

Behind The Curtain



Borys Antonenko-Davydovych

Behind the Curtain

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Borys Antonenko - Davydovych

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Translated from Ukrainian
by

YURI TKACH



Bayda Books

Bayda Books, 30 Fairway Rd.
Doncaster, 3108 Australia

First edition 1980

Za shymoyu first published in the Ukr. SSR 1963.

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Printed in Australia by Industrial Press
Typeset by Barbara Tinline Typsetting

FICTION
ISBN 0 908480 01 6

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Borys Antonenko-Davydovych was born August 8, 1899 in Romny, Poltava province, in Ukraine. His father was an engine driver. His early years were spent in Briansk in Russia. Borys learned Ukrainian at six, after the family returned to Okhtyrka in Ukraine. His father died in WWI; after finishing high school in 1917, Borys left to study at Kharkiv University, then later transferred to the Kiev Educational Institute. Though he first began writing in Russian, the political struggle in Ukraine during the 1917 Revolution prompted him to start writing in Ukr. in 1923. The most significant works of this first decade were *Death* (1927), *The Seal* (1930) and *Through Ukrainian Lands* (1929).

After groundless attacks in the press and accusations of nationalism Antonenko-Davydovych was arrested in 1935, and sentenced to ten years in labour camps. But he was only able to return to Kiev from exile 21 years later in 1956, an ailing man. Notwithstanding this, the author has been active in Ukrainian literature during the 'thaw' of the sixties.

Since 1971 the author has been persecuted by the authorities for his involvement in the dissident movement, and is no longer able to publish his works in the USSR.

I would like to thank Valia Sydorenko, and Natalia & Andriy Lalak for checking medical terminology, and Graham Hirst for his careful editing of the manuscript.

Yuri Tkach.

CHAPTER 1

A whole hour remained until the dispensary would be opened. It took no more than three minutes for Doctor Postolovsky to cross the yard from his apartment to the dispensary, which allowed him enough time to do some reading before breakfast. He hesitated whether to start on the latest issue of 'Soviet Medicine' or to continue with Chekhov's 'The Hunting Party' which he had been reluctantly forced to put down the previous evening by an unexpected house call. Certainly, as a doctor, he had to be aware of the latest medical developments and it would not be worthwhile to postpone reading 'Soviet Medicine' for much longer; but then he wanted to thoroughly explore Chekhov at last. While still a student he had promised himself to study Chekhov in more depth; Chekhov — doctor and author, so often mentioned and so often written about . . .

Long ago, while still attending high school in Pereyaslav he had enjoyed literature classes, especially poetry, and could recite numerous verses of contemporary Ukrainian poets. But because of the limited school syllabus he was a stranger to prose, especially the classics. After he had graduated from the institute seven years ago, he had surrounded himself with medical literature and rarely touched fiction. It was only recently that he had resolved to study the classics, and first of all — Chekhov. Doctors like lawyers, could not remain in the narrow circle of their profession; being well acquainted with literature, was, so to speak, a requirement of the profession itself. To his own surprise, he was captivated by the plot of the 'Hunting Party' and it was difficult to avoid the pleasure of settling down to 'The Party' for at least half an hour. As he combed his long hair in front of his wife's cheval-glass, Doctor Postolovsky, or Alexander Ivanovich as everyone called him, decided on Chekhov.

The May Uzbek morning brought no dew or coolness, but neither had it yet developed into the oppressive heat of midday. A set

of quick exercises and a glass of icy water made Alexander feel the resilience in his muscles and that habitual vigour in his body return, a feeling so conducive to work. The day had begun well, according to routine, and things would have continued smoothly were it not for breakfast. Breakfast was not ready yet, but above all he was not sure if it ever would be. The fact was that Alexander's mother, who usually did all the cooking since moving here from Ukraine, had been sick in bed since yesterday evening with a bout of malaria and so his wife had to prepare breakfast. Naturally, he could have gone into the kitchen to ask when breakfast would finally be ready, but Alexander knew how reluctantly his wife, Nina, had crawled out of bed early that morning, how irritated she was pottering about in their tiny narrow kitchen frying the eggs and making the tea. She was annoyed with everything: her mother-in-law's illness, which she viewed as another show of pretence, the tainted eggs bought hell knows when and hell knows where by the mother-in-law, and the salt which God only knew where the old hag had hidden . . .

And so he was still without breakfast. Time was moving on. Obviously, he could have read for awhile without waiting for this dubious meal and then left for the dispensary, satisfying his hunger later on, at lunch time, as occasionally happened whenever Alexander was called out early in the morning. His mother might feel well enough during the day to get out of bed; then lunch would be a simpler affair and undoubtedly more delicious. However this would have unnecessarily upset the day's normal routine and threatened to ruin his mood. To be in a good mood was paramount. It helped him work without tiring, clearing his mind to perceive things instinctively and intuitively without the aid of x-rays and analyses, enabling him to easily anticipate the possible course of a disease, giving . . . No more need be said! The doctor's skill, as his professor at the institute put it, is not a trade, but true art, creativity, calling . . . If so, then inspiration and tenacity were needed, an appropriate zeal and temperament.

Moving away from the cheval-glass, he strode into the adjoining room. In their smallish apartment this room served as a study, and at the same time doubled as a bedroom for his mother. Strictly speaking, it was never a bedroom but a place of sleep, for his mother entered the room only at bedtime and whenever she was too ill for her frail legs to support her. She preferred to sit quietly in the kitchen or out in the yard, so as not to upset anything in the rooms her Sashko and daughter-in-law occupied.

On his right, hugging the wall and curtained off, stood the bed. The old wooden camp-bed, with its long canvas sack mattress filled with straw long turned to dust, was covered with a patched sheet and an old home-spun bedspread. His mother had brought these with her from distant Pereyaslav after she had finally decided to move in with her only son. Even now Nina could not help laughing when she looked at the shabby curtain of coarse old linen, hung on sticks blackened by time and miraculously held together by rusty hinges. This clumsy creation of a bungling country carpenter, together with the rest of his mother's belongings, was not worth even a tenth of the money paid for its transport over the thousands of miles to Uzbekistan; but his mother firmly held on to it, just as girls once cherished their dowries. She was especially fond of that quaint curtain which she called a paravane, in the old way. Whether on purpose or because she failed to understand, Nina, in order to ridicule her mother-in-law's illiteracy, repeated many a time, laughing: 'What 'caravan'? This is a curtain. Understand, Odarka Pylypivna — a curtain! You've got a doctor for a son and yet you talk like a yokel.'

In Nina's opinion the curtain should have been thrown away long ago, sentiments with which Alexander quite agreed, for its very antiquated appearance only served to compromise them. But the local textile industry had as yet to come up with anything even bordering on decency and in the depths of his heart Alexander felt pity for his old mother and her quaintness. And so the curtain remained. Yet whenever guests were invited over, the curtain and the bed were moved outside beforehand and until the guests left his mother had nowhere to sleep, for the mosquitoes gave no peace outside, and it was not fitting for an old woman to stretch out in the yard.

When Alexander entered the room, all was quiet behind the curtain. His mother, exhausted by the fever during the night, was probably fast asleep. Closing the door behind him, Alexander tip-toed to his desk so as not to wake his ageing mother and sat down in an armchair. The bed creaked behind the curtain.

