-do customers, wearing leather and gold, choosing their gleaming cuts of smoked salmon, pointing to the sushi rolls, ordering caviar.

She regarded me with wary puzzlement. I was dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt I hadn't changed in days, and didn't look well-to-do or well.

She squinted at me, spooned the caviar into the container, and put it on the scale.

"It's for my mother," I said.

I don't understand what compelled me to share this. I'm a private person. I don't chat with strangers. I don't share things. Except, of course, in my fiction.

But I said that to the woman behind the fish counter. I wasn't sure if she heard me. There was loud music playing through the speakers, alternating with advertisements. "Buy your kitchen sink from Alex's Stainless."

The muscles around my mouth started to twitch, and I wanted them to stop, but I didn't have any control over them.

The woman behind the counter did hear me. And she understood what I meant right away. She stood there as if frozen, holding that container with caviar in her hands.

I think she was the one who started to cry first. Then I started to cry. Or it could've been that I was crying the whole time.

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The woman behind the counter seemed to be as shocked by her tears as I was. I was ashamed. I didn't have the right to pull her into my grief. I used her. The silent anguish was getting impossible to take—I needed an explosive release, and I used that woman to help me explode. Or perhaps, I needed a tiny bit of kindness, of connection, right there, right at that moment, in front of the fish counter with those gleaming cuts of smoked salmon, and colorful sushi rolls, and caviar.

Then I saw she wasn't crying for me, or for my mother, but that something about my experience momentarily clicked with hers. I became exposed to her, and she became exposed to me. And perhaps she needed it as much as I did.

I think about that woman often.

My mother didn't want the caviar. I waited until she woke up, and then I made her a sandwich that looked exactly like the ones she had made for me before school. She studied it and raised her eyes to me. She still recognized me as a caretaker or as some sort of parental figure, but I don't think she knew who I was anymore. She looked at me with that pleading expression she had had for the last week or two, as if she knew that I wanted something from her, and she would've been happy to oblige, but could I please, please, please leave her alone?

I fixed her pillow and stroked her on the side of her head above her right temple. She closed her eyes and turned away from me.

I went upstairs to look for my kids. I found both of them in their rooms. Nathalie, thirteen, was curled up on her bed, asleep, her tear-streaked face pressed into the open paperback of Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*—the book that she kept rereading over that summer.

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Dan, sixteen, greasy hair, unwashed clothes, was hunched over his laptop playing *Minecraft*, building a virtual castle with a virtual tower that led right into the virtual sky. I walked up to him and touched him on the shoulder.

“What? Grandma’s calling?” he asked, ready to rush downstairs.

I shook my head and walked out of his room. Both kids seemed to be a picture of neglect but also a picture of normalcy. Neither of them wanted me at the moment.

There was no excuse not to do the work that I urgently needed to do. I went into my bedroom and opened my laptop. A long queue of emails filled me with panic. Some were from my students, who wanted me to look at their stories, others from the college admins, urging me to order books or confirm my schedule. A few were from various editors offering me one or another freelance assignment. My book editor was politely inquiring when I was going to deliver the novel I hadn’t started. I had been earning my living as a writer for about twelve years now, a fact that made me immensely proud, especially since I had been earning my living as an American writer, working in my second language. But the thing about making your living as a writer is that you need to be writing in order to make a living. You need to be writing a lot, and writing well, and I wasn’t writing at all. Then there was an urgent email from my agent asking me to describe my future novel in a hundred words or less.

“I’d love to write the novel about Love and Death,” I typed. “How both of those words lost their majestic old meanings. People don’t really ‘love’ each other anymore, they either ‘worked on a relationship’ or ‘succumbed to sexual desire.’ People don’t ‘die’

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either, they ‘lost their battles’ with various diseases or they simply ‘expired’ like old products on a shelf. Neither love nor death is considered the most important passage in the life of a person anymore. In my new novel, I would try to restore their proper meanings.”

My agent shot back an answer almost right away.

“Is it going to be a comedy?”

I was shocked and even a little insulted. Comedy? Why comedy?

But then I thought that comedy, a very dark comedy, a comedy so dark that it made you cry, was the only form that would allow me to write with all honesty. If I were to truly open up in this novel, and there wasn’t any point in writing it unless I did, I would need comedy, a lot of comedy, to create a protective layer shielding me from being too exposed, guarding me from sounding too bitter. And then wasn’t life itself a perfect dark comedy too, with its journey to an inevitable tragic ending interspersed with absurd events providing comic relief?

I was about to put that in writing when I heard a strange sound coming from my mother’s room. I shut my laptop and rushed to her.