"Had breakfast yet, Sashko? There's some cheese and yesterday's milk, if it hasn't gone sour, on the bottom shelf of the cupboard . . ."

"The huzapaya is probably damp or else the primus is playing up again," said Alexander, ignoring his mother's last words. He knew that in May, when the spring rains ended for good, the thin stalks of the previous season's cotton plants could never grow

damp, and the primus had been repaired only recently, but he had to say something to cover for his wife's strange lingering. The clock on the table showed twenty to nine. Alexander drew an armchair up to the desk and opened 'The Hunting Party'.

"The cheese is in the corner, covered with a saucer . . ." his mother's soft voice came from behind the curtain once again.

Alexander scowled. His mother's words seemed to hint at Nina's carelessness and inability to keep house.

"Please, mother, don't worry . . . You're not well, you need to rest. We'll manage," he growled, without concealing his dissatisfaction.

"But you'll go hungry again . . ." his mother uttered, as if justifying herself, and sighed heavily.

The sigh really exasperated Alexander. He wanted to tell his mother not to interfere in other people's business, that he and his wife would be able to manage, but at this moment a child's scream erupted somewhere in the kitchen, reverberating through the house. It subsided, then both halves of the study door were suddenly flung open and Vasia, Alexander's three-year-old son, burst into the room. One hand outstretched, his small fingers spread out, the youngster choked on his tears and with a patter of little feet made straight for his grandmother, ducking in under the curtain.

"Nanna, nanna — sore!"

"Don't cry, Vasylo, don't cry, my dove . . ."

"Mummy hit Vasia . . ." the youngster continued to explain.

"Where's the sore? On your hand? Here, let's have a look at it . . ."

Alexander could not see past the curtain, but he could imagine to the finest detail what followed. Once long, long ago mother had amused him the same way and it had soothed Alexander just as quickly then, as it did Vasia now. Mother slowly bent the teeny fingers into his tiny pink palm, beginning with the little finger and cooed over each one: "Peasie, beanie, wheatsie, herbie . . ." On reaching the thumb mother suddenly gave her voice a false chiding tone and pulled lightly at her grandson's finger, saying: "And big bean . . ." A short pause ensued, while granny seemed to decide what to do with 'big bean'. Mouth agape, the youngster grew rigid with ecstasy, though he had heard it all so many times before.

"And big bean — a-wa-ay with you!"

And grandmother threw her thin yellow hand far to the side. The 'awa-a-ay' brought on fits of laughter. Wet tears still glistening on his cheeks, the youngster begged granny to repeat everything

from the start, thrusting his other hand forward.

The book lay open before Alexander, but his thoughts were behind the curtain. Gradually, overcome with a peculiar mixed feeling, he could not tell whether it was jealousy that his son had not come to him but to grandmother, or a longing for something irretrievable and long since lost, who knows where and how. His mother began again: "Peasie, beanie, wheatsie . . ."

Alexander did not even hear his wife stride hastily into the room. Glaring angrily at the curtain, she cast a disgusted look at Alexander.

"You'll have to put an end to this! I can't go on this way! Our son misbehaves, I punish him and Odarka Pylypivna, just listen to her: 'Peetie, meany . . . ' What sort of an upbringing is that? And secondly, why teach the child such nonsense!"

Alexander realised that his wife had deliberately mispronounced the words of his mother's flourish; he knew too that she often punished Vasia without the slightest need, and besides, slaps and blows were no way to bring up a child. But he kept quiet. Speaking his mind now would only lead to a row. There was work to be done. Any job, especially a doctor's, required serenity. Picking up his note book and stethoscope off the table, he quietly rose from the chair, avoiding his wife's gaze.

"Great, just great! Odarka Pylypivna spoils our son and you look on through your fingers. Really . . ."

Nina itched to have a fight with the old woman, to tell her at last, that it was time to stop playing the fool. If her doctor-son couldn't see, well then she could. What malaria? This was a ruse! A prank designed to dump the damned kitchen on Nina, as well as everything else. No, what was needed here was not quinine, but . . .

Nina's anger boiled over, but all was quiet behind the curtain. Even the youngster was silent, probably frozen to his grandmother with fright. This really piqued Nina. She could not force the old woman to her feet. Although the old hag undoubtedly deserved it, she could not very well make her get out of bed.

Biting her lip, Nina strode resolutely up to the curtain.

To avoid touching that abomination, she disgustedly drew aside one fold with her shoe and without peering in, quickly felt out Vasia with her hand and extracted him with a violent tug.

"Don't you ever dare go in there again, you hear!"

The youngster broke into screams, squirmed about, stretching his free hand towards the curtain, but Nina dragged him with authority towards the door.

In the doorway she turned to Alexander.

"Aren't you coming in for breakfast? The eggs are on the table and the tea's getting cold . . ."

A quiet sigh came from behind the curtain and Alexander wanted to sigh himself, but held his breath. The bed behind the curtain creaked, slippers scraped across the floor. His mother had probably left her bed and had begun dressing. Alexander glanced sadly at his watch: ten to nine. He sighed and left the room.

Nina was disciplining Vasia in the adjoining room. Holding the youngster between her knees, she leaned back against the chair and tapping time with her shoe, repeated:

"Goosie, goosie, don't go far!

Have some water! – ga-ga-ga . . .!"

The boy stared drearily out the window and remained silent. Without pausing, Alexander quickly made his way to the dispensary.

CHAPTER 2

Alexander finished examining the Uzbek patient and lay the stethoscope on the table, diagnosing cavitation caused by tuberculosis in the central region of her left lung. But just then he happened to glance out of the window of the dispensary and noticed the oblong torso of a black dog in the hospital grounds. It appeared for a moment and then vanished.

Her again!

That cursed bitch again!

Alexander screwed up his face in annoyance and looked around helplessly.

“Get her out! Get her out at once!”

The plump, short-legged assistant, Taskira, who was sitting silently at a table covered with a white cloth, busily recording something in the dispensary register, leapt from her seat.

“Get who out, Alexander Ivanovich?”

“Ah!” he exclaimed turning away from her impatiently and slightly moving his fingers through the air as if trying unsuccessfully to catch an invisible thread.

“The dog! That black bitch! She’s in the yard again!”

Taskira rolled out from behind the table. Her stumpy legs carried her plump form to the window. Behind Alexander nurse Saodat, silent and forever worried, busied herself and clumsily knocked over a tin dish full of soiled bandages.

No, nothing was going right today! Such a disorganised, thoroughly luckless day! Even his assistant Taskira seemed to be leaning over the window sill in a very unbecoming way and was calling out in Uzbek to someone in the yard rather more loudly than was right in a hospital area. Her lacquered, intricately ornamented Uzbek shoes, worn on bare feet, left the floor and dug into the wall.

‘She’ll scrape the paint off again and it’s only been white-washed recently,’ thought Alexander. But he did not say a word.

Hurrying outside to drive the dog out, nurse Saodat bumped her elbow against the washbasin and something metallic clanked inside. Alexander thought: 'They can't even keep the basin clean! Everything's unfinished, done any old way!'

A moment later Taskira turned from the window and announced triumphantly that the dog had been evicted. Nurse Saodat tip-toed back into the room and quietly, almost as if she was talking to no one in particular, said that the caretaker, Ismail, would stop up the hole in the fence with rocks and boards and the dog would no longer be able to get in from the neighbouring yard. But all this brought Alexander little consolation. He knew that the day would now be lost, because nothing could restore his good mood again. First, it had been upset by his wife at home and then completely destroyed by the dark shadow of the dog. And now, instead of questioning the patient thoroughly about her living conditions, the beginning of the illness, members of the family and so on as he usually did, and then neatly jotting everything down on the patient's card, he hurriedly wrote out two notes: one to the regional x-ray clinic, the other to the laboratory. Handing them to Taskira, he turned to the nurse:

"Who else is waiting? Let them in Saodat."

The Uzbek woman hesitantly took the two small notes from Taskira and rose. She continued to question the assistant for a long time, throwing uneasy looks at the doctor, but he no longer took any notice of her.

A barefoot old Uzbek, dressed in a quilted chapan despite the May heat, entered the room. Without removing his black skull cap embroidered with white moons, he sedately settled into the chair facing the doctor, ready for a lengthy conversation. But Taskira immediately pounced on him:

"Surname? Name? Age . . . ?"

The Uzbek didn't even turn his head towards her and, showing his dissatisfaction, fought Taskira off with abrupt answers, as if she was a mangy, wearisome mongrel which though in no way dangerous, nevertheless irritated with its yapping. When Taskira finally finished, he moved his chair forward and leaned over towards the doctor, as if afraid that he would not be heard and properly understood.

The Uzbeks of this large, though remote, isolated village where the dispensary was situated knew that the young doctor who had come from far away, could understand a little of their

language and ordinarily addressed him in Uzbek. However, this man was obviously not a local, for he spoke a mixture, interspersing Russian phrases with Uzbek words and animated gesticulation.

At every point he added the completely unnecessary phrase 'you understand,' and every so often for emphasis he slapped his hips and knees.

He approached his complaint in a round-about way, as if some household matter, and not sickness, had brought him here.

"No mill on our collective farm. To mill wheat, mill maize, we travel ten kilometre to . . ."

Long ago Alexander had decided always to listen patiently to the sick. From scores of trivialities, often mere nonsense, he had learnt to sift out what was worthy of medical attention, what could be useful for anamnesis. Only infrequently did he direct the patient's thoughts with short questions. But this time he was not listening to the Uzbek. Involuntarily his thoughts kept returning to the repugnant black bitch.

She was long and thin. Even at a distance you could count all her ribs. To complete her miserable appearance, she had only one eye. The other, which was probably knocked out earlier, was now a rankling slit with a turbid whitish bottom. She limped on her front left paw, and down the right side of her back she bore the mark of a recent scalding — a gaping grey patch. Dirty and dishevelled, always hungry and frightened, she was the living embodiment of a homeless dog's misery.

Many a time Alexander saw the boys baiting her in the street, trying to stone her or whack her across her protruding ribs with a stick; he happened to see how, in the dark yards where her black shadow appeared, quietly jumping through holes in fences, for the bitch was afraid of entering from the street in broad daylight, the women mercilessly poured buckets of boiling water over her and old men raised their canes when she came near. She fled blindly from her pursuers, her dried-up teats shaking about like small leather purses, again to be beaten and chased away. It was probably a hard life for the dog, a scanty, miserable existence of eternal contempt, hunger and disease. And yet she lived for something and to prolong her appalling existence she sometimes ran into the hospital yard in the vain hope of finding something nourishing.

A dirty, ugly creature, a carrier of infection — and in the hospital grounds! The hospital grounds, where there was nothing superfluous, where during the morning the patients sat waiting their turn in the shade of the young trees while children sat on

low benches. Could it be permissible? On top of that, as she was scared of the nurse and the caretaker, the dog sneaked into the yard, crawling in from the adjoining yard into the garden which Alexander had planted himself and cared for. Her paws trampled the tender rockmelon vines, broke the young stalks of the tomatoes and tore the wicker-work of the grapevines. Knowing that the doctor could not stand the presence of the dog in the yard, the caretaker, Ismail, beat her with everything he could lay his hands on, if she happened to be lingering after not hearing his footsteps from afar. The patients' children chased after the dog, also trying to harrass the crazed animal in some way. Nevertheless, Alexander always saw the dog in the yard again in a day or two. Whether, down-trodden and chased from all quarters, she forgot about the dangers awaiting her in the hospital yard, or whether the dangers in her frightful life were so numerous that she no longer bothered to be careful, she still appeared time and time again from nowhere to satisfy herself that there was nothing edible here or ever could be, and at the same time to ruin Alexander's mood for the day once more. She spoilt his day not only by disturbing the strictly kept sanitary conditions in the yard, not only by trampling the garden, not only in her horrid appearance, her timid movements, her only eye, forever frightened and trusting no one, but because Alexander saw in her a chiding reproach, a reproach to him and everything normal, healthy and beautiful in this world. This bleary eye, which did not really look around, but merely cast glances and this dog's mouth, dry with eternal thirst, which never bared its teeth at assailants or uttered any noise apart from short pitiful yelps after being hit by a wall-aimed stone, spoke mutely, but so very expressively: 'Yes, I am hideous, I am ugly, but I am alive. Like you, I want to live too. Why do you raise your hand at the last thing I have — this miserable, bitter existence of mine? Give me my scrap of your surfeit and I will go away. But give it to me! Aren't you ashamed — hurling stones at me instead of giving bread?'

Many a time, seeing the hungry, baited bitch, Alexander remembered everything he had ever read about dogs; he recalled Turgenev's Moomoo, Chekhov's Kashtanka, Kuprin's poodle — and one way or another they all fitted the notion to which he had been accustomed since childhood: that dog was man's best friend. But this monster was perhaps only a sarcastic grimace of these words which his hunter-father had so often repeated. The only thing that Alexander could call it was filth. But at the same time it was alive, a completely bared allegory on something which

Alexander had not yet thought out, actually something which he did not wish to think about, but which importunately entered his head.

Meanwhile, moving closer to the doctor, the Uzbek continued his story:

"Well then, so I told Abdula (Abdula's my brother, my younger brother; I've got another brother, but Abdula's older than him) . . . Well, so I told Abdula then . . ."

Alexander transferred his surprised eyes to the Uzbek, as if he had just noticed him, and endeavouring to focus his attention on the patient, lightly shook his head to one side, as if wanting to toss away the rest of the unfinished thoughts from his mind.

"Where's the pain?" he suddenly asked the garrulous patient and looked him up and down.

"Pain?" the Uzbek asked in surprise as if never expecting such a question from the doctor. After all, he had to set forth everything properly first, how it all was — then he could talk about pain.

"It hurts in my side . . . right here," he pointed reluctantly under his right armpit and immediately returned to his story:

"Abdula, you understand, wanted to go to the dispensary straight away, but I said to him: 'The dispensary's far away, it's almost nightfall, it'll soon be dark . . .'"

"How long has the pain persisted? Two, three days or a week?" Alexander interrupted the Uzbek, not listening to a word of his narrative.

"How many days?" the Uzbek was surprised again and spread his arms out enigmatically: "It's been hurting four days now . . . Well now, as I was saying, Abdula . . ."

Alexander did not hear any more. His attention began to drift. Again he tried to master himself and hear out the patient. He reached for the stethoscope to listen to the Uzbek's chest, but again his ears were bombarded by the tirade: ". . . you understand, I said to Abdula, when the sun sets, that's it — finish! Everything goes to sleep, everything must sleep: horses, cows, donkeys, chickens. We can't go to the dispensary now . . ."