It was all quiet. My mother was still asleep, in the same position, breathing hard. Perhaps I had simply invented the strange sound so I wouldn’t have to deal with my emails.

I sat down at my mother’s table, which also served as her desk, littered with pill bottles, grocery receipts, hospice papers, random medical equipment, various food items, and yellow flash cards with my mother’s notes for her new book.

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In Russia, she had been a famous author of math textbooks for children. She had published her last right before we emigrated, so this was going to be her first book in twenty years, and her first book written in English. She said that she had this sudden and stunning insight on how to make a math textbook that would guide you through life.

My mother kept working on that book for as long as her mind was still functioning and for a time after it stopped.

There were about twenty of these cards dispersed around the room. Some perfectly coherent, even brilliant, others showing both the inevitable deterioration of my mother's mind and her desperate attempts to stave it off.

One of the cards had fallen to the floor. I picked it up and put it back on the table.

It said: "Divide me by zero." Nothing else. No date. I wasn't sure if my mother had written it in a state of confusion or if she had had some deeper meaning in mind. As a child I was fascinated by this concept. I kept asking my mother what would happen if you divided something by zero. She would say: "Nothing!" But I didn't believe her. I thought of division as a physical action. You could take a piece of bread and divide it by two, and you would have two pieces. "Nothing" happened when you divided something by one, the piece would stay intact then. Dividing by zero must have a different outcome! I kept pushing buttons on my mother's huge calculator, forcing it to divide something by zero again and again. It would beep and the screen would scream "ERROR," as if guarding the answer from me, refusing to let me into this mystery. What was that mystery? I'd pester my mother. "Not all mysteries can be

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solved,” she told me once. “Certain things are simply beyond our grasp or understanding.”

Could the “Divide me by zero” card mean that she had finally been let in on that mystery? As she was about to die?

It’s tempting to say that my mother started working on her last book right after she received her terminal diagnosis, but this wouldn’t be true. It was good news that inspired her to start writing. The first flash card for my mother’s book is dated December 10, the day her GE told her that she definitely didn’t have cancer. He had scheduled the colonoscopy because the symptoms pointed to colorectal cancer. Turned out that she did have metastatic cancer at the time. Just not colorectal. Her cancer was someplace else, so the colonoscopy didn’t show it. He couldn’t see it.

My mother had told me about her symptoms too, but I didn’t really believe her, because her symptoms appeared when I decided to leave Len. She was vehemently against the divorce, and I felt that she developed her symptoms to stop me or, if she failed to stop me, to punish me. We’ve had a history of doing that to each other—you’ll see.

I wouldn’t let her health worry me. I needed to focus on my divorce, which was a long time overdue. Sixteen years overdue to be precise.

On the day of my mother’s colonoscopy I was hiding out in Victor’s Manhattan apartment, fending off angry phone calls from Len. At one point Len called to tell me that he was going to take my kids away. I ran out on the roof terrace so I could listen to Len scream at me in private. The terrace was covered with snow. I was barefoot. The sun reflecting off the snow was

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blinding me, but my feet were freezing. I had to run across the terrace from one snowless spot to the next, hunched over as if it could shield me from the cold or Len's hatred. I was a monster, Len said. I had ruined his life and the kids would be better off if I died. The kids were at my uncle's place in the Poconos—I had sent them there so they could absorb and store as much normalcy as they could along with fresh mountain air. I had a quick scary thought that Len might drive there and kidnap them, but I managed to recognize this thought as crazy right away. As much as Len wanted to destroy me, he would've never done anything to hurt the kids. I imagined Len pacing across the living room of the New Jersey home of his skiing buddy. Pale, balding, scared, confused, holding on to the idea of me as a monster, because this was the only thing that dulled his pain. Fighting a devious monster must feel so much better than accepting the banal situation of his wife leaving him for another man. I hadn't loved Len for a long, long time, and I feared and hated him at the moment, but I also couldn't help but feel perverse affection for him. We'd been married for seventeen years, we were used to taking care of each other. I felt like it was my duty to protect him from this pain, even though I was the one causing it. But then I knew that any gesture of kindness would only make his pain worse.

Len finally hung up, and I cleared snow off the edge of a lawn chair and sat down, savoring the moment of peace before I had to go down and face Victor. He was angry at me for not being more resolute about the divorce. He suspected that I wasn't fully committed to him. He was right.

Even if I didn't love Len anymore, I still had feelings for B., no matter how hard I tried to kill them. In fact, there was nothing

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I wanted more at that moment than to see B., right then and there, on that snowed-in, blinding roof. To see him walk up the stairs and to rush into his arms, to feel his warmth, his smell—he smelled like cigarettes and hay—to move a wisp of his graying hair off his forehead and look into his eyes.