Alexander drew his outstretched hand back, picked up a pen and in his journal under 'Diagnosis' wrote *Nihil*. He rose, and moving out from his desk, told the assistant:

"Give him some ointment and write on the label . . ."

CHAPTER 3

After leaving the dispensary Alexander did not go straight home, though he felt an unpleasant emptiness in his stomach, which even made him feel slightly sick. He itched to see the damage the damned bitch had caused that day, so he set out across the yard to the vegetable patch. His good spirits continued to be eroded. He was utterly dissatisfied with the day's events and with himself. Everything was going wrong! He had not altogether finished with the woman suffering from tuberculosis, and he dealt with the garrulous Uzbek offhandedly, like an incompetent, drunken medical assistant. Alexander reproached himself. And then there was that bitch! To top the day's unpleasantness Alexander very much wanted to find the wretched signs of the day's attack. Carefully parting the thin branches of young saplings and taking large strides, so as not to trample the flowers and green beads of cantaloupe which spread out under the trees, he turned towards the wall. This was almost certainly where the bitch entered the hospital yard.

"I thought as much!" he mumbled angrily to himself, crouching over a broken vine, the ends of which had already begun to wilt.

"The mongrel! What can I do with her?"

Alexander walked on, his eyes searching for further signs of destruction, when suddenly, not far from the wall, he heard his mother's voice. She was speaking softly to someone.

"Who's she talking to?" Alexander wondered, knowing that his mother still knew virtually nothing of Uzbek, except perhaps a few numbers, without which it was impossible to shop at the market; if she ever did come across Uzbeks, she resorted to pantomime.

His mother stood with her back to him and was bent forward, coaxing someone:

"Eat, eat, my shaggy darling! How hungry you are! And dirty!"

His mother stretched out her hand and probably squatted, for she almost disappeared behind the dense strip of tall staked

tomato plants. His interest aroused, Alexander quickly moved round the row of tomatoes and approached his mother from the side. To his great amazement he saw that she was patting the horrid one-eyed bitch!

"Now, really!" he cried, as much from surprise as from anger. "I order everyone to chase her away, she gives me no peace, and you lure her back, mother!"

Hearing a man's voice, the bitch sprang back in fear, and licking her drivelling lips, sneaked a glance at Alexander, evidently deciding whether she could still count on the trouble to pass or whether it was better to make off at once, before it was too late.

"Feeding her from a bowl too!" Alexander chided her, taking a step forward to get a better look at this surprising scene. The bitch bolted to one side in fright, but hearing the old woman's voice, she stopped.

"I picked out an old useless dish for her. It's even got a hole in the bottom, but I stopped it up with a piece of rag." His mother seemed to be justifying herself, turning her sad, wrinkled face towards Alexander. "I feel sorry for her, Sashko! Everyone beats her!"

Carefully his mother pushed the bowl filled with yesterday's leftover soup towards the dog: "Eat Zhuchka, eat. Don't be afraid! Nobody's going to hurt you."

"Mum, it's not the bowl," Alexander muttered, knowing his mother always feared he and Nina suspected her of being wasteful.

"The bowl's nothing! But the dog, why let the dog in the yard?"

"I pity her Sashko. She is such an unfortunate old thing!" his mother said softly and stood up.

"Unfortunate! Why, she's a walking plague!"

"Is it her fault?" his mother asked with a sad smile and gave him a placid, sorrowful look.

Alexander wanted to rouse himself to indignation again, but when his mother's look penetrated to the depths of his soul, he grew embarrassed and felt he could no longer be indignant. He turned his eyes to the bitch, who sniffed greedily at the bowl from afar, still unable to summon enough courage to come closer, then stole a glance at his mother's profile: she had also turned her head towards the dog and her face now looked even more woeful than before.

'And she's still sick, even though she's out of bed,' he thought, and slowly turned back.

CHAPTER 4

The evening clinic finished and Alexander stepped out onto the dispensary porch.

Night was falling. In the west, behind the trees, the setting sun hastened to bed, and the air was filled with the sound of the first mosquitoes.

All day Alexander had been with people and now he wanted to be left on his own, to gather his thoughts, scattered by the day's many worries. So he went for a walk in the hospital grounds.

Three years ago, when young Doctor Postolovsky had come here to work, this yard was a melancholy wasteland, overgrown with weeds. At one time, before collectivisation, the grounds and the buildings of the present dispensary belonged to a wealthy landlord. This was the landlord's retreat: two white buildings with windows facing the yard and blank walls fronting the street, so that an outsider's eye should not fall on the landlord's wives. The third building, which stretched down the length of the yard and only touched the street with a side wall, housed the servants and was used as a store-room. A solid gate, well bolted and with a small wicket, was built into the outside wall. This and the greyish wall of clay which separated the yard from the neighbours made the landlord's estate resemble a fortress or a prison. Here, into this huge yard, harvested cotton, wheat and rice were once transported. Russian merchants and officials came and the yard was always crowded with carts, loaded mules and people. A large shed rose from the middle of the yard, and in its shade, evading the heat, rested the landlord's horses, and the servants too, if ever the landlord was nowhere in sight. Ismail, the old caretaker, had told the doctor all this. He had remained here, a witness to days long gone by when he had been a servant.

When the assistant superintendent from the Provincial Department of Health in Namangan assigned Alexander to this place, he had said with a heavy sigh:

"Uzbekistan did not know the terrors of war, but during the war, mismanagement and occasional rapacity reduced some of our medical establishments to as much ruin as the bombs in the west . . . You'll find difficulty with accommodation at first."

Noticing the new doctor's long face, he was quick to add:

"But you must realise this will only be at the beginning. Things will be ironed out later on. You know how it often is on trains — first there's nowhere to sit, but after a few hours you're stretched out comfortably and dozing . . ."

The assistant superintendent gave a reassuring smile, but Doctor Postolovsky's face did not brighten.

But it wasn't difficulties with lodgings or the sad perspective of having to keep warm by other people's fires which made Alexander melancholy. He had existed in places and conditions far worse during the terrible war years. No, he was not feeling well because the man had mentioned the war. As happened many a time before when talk turned to the subject, so now too Alexander felt that the man was furtively wondering where Doctor Postolovsky was during the great trials? Why were there no scars on his body, and no bar with decorations and medals on his jacket?

A year before the great Fatherland War, already married, he had graduated from the Moscow Medical Institute and was posted to a remote district in the north of the newly created Lviv province. Understandably, Nina did not follow him to 'such a hole', and if war had not already been raging in Europe, causing alarm and uncertainty in Moscow too, she would have used all her friends and connections to set up her husband if not in Moscow, then at worst somewhere not far from it. But the war had upset everything . . .

However, before Alexander had grown properly accustomed to the novel conditions, before he had settled into his position, a terrible storm struck one June morning . . .

Ominous clouds had been gathering for a long time beyond the western borders of the Soviet Union, but neither Alexander nor millions of other people had any inkling that the thunderbolt of war would strike so suddenly. Hurriedly transferring control of his medical district to the nurse, and having no time to write to his wife, let alone his mother, he immediately set off for the district town to fulfil his military duty before the Fatherland.

When he reached the town that evening after much trouble, there was no one either in the Health Department or even the

enlistment office. The town hospital was empty too; the last cart was leaving the grounds loaded with medical instruments and kitchen utensils. It too set a course east following the direction the head doctor had taken with his staff several hours before. The old hospital cook, a Galician, looking around in fright, whispered to Alexander that all the 'Soviet' men and women had fled the town after someone had brought news of German motorcyclists nearby.

What was he to do? Alexander considered that following the others east would be despicable: his duty was to join the army. Deciding quickly, he left his belongings in the hospital and set a course south-west on foot to join the first military unit moving towards the front.

But the unbelievable happened. Certainly, there was nothing strange in the fact that at dawn the next day, after Alexander had cleared a good thirty kilometres, he was detained at a cross-road in the forest by a field patrol. Such vigilance was normal. However, when he was handed over to a young lieutenant who, despite Alexander's papers being in order, began to suspect him of all mortal sins, Alexander became annoyed. He was particularly shocked by the sullen captain, who found fault with him because his surname ended with 'sky'. From the interrogation of the captain who listened in alarm to the distant artillery cannonade, it became evident to Alexander that this stern and yet easily frightened person with eyes red from lack of sleep did not believe him one bit; to him he was not Doctor Postolovsky, but a remnant of the routed army of Ridz-Smigla or a Ukrainian bourgeois nationalist, who had crawled from a crevice and was hurrying to join the fascists. How bitterly ironic it was that the best and indeed, only proof of his intentions which the field patrol sergeant, the lieutenant and the captain considered acceptable was just that which, to Alexander, seemed to be the only right and just thing to do: why was he heading west when the army, Soviet establishments and private individuals were all retreating east? With each day this general movement east across the river Zbruch, once the border, gained momentum. Anxiety turned to panic and suspicion, giving weight to the ludicrous charge against Doctor Postolovsky. There were even moments, Alexander suspected, when his captors considered executing him.

And so, instead of landing at the front, he was placed under guard in the company of all kinds of dubious characters, and forced to tramp across the breadth of Ukraine. Exhausted, in rags,

devastated, he finally reached Voronezh, where he was imprisoned. Recovering from everything which had so suddenly befallen him, Alexander insisted that his case be finally looked into so that he could be sent to the front. But even without this insistence they finally probably took him seriously in the serene conditions of Voronezh. He was summoned for interrogation many times, thoroughly questioned, then they contacted Moscow where Alexander had studied and from where he'd obtained his posting to Lviv province. But above all they did not try to force Doctor Postolovsky into a trumped-up charge. But by the time all the required documents had arrived from distant Moscow and scattered the fantastic accusations like a deck of cards, the war had crept up to Voronezh.

At the enlistment office where Alexander went straight from the prison, hasty preparations for evacuation had begun, and in the confusion he was assigned to a hospital train on which most of the medical personnel had died as the result of an aerial attack. The hospital train took Alexander into the depths of Siberia, to a small resort in Khakassia, where a military hospital was being organised. The local enlistment office, where Alexander went after handing over the echelon of wounded, directed him to this hospital despite his protests. Male doctors of call-up age in the district had been sent away and to the importunate demands of the old female doctor in charge of the military hospital, the enlistment office could only offer Alexander, who had appeared on the scene so unexpectedly. The old doctor clutched at Alexander, he being the only male doctor, and despite all his requests to be allowed to join the standing army, the old doctor replied categorically: "It makes no difference where you help the wounded, in the west or the east, and at present you are needed here." And so he hadn't managed to escape from this hospital deep behind the lines, and though he wore the narrow epaulettes of a medical service captain, he had not 'sniffed powder'. At the end of the war he was given a 'Victory Over Germany' medal, but he was ashamed to mention it even when filling out questionnaires—for this was the decoration recieved by people who worked behind the lines during the war, while a young doctor should have been at the front . . . 'But it was as it was,' Alexander's mother often said, and now he bitterly applied these words to himself. Perhaps it was because of this bitterness that Alexander had not returned west after the war's end, but asked to be sent east of Moscow, to where doctors were most needed.

When Alexander arrived here one cloudy autumn evening from Namangan, a year after the war, he suddenly felt as if the last bombs had exploded here just a few moments ago and there were still smoking ruins nearby.

Of the three buildings only one remained, the smallest, in which a squalid dispensary had been set up. The second, assigned to the doctor, stood without windows or doors, the paint was peeling off the walls, the stove and fireplace stood half destroyed, without doors or grates. The pockmarked floor was burnt in places, with gaping holes where boards had been removed. The third building was a complete ruin; all that remained were the walls with gaping holes that had once been windows and doors. There was no roof, no ceiling, no floor, just heaps of rubble, rubbish and refuse.

In the dense thicket of lush weeds which invaded the yard, half-wild Uzbek cats hunted little birds, the occasional snake slithered through, and scorpions rummaged about in the jagged ruins of the clay wall. The shed had long since disappeared and only the wooden stumps could have served as a reminder of its existence, had they not been engulfed by the weeds. The old gate alone stood untouched, solid and demure, just as it had been in the landlord's time. Even the hole in the wicket, through which you could peer outside before unlocking the heavy bolts to a stranger's knocking, had survived the ravages of time.

Waste ground , ruins, solitude . . .

After looking about, Doctor Postolovsky was overcome with a sinking feeling. He had expected everything, coming to this remote, out of the way place: backwardness and superstition, poisonous spiders and scorpions, tropical heat and serious epidemics, but never a ruin like this. To crown it all, across from the gate and high above his head a torn rope hung from one of the rafters. The slightest breath of wind made it sway, as if some poor soul had only recently hung himself there out of despair and his blue corpse had just been removed.

The first thing which came to Alexander's mind, after he had recovered a little from the depressing sight, was his good fortune that he had come alone, without his wife. When Nina was finally lured here by the exotic charm of Central Asia and arrived eight months later to a renovated, bright apartment and relative order, she was terrified, seeing the bare walls of the third building. What would have happened, had she come upon the house as it was then, without windows or doors, surrounded by thickets of weeds,

and with the rope swinging in the wind! What an uproar there would have been, had she seen Alexander kill two scorpions on the walls of the bedroom in those first days.

The very next day, after another look at the melancholy sight of the dispensary and its grounds in the light of the bright morning sun, Alexander set to work with redoubled energy to restore some order to the place. No, he did not panic, he did not recoil from the difficulties facing him, he did not desert the battlefields of reconstruction! No, Doctor Postolovsky was not that kind of person. He had asked to be sent here. He wanted to break the virgin lands, instead of travelling beaten tracks, to avoid sitting quietly in a cosy nook warmed by predecessors, and instead take medicine to places where it was still scarce. Better to be first in the village, than second in the city, as the Romans once said. Yes, Doctor Postolovsky would truly be the first among the village doctors of Uzbekistan!

It cost him a lot of time, work and effort to finish renovating the dispensary and doctor's quarters, to turn this enormous yard into a blooming orchard and garden. Rolling up his sleeves, he zealously wielded a mattock, biting into the dry clay soil, digging holes for trees and deepening the filled-in, barely discernible channel which once brought water in from the street. Sweat covered his brow, his lips were parched, his hair grew dishevelled, but he continued to swing the mattock. And seeing this, the others were forced to follow his example. The working-bees which he announced in advance, were attended not only by the medical assistant, the nurse, and the caretaker, but also by the *bonifactor* and three *akriquisators* who appeared at the dispensary only rarely, to warn of outbreaks of malaria in the villages and on the cotton plantations.