I had to stop! I really had to stop thinking about B.!

This was precisely why I had started seeing Victor in the first place, in a crazy, or perhaps crooked attempt to get over B. I've discovered that Victor wasn't perfect, far from it, but he was strong, extremely intelligent, and somewhat kind. A romantic self-made man, a Russian Great Gatsby. He was also very rich, have I mentioned that? I'm sure I have and I'm probably going to mention that again and again. Not because I'm proud of the fact of dating a rich man but because I still find it disturbing and even a little disgusting.

Victor promised to help me with the divorce, to come up with a fair solution for Len, to make sure that the kids stayed with me and that they were well provided for, that my mother had a decent home. All of that in exchange for a sincere assurance that I was going to be his loyal partner. I couldn't possibly deceive Victor. I could accept his help only if I felt that I could be that for him. He knew that I didn't love him yet—he didn't love me either—but he believed that love would develop with time, from our mutual affection and respect. My problem was that I doubted that. But maybe love wasn't necessary at all? I had married Len for love. I'd later experienced the most intense love for B. and look where it got me.

I was sitting on that roof, literally freezing my ass, while trying to persuade myself that I didn't need love and will myself into wanting to be with Victor, so I could go back and face him.

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This was when my mother called to tell me about her colonoscopy results. “It’s all good,” she said. “No cancer!”

I said: “Okay.”

“I thought you’d be relieved.” She sighed.

At that moment, I didn’t have any patience for hypochondria.

“I am not relieved, because I never thought you had cancer in the first place!” I said.

“But what about my symptoms?” she asked.

“Your symptoms are not real!” I screamed.

I said that. The words were out and gone, I immediately forgot about them, as if they had gone to some sort of memory landfill, but apparently that landfill wasn’t very far or very deep, because when my mother got the correct diagnosis just a few months later, my words came right back to stay with me forever.

On the card dated December 10, my mother wrote that her new book would have so-called “notes or asides to readers” that would try to engage them directly with the text. There were no examples in the following cards, but I imagine the notes were supposed to look something like this.

Note to a reader about to scream at her mother that her symptoms are not real. Don't do it! You will never be able to forgive yourself. You hear me? Never!

I ate the caviar at that desk, right out of the container, trying to justify eating it by telling myself that I couldn’t afford to waste money, or that I simply needed it for nourishment, with my

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mother and my kids all depending on my strength at a time like this. It didn't work. I felt as if I were robbing a grave.

Writing this book often feels like that too.

MENTAL MATH:

Since the invention of calculators, people became lazy to do math in their heads.

Mental math, however is crucial to the development of memory, attention, creativity, and situational Problem Solving.

TWO

The first few months of my affair with B. were the simplest and the happiest. By a silly twist of fate, it so happened that we both worked at the same Enormous University in New York. I taught creative writing, and B. taught film studies. We had classes in different departments and different buildings, but on the same day. We would usually steal an hour or so, right after our classes ended and before we had to rush back to our respective families, and spend it in the sprawling park by the river.

One of my students posed this question once: “Why is it so much easier to describe bad sex than great sex?” After a heated discussion, the class came to the following conclusion. Writers usually base complex sex scenes on their own experience, and while they remember bad or ordinary or even good sex in great detail, they fail to evoke the specifics of great sex because they weren’t lucid enough while it was happening to make observations. “You’re too much in the moment!” one of my students complained.

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The same goes for happiness.

I can't possibly describe what B. and I did in that park in detail, because the happiness was so extreme and all-consuming that it completely erased my ability for observation.

The thing I remember the best was the crazy urge to touch each other, as we walked along the water edge or sat on one or another bench. We were apprehensive about a stray student or a colleague who might see us, so we tried our best to resist that urge, but we didn't always succeed. I can't help but think what a strange sight we must have presented to an onlooker. B., with his graying long hair, neat Russian beard, wearing his frayed leather jacket, I, wobbly in my ridiculously high heels, my dark hair drawing crazy shapes in the wind. Kissing like mad. This phrase comes from "What Is Remembered," my favorite story by Alice Munro, and for the life of me I can't think of a better expression. Kissing like mad, but also talking like mad, talking about anything at all with the intense focus that came to signify love for me.

There was another strange thing that I noticed. Since this was the very beginning of the affair, we both tried to impress each other, claiming obscure films and books as our favorite, dropping names of especially dense philosophers, spouting nonstop intellectual insights, but at the same time the process of falling in love made us too vulnerable and overwhelmed to maintain cerebral cool.