Silently displeased at being detained at work, assistant Taskira patiently carried buckets of water from the irrigation channel, demonstratively checking her watch from time to time; the *bonifactor* and the three female *akriquisators* hoed the weeds, levelled mounds and filled holes. The caretaker Ismail, puffing on a cigarette, planted trees in silence and trampled the freshly-dug soil firm with his bare feet, moving awkwardly like a trained circus elephant. Nurse Saodat fussed amid the piles of rubbish and brick. She was very involved in her job. However, her face was set with adamant conviction that it wasn't a doctor's business to swing a pick and that all this was to no avail.

And yet they continued to work. The work proceeded at a

slow but persistent pace, and at last the yard had been tidied, a small orchard planted and a vegetable plot dug.

This spring the dwarf cherries and apricots had blossomed for the first time, the young pears and peaches were making vigorous progress, and the poplars bordering the orchard had grown profusely. Their dense tops became tightly interlaced in a rigid green canopy. Under the poplars, which separated the orchard from a small square of virgin land, the black branches of dense jasmine bushes reached out in all directions, and before them, luxuriant, dahlias stood in single file.

Even now, while pensively crossing the yard from the dispensary, Alexander admired the beauty which had replaced the recent wilderness. A warm glow of pride in the knowledge that he was responsible for initiating and completing this transformation, embraced him for a moment.

He steered clear of the apartment, where his mother was sitting on the doorstep, and made for the bare walls of the third building, but not without failing to notice a small, but rather characteristic family scene. Vasia rushed outside, stumbling over his grandmother. One of his cheeks was puffed out. He held a small trumpet to his slobbering lips, but his full mouth prevented him from blowing into it. He took a sweet from his mouth and offered it to his grandmother.

"Have one, gran."

"Thanks, Vasylo. Eat it yourself, dear. But why did you stuff so many into your mouth at once?"

"So mummy wouldn't see. Mummy says not to give granny any lollies."

"Granny doesn't like lollies. Eat it, my dove!" The old woman brushed Vasia's hand lightly aside, but the youngster, moved by his exploit, persevered:

"No, have one! Go on, gran! Come on, have one!"

To placate the boy, the old woman took the sweet, brought it to her dry lips and pretended to eat it. She let out a deep sigh, smiling sadly, and stroked the boy's hair. Vasia was satisfied at once. He swallowed the sweets and began hopping about, blowing hard on his trumpet. Irritating, piercing sounds filled the yard, but the old woman endured them, and whenever the boy stopped to see how his grandmother liked the music, she said with a smile, slowly nodding her head:

"Oh, how nice! You can play already?"

Closing a window, Nina called out from inside the house:

"Vaska! Stop playing on my nerves, or I'll throw that stupid trumpet out."

The youngster brought the trumpet to his mouth again, but the old woman hushed him and took him in her arms:

"Here, listen, Vasylo, I'll sing you a song."

The boy forgot his trumpet and fixed his eyes on grandmother's mouth. Stroking the boy's small head, she sang softly:

*There was a time, old pipe-player,
There was a time you walked the streets,
There was a time you played your pipe . . .*

"Vasia, bedtime!" came Nina's emphatic order from the hall, and the singing broke off.

Alexander entered the ruins of the building through an opening, and though it suddenly grew quiet in the yard behind him, his mother's singing still echoed in his mind and the song he knew from childhood but had long since forgotten, continued:

*Now with us you are no more,
Your pipe lies idle on the floor . . .*

Alexander grew sad. He didn't know whether it was because of the words and the melancholy tune of the song, or whether it was because of the twilight hugging the bare walls, high above which the first star had already appeared.

This third building, which could be transformed into a beautiful maternity block, still stood a ruin!

Although there were no more broken bricks and refuse here, for nurse Saodat had finally refrained from scattering litter and waste, the bare walls clashed loudly with the clean-swept yard, the dahlias and jasmine, and everything else which Alexander had managed to accomplish.

One thing weighed on Alexander's brain like an annoying unpaid debt: the maternity block. Uzbek women gave birth in village huts in terrible, unhygienic conditions, often without calling for either a doctor or a medical assistant: and meanwhile these bare walls stood idle, begging to be transformed into a village maternity block. Such neglect could not be tolerated in this day and age! Alexander often raised the question with the District Health Department, but they did not envisage any real possibilities of this; he had pleaded in the provincial capital too, but they only shrugged their shoulders, unable to understand, and referred him

to the District Health Department. So Uzbek women continued to give birth in huts; the bare walls still stood in the yard, a sad monument to man's ignorance.

A tempting thought occurred to Alexander:

'Why not rebuild the maternity block under our own steam without waiting endlessly for the district's agreement and their grants? Why not encourage the villagers to rebuild the block themselves, using voluntary labour and enlisting the support of the collective farm? I'll have to discuss it with a few people in private, at first perhaps with those who have seen me the most, then with the management of the nearest collective farm — Akhunbabayev . . .'

However, when his thoughts drifted to the prospect of talking with the collective farm manager, cunning, fat Rakhimbekov, he immediately came back to reality and realised the barriers stopping him from achieving his objective. He even smiled, imagining how Rakhimbekov would try to wriggle out of it. No, he would not refuse, because in the Uzbek sense it would be bad manners; he would gently agree with the bewildered, unfathomable oris-doctor, even promising certain things, for courtesy demanded this too; but it was certain that he would do nothing himself. Villagers don't like being in hospital for any reason and there was no way they would bring their women there to give birth. To suddenly begin building the hospital, this maternity block, on their own, to expend time on this 'futile' business, to waste manpower, building materials, especially wood, which was so expensive here, to encumber the horses — no, such an unpopular idea would be lucky to find even a few supporters.

And yet the dream had to be realised.

Definitely!

Again Alexander remembered the trouble he had first experienced with fuel in winter, how he had endlessly sent the nurse, the assistant, and finally raced from one collective farm manager to another on his own, requesting that they send at least one cartload of *huzapaya* to the dispensary. But all was in vain. Though everyone knew that collective farms were supposed to supply the dispensary with fuel and everyone made promises, Alexander together with the assistant Taskira and the patients, continued to freeze in the unheated dispensary.

Who knows how much longer they would have had to wait for the damned *huzapaya*, if Doctor Postolovsky had not adopted a different approach. He no longer sent the nurse with reminders and stopped going himself. After talking with the Party secretary, he

took the floor at the plenary meeting of the Village Council and then took advantage of the annual meeting of the collective farm. Now he was no longer asking. With all the ardour and resolve characteristic of him, he entered the fray. He accused, upbraided, and finally demanded. It brought results. Now he had even ceased thinking about *huzapaya*, although whenever they met, the manager still considered it his duty to ask: 'Have you enough *huzapaya*, doctor?' And that was only out of politeness, for he knew the dispensary now had all the *huzapaya* it needed.

Why couldn't the apathy, the damned immovability be broken this time too? He would try. It needed greater contact with the people, more persistence, more obstinacy.

Before Alexander knew it night had fallen. When he returned to the yard the sky was completely dark. Large stars twinkled brightly like gold sequins liberally scattered over dark green velvet.

CHAPTER 5

On his return from a house call, Alexander met his wife at the gate. Wearing a cream hat with a wide curved brim, Nina pompously approached the gate, breathing heavily because of the oppressive heat. Her left hand, weighed down by a box of paints, hung limply at her side; in her right hand she held an open red parasol, resting it on her shoulder. A parody of a kimono, though expertly sewn from colourful Uzbek silk, was stuck in places to her sweaty body, and Alexander noticed that his wife's bust had filled out prematurely and there was a general undesirable tendency towards obesity: "When has she managed to become so plump?" he thought in amazement. Only recently, it seemed she had been quite thin . . .

"Oh, this damned Asia!" Nina sighed heavily, lifting her tired legs high over the threshold of the wicket built into the gate. When they were in the yard, Nina languidly raised the thin curves of her slightly painted eyebrows, and acting like a wronged and helpless child capriciously put out her puffy cheek:

"Kiss me, *Pappy*! I'm awfully tired!"

Despite his serious expression, always deep in thought, and his age equal to Nina's, Alexander still looked younger than she did, but on those rare occasions when Nina wanted to show some tenderness towards him, he forfeited his domestic name of Sashko and became *Pappy*, partly, it seemed, because he had the same name as Nina's father. He didn't particularly like this, and sometimes when he was engrossed in something, it annoyed him, but he did not show this, and silently, without any special desire, kissed the offered cheek. (He was allowed to kiss her lips only at night, when there was no need to fear that he would smear the lipstick on Nina's sumptuous lips).

Alexander was in no mood for kisses. He was still thinking about his patient, still unable to decide whether he had detected only acute cystitis, or whether something else lurked behind the high temperature. Besides, Taskira, Saodat, and the caretaker Ismail could

see them. His mother was probably looking out for them too, and in his mother's presence he was still embarrassed to kiss his wife. So Alexander hesitated.

"Well . . .?"

Nina's brows rose even higher, but this time in astonishment. Alexander knew from experience what this meant. In a minute Nina's eyes, these still beautiful greenish eyes for which he had married her, would screw up and shower him with such coldness that it was better not to delay. So, embarrassed by his own self and the invisible eyes of onlookers, he glanced sideways and timidly hastened to put his lips to his wife's cheek.

"What's the matter with you today?" Nina turned her head towards him in amazement.

"How did it go today?" he asked with feigned interest, stretching his hand out to take a box of paints. But Nina had already realised the worth of his kiss and angrily moved her hand away.

"Only the dead and hippos are kissed like that!"

Nina turned away indignantly, straightened and resolutely made for the house. Alexander had wanted to retort with a joke, but realised in time that he wouldn't be able to make a joke of it now and followed his wife silently into the house.

These last few days Nina had become engrossed in her new painting, which would be called 'The Old and the New'. She spent whole hours under her red parasol on a folding stool before the easel, painting the half-demolished mosque, beside which a kindergarten was supposed to be located. In fact there was nothing of the sort beside the mosque, only vacant land, the kindergarten being much further away on the other side of the street. Occasionally Nina went there too to make sketches. But on canvas it was one ensemble. The mosque, which served as a backdrop in the picture, was 'The Old', and before it, quite out of place in Alexander's professional opinion, was a huddle of cots with infants. Further away stood a crowd of Uzbek children playing with toys, and on the right, a beautiful young Uzbek woman with a skull-cap, from under which numerous thinly-plaited braids of hair cascaded onto her back and breast, was solemnly cooking on a primus. This was 'The New', which was supposed to stand in sharp contrast to the mosque and all the old things relating to it. Nina had wanted to sit an old mullah in a green turban on the stone steps of the mosque, hatefully looking on with clenched fists at the newness which was situated so playfully near to him, but Alexander dissuaded her. And strangely

enough Nina heeded his advice. On the other hand, maybe she simply couldn't find a subject to pose for her, for old Uzbek Moslems did not believe in the portrayal of people on canvas.

Because of this painting, which Nina said was to make a name for her in art, she waived even her rule of forbidding Vasia to continually be around the mother-in-law, and the boy had been left many a day now under her malevolent influence.

Alexander was unable to judge the quality of the painting. Who could tell, maybe there was something original in it, something valuable, but maybe it was just one of those countless variations on what greater and more talented people had created long ago. He didn't very much like the idea itself, and he saw nothing special in her technique. Nina's explanations, liberally sprinkled with the words 'composition', 'tonality', 'chiaroscuro' and 'hue' reached neither his logic nor emotions. On the contrary, the more he studied the painting following Nina's forefinger from one point to another, the more these magical words seemed to him like tinsel, invented only to disguise a lack of talent. Alexander saw something elementary, restricted, and yet pretentious and gaudy, in his wife's painting. Above all, being a doctor, he would never have agreed to locate a kindergarten near a neglected mosque on wasteland, when it was easy enough to find suitable sites in the village. Secondly, the female Uzbek cook was far too decorative, almost pompous. There were none like her in kindergartens. And the faces of the children were far too puffy and red — more like those of cherubs from bourgeois postcards than those of the Uzbek farmers' children.

However, Alexander did not voice his thoughts to his wife. Once, in the first months of married life, Alexander was indiscreet enough to openly air his thoughts on Nina's artistic exercises. The fact alone that he had unsuccessfully and sometimes erroneously used such terms as 'decadence' and 'futurism', made Nina gasp at her husband's backwardness and then she would remain indignant for several days. As for Alexander's views on art, she didn't even want to hear them. She already knew that his idea of a painting would be an authentic Shyshkin forest, dark and impenetrable, with bears . . .

Since then Alexander had avoided this dangerous, slippery subject. Besides, being a person used to carefully defined concepts, he felt quite uncertain in the theoretical abstraction of pictorial art. But this hardly worried him. His medicine sufficed; he dreamed not only of a broad practice, but also secretly cherished a scientific career. He keenly followed all new developments, subscribed to and carefully read medical journals and struggled to attend scientific

conferences in the cities. Now he had taken on classical literature, because he felt a doctor needed this. He read Veresayev's 'A Doctor's Notebook' and seriously took to Chekhov. This was enough for him! Having an artistic wife, he rarely worried about his incompetence in art, music and the theatre.

But Nina viewed things quite differently. The fact that Alexander could not name even one of Michaelangelo's works, did not know what differentiated a Rembrandt from a Rubens, and of the Peredvizhniks remembered only Kramsky — this was inexcusable. She had thought bitterly on many occasions that her marriage and family life with such an ignoramus was not only a terrible mistake, but a tragedy too. After all, she was a woman of the arts, a young talented artist, who showed great promise even at the Moscow Art School (in Moscow, not somewhere in the provinces!). And if her paintings had yet to forge a path to the All-Union art shows and the republic exhibitions, having so far only found places in workers clubs and tea-houses, then it was undeniably the fault of her 'rusk' and the conditions he created for her. (Nina had once called Alexander a 'rusk' in a fit of extreme irritation and used the nickname for subsequent misunderstandings). Frankly, he was not for her. She had simply giddily followed the voice of passion and lowered herself to the simple, insignificant Doctor Postolovsky. And as for this impossible mother-in-law, his mother! Nina addressed her on principle only by name and patronymic, deliberately accentuating, it seemed to Alexander, by her overly accurate pronunciation, the simple, plebeian name — Odarka. Nina had to share the running of the household with her too, of which she took on the organisational role, leaving the housework to the mother-in-law. But most importantly, Nina had to live in the same apartment as this irritating silent woman, with whom she did not have and never could have anything in common, a woman who had stagnated in the bourgeois routine of some Pereyaslav, and by her mere presence, left a mark of pettiness on everything about her. Living in the one house, she had to come in contact with her in every kind of domestic trifle, to watch over her, to leave the child in her care! Nina was afraid to even think what Vasia could take in from his grandmother, for being a child he deftly swallowed both the good and the bad. Her language, her expressions, her manner! And it was all because the old woman had no one else to turn to apart from her last surviving son, Alexander. She hadn't given birth to more children, so that she could take turns in spending her last years with them! What business was it of Nina's?