One time B. was in the middle of a complex argument about Bergman's lack of sentimentality when his eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"Do you remember that shot at the end of *Wild Strawberries*, where the elderly professor is sitting next to his ancient mother?"

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I didn't remember it.

"He is an old man. But he's also a child at that moment. A lonely child. Nobody can understand true loneliness, except for children and people approaching death."

B. choked on his words and couldn't speak for several minutes.

I think it was the "talking like mad" rather than the "kissing like mad" that made it so hard for us to face our respective spouses afterward. I hadn't loved Len for a long time before starting an affair with B., but I still cared about him, and what filled me with unbearable guilt was that I couldn't force myself to listen to Len with genuine attention, no matter how hard I tried.

Ever since I was a young child, love was something that I badly wanted. This was what my parents had. I knew that that was what they had, before I even knew the word "love."

Here is how the story goes.

My mother and father met at a party in somebody's crowded apartment. Within an hour, they sneaked out and spent the rest of the night walking along the streets of Moscow. It was summer, my mother was wearing a stiff sleeveless dress and a pair of too-tight sandals. She mentioned those sandals every time she told me the story. They made it to the Moscow River embankment and walked along the river until my mother's feet were chafed raw. Then they sat down on the bench facing the Kremlin. They wanted to see the sunrise, but it was too cloudy that night, and by the morning a warm drizzle started, so they couldn't really see anything. My father pulled the *Pravda* newspaper out of his briefcase, checked the sunrise time for the previous day, subtracted one minute, and proposed to my mother

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exactly then. She thought it was a joke and started to laugh. She wouldn't stop laughing. He said he was completely serious. She still wouldn't stop laughing. She said, "Fine, I'll marry you." He said he needed this in writing. She asked: "What do you want, an official document?" He nodded. My father had a pen on him, but no paper, so he had to tear off the corner of *Pravda's* front page.

"I, citizen Nina Kopeleva, promise to marry citizen Daniil Geller. Signed and registered." There are also the words "Workers of the world, unite!" printed in huge letters in the background.

My father lived in Sevastopol, a town on the Black Sea, famous for its bloody military history, vast pebble beach, and the ruins of an ancient Greek town called Chersonesus. He was an oceanographer, employed by a lab that specialized in studies of the ocean. Because of his job, my father couldn't live anywhere else, so it was my mother who had to leave everything behind, including her job at the Ministry of Education, and move to Sevastopol to be with him. She told me that she didn't mind. She had just published a very successful math textbook for children, and she hoped she would be able to work from home and earn her living by writing more textbooks.

This was the peak of the so-called stagnation period in the Soviet Union, when people were allowed to live and work in peace, unless of course they tried to stir things up. Those ended up fired or exiled (if they were very lucky) or locked in psychiatric asylums (if they weren't). I wonder if this was why both my parents found fields that were timeless and infinite, to exist beyond politics, like the Ocean and Math, so they wouldn't be tempted to stir things up.

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In Sevastopol, my father had to spend a lot of time away, crossing the oceans and seas on specially equipped ships, gathering data, making up formulas for the activity of the currents, but also watching those currents live, how they shifted and breathed, making the whole mass of the ocean move and rise and fall. The ocean was his curved space, magical in its enormity and disregard for human concerns.

My mother stayed home, where she worked on her books and took care of me. We would go to the beach every day, even when it was chilly, and do math with pebbles. One of my first memories of my mother is our doing math with pebbles. I was only three, I think. The pebbles were all cold and rounded, but of different sizes and colors, so you could do all kinds of mathematical operations with them. You could count them up, you could arrange them from smallest to largest, you could build various geometrical shapes out of them.

“See?” my mother would say. “This is a square. Now let’s make a triangle.”

Her black curly hair flew in all directions in the wind, falling over her eyes, which were brown and gleaming like the eyes of a horse. Everybody said that I had the same eyes.

The cold often made my nose run, and my mother would wipe my face with a sandy handkerchief that felt scratchy against my skin. All of our things were sandy, because we spent so much time on the beach.

Every time my father came home from a trip, we would go to the port to meet him. My mother would hold me by the hand, and her hand would be sweaty and throbbing because she squeezed mine hard when we had to push through the crowd.

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She kept craning her neck and rising on her toes to see above other people's heads. Her lips were painted bright pink, and she wore so much perfume that every time a gust of wind blew in my direction, it felt like being slapped across the face by a bouquet of flowers. One time, when I was about four, my mother left me in the crowd. She couldn't spot my father for a long time, and when she finally did, she dropped my hand and ran toward my father to jump into his arms. I was scared, but I wasn't mad at my mother, or at least I don't remember being mad.

When my father was home, we would take long walks on the beach. I remember one of our walks well. I was five, still small enough to be hoisted up onto my father's shoulders. He taught me how to spot ships that were far away, tiny shimmering spots on the horizon, indistinguishable from seabirds. I remember thinking that if the ships on the horizon were that tiny, that meant my father had to turn into the tiniest speck to fit in there. The ships would reach an invisible line and then disappear beyond the horizon. "Look, another one vanished!" I would point to the empty space where we had just seen the ship. "They don't vanish!" my father would say, chuckling. "They go beyond your line of vision. If you can't see something, it doesn't mean it's not there."

He died two months after that.

His sister Rosa had immigrated to Israel, and my father's Communist Party membership had been revoked. Then my father had been summoned by a KGB officer assigned to oversee the lab. My father was told that he wouldn't be allowed on overseas research trips, because he wasn't trustworthy anymore. "But this work is my whole life!" my father pleaded. "You should've explained this to your sister," the officer said.

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My father had a heart attack and died within twenty-four hours. He was only forty. I was only six. My mother was only thirty-six.

Her hair turned gray overnight. There is proof of this in the photos. Here she is at the funeral, leaning against a brick wall, sparse gray tufts sticking out from under her black scarf. And here is a photo taken just a few days before, where my mother is posing on the beach with a full head of black curly hair.

There was a box with their letters and photographs. My mother gave it to me when I was eighteen, during a time of true and intense friendship. I was recovering from my first heartbreak and I was reading everything I could find about love (novels, memoirs, essays, poems). I thought that if I could study love the way I used to study math, the knowledge would arm me with some power against the colossal incomprehension and fear I was experiencing.

Most of my mother's photos from our time in Sevastopol turned out to be of her striking silly poses on the beach. There were two or three photographs of my mother and father together. They don't really look glowing with passion in any of them, but rather at ease with each other. Each perfectly comfortable in the other's space, each absolutely sure that he/she is with the right person, each wearing the sly, smug expression of somebody who is sure of being deeply loved.

There were also letters. Tons of letters that my parents wrote to each other while my father was away.

I was disappointed at first. Neither of my parents was a good writer, and neither of them employed the grand words of love. But then I saw something else, something more important and powerful than grand words: genuine hunger for each other's presence.

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My dear and dear and dear and dear Danka!

You asked me to tell you about my day minute by minute. Unfortunately, I had to spend many minutes standing in line to buy underpants. It was worth it though. They are made in Poland and have these little blue flowers all over them. I think you're going to love them!

I'm worried about what you eat on that ship! Every time I cook something delicious for Katya and me, I feel sad that you can't eat it. Things with the new book are still tough. The artist failed to submit the illustrations by the deadline, and now everything has to be postponed. It's not like he's a good artist either. He mostly draws little pigs. I can't have every problem be about little pigs. There are other animals, you know!

I'm still having trouble falling asleep without you. The empty space on your side feels wrong. Luckily I know math, so I just stretch diagonally to minimize the empty space.

Love you, miss you, kiss you!

Your Nina

Nina, Ninochka, Nochka!

I don't sleep very well either, I keep dreaming of you and reaching for you and wake up on the very edge of the bed about to fall down. Food is actually pretty good here. The cook makes borscht with ham and sausage, it's really good, nothing like yours though. I agree that math problems should employ different animals. Kids should be able to count sheep and cows and goats. Counting pigs alone won't make them ready for the real world. Speaking of animals, I think I saw a whale yesterday. I wanted to take a picture for you, but it

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*was gone before I got the camera. I have to go to a meeting
in a minute.*

You can't imagine how much I want you right now.

Your D.

Note to a squeamish reader. No, I didn't find the sexual innuendos in my parents' letters embarrassing. I found them heartbreaking.

There was one more item in that box. The note scribbled on the yellowed corner of the *Pravda* front page: "I, citizen Nina Kopeleva, promise to marry citizen Daniil Geller. Signed and registered."

A love letter in the language of Soviet bureaucracy written on the corner of a Soviet newspaper.

I came to think of that note as my talisman and my written oath. What my parents had was real love, and I promised myself not to settle for anything less.

In 1994, my mother and I immigrated to the US. Most of our letters and photographs were lost in the process, but that note survived, because I had it tucked between the pages of my passport and never touched it, except one time, in 2010, when I'd started seeing B. By then the note was forty years old. Forty years old, can you imagine that! Completely yellowed and so thin that I was afraid it would crumble in my fingers. I stroked it, choking with a mix of emotion and being embarrassed by emotion, and put it back.

Encourage kids to
do math in their
heads ALWAYS, no
matter what.