Was it her fault that the old woman didn't even have relatives who could have given her shelter? Why did Nina have to upset her own personal life, to restrict herself, tie herself up in knots, dry up, and finally check her creativeness? At least the old woman usually remained silent and hardly ever argued, almost as if she was trying to please Nina. But it was to no avail! Nina could feel that the mother-in-law did not love her, did not approve of her son's choice and looked askance at her daughter-in-law's paintings, easel, palette, brushes and paints as foolishness and frivolity. The old woman even tried not to come too close to the daughter-in-law's toys, but it was enough for Nina when the mother-in-law occasionally threw her dry poisonous look over her artist's tools and sighed quietly; and when on top of this Nina noticed a lenten expression of unconcern, indifference, a snake-like neutrality in the mother-in-law's face, something the old woman was so expert at doing, characteristically closing her sunken blue lips, she was seized with fury and could hardly control herself. And then she thought indignantly: what of it, if she has only one son! Couldn't she live apart? In a separate flat, or better still in another town so they would rarely meet. Of course she could! Obviously she would have to be helped. Alexander would send her money, alimony or whatever it was officially called, and everything would be fine. Others lived that way! But mention it to Alexander, suggest it to him nicely, and he immediately becomes silent, scowling, and leaves home, deliberately losing himself in some village or else disappearing completely to the district or provincial centre, dreaming up some false, urgent business, leaving his wife to face the mother-in-law alone, to suffer her intolerable presence.

No, there was nothing else to be said! Art and creativity needed the right conditions, and these Nina did not have . . .

Nina pulled back the wide sleeves of her elegant kimono and came up to the basin to wash herself. Through the cloudy suds in the white enamel basin she immediately spied the white smears of paint. Vasia sat in the corner with his toys, dubiously silent, and glanced fearfully at his mother.

"Been playing with my tubes again Vasia, squeezing out the paint?" Nina turned to him menacingly. "Come here this minute!" she ordered and rolled up her sleeves past her elbows.

"Speak up — did you take my paints?"

"No, no, no . . . I . . . just played with the brushes a little . . ."

"Don't 'no-no' me. And come here, when I'm speaking to you!"

Sensing an inevitable beating, the boy moved slowly from his place and prepared to burst into tears. With two steps to go, the small fellow changed his mind and arms outstretched, rushed towards his mother.

"I won't, I won't do it any more, mummy!"

He knew already the appeasing effect this had on his father, when he was angry, so he decided to try it out on his mother.

"No, first tell me why you took the paints?"

Nina, her arms akimbo and feet set apart, was ready for an exhaustive interrogation, but at this moment the old woman came inside and quietly shuffled past, carrying an empty dirty bowl. As soon as Nina saw the useless bowl with the hole in the bottom stopped up with a rag, all her anger turned from Vasia to her mother-in-law.

"Good God! You drag all sorts of rubbish into the house, Odarka Pylypivna!" Nina clapped her hands, and Vasia, taking advantage of the opportunity, quietly backed away from trouble.

"I'll just rinse it and take it out again," the old woman replied hastily.

"You can do that outside. It's about time you remembered you're living in a doctor's apartment!" Nina called after her, and began to soap her hands.

Alexander heard everything from the next room, where he came to change into his slippers. He couldn't care less about the bowl his mother had brought inside, though he guessed at once it was probably the same one from which she had recently fed the dog, but he was displeased that his mother had quarrelled with his wife once again. He could never really tell who was to blame and what had led to the quarrel, but he had long since adopted the view that in household disputes mothers-in-law were always to blame, and so he was inclined to take his wife's side. Just now he had consciously ignored the words 'doctor's apartment', on which his wife had placed such great emphasis, though he knew only too well that Nina herself took little notice of this and in fact their apartment, where Nina had taken over a large room for her easels, sketches and studies, resembled an art studio rather than a doctor's apartment.

'Why do they quarrel? Why can't they be friends?' he thought vexedly and went into the living-room, so that if anything happened, he could stop his mother in time. But his mother and Vasia were no longer in the room. Nina wiped her hands with a fluffy towel.

"You know my heart's been playing up lately, Sasha dear . . .

Probably overwork . . . I've become so nervous lately, I just don't recognise myself".

If this had been the first time such a thing had happened, Alexander would have been puzzled by his wife, whose mood had changed so suddenly, but he had grown accustomed to such changes, as he had to complaints about poor health whenever Nina had a misunderstanding with his mother, or whenever mother was sick. He knew in advance that it was enough for his mother to be confined to bed, and immediately something would begin to pain Nina too. If it had been someone else, he would have laughed openly: was the exhaustion from too much loafing? A bad heart in such a healthy person? Now as for nervousness, she was right. Nina was a real neurotic! But this was only a fleeting thought in the depths of his consciousness and he immediately extinguished it. Forgetting her heart and exhaustion, Nina was already rattling away:

"Just think, that offensive shop manager, I think he's called Abdulayev, he almost forced me to drag my easel home! Didn't want to let me leave it in the shop till tomorrow. Kept giving excuses that it was 'in the way' and 'out of place' and 'some customer might break it' . . . I just managed to persuade the impudent fellow! Under no circumstances, Sasha dear, must you send his wife to the hospital! We'll have to teach them to respect us, or you'll never know what they may do next!"

Alexander disliked his wife's meddling in his medical affairs, and at another time would certainly have frowned in disapproval or perhaps quietly remonstrated with her. Calmly, without raising his voice, he would have let her know that such matters were none of her business. But now, after the unsuccessful kiss in the yard, and after her fray with his mother, he took her tender 'Sasha dear' for a sign of continuing peace and cheerfully came up to the table.

"Shall we have lunch, Nina, love? Tell mother to serve the food."

"One minute!" Nina threw down the towel on the edge of the bed and without waiting for her mother-in-law, began setting the table.

For a long time Alexander had known that when his wife quarrelled with his mother, Nina tried to be gentle with him. And so it happened now, but Alexander refused to concede this change in his wife's behaviour. The fact that Nina, like any deft, thoughtful housewife, busied herself setting the table, had moved him a little.

Nina put out the plates, cut some bread, popped into the kitchen to arrange everything and even got a bottle of vodka and a

glass from the cupboard.

"Will you have a drink, Sasha dear?" Nina screwed up her eyes a little and looked inquiringly at her husband. Alexander was not against an occasional drink before lunch to whet his appetite and besides, vodka was not a common sight in the village shop as there was still no great demand for it among the Uzbeks, because of ancient Moslem laws, and he wanted to return the sacrifice. He knew that Nina detested the smell of vodka, and if she offered him a drink herself, it was an exceptional favour.

"No thanks, Nina, dear! I think I'll give it a miss today . . ."

Nina promptly returned the small carafe to the cupboard and rushed up to Alexander with outstretched arms.

"How nice you can be, Alexander!"

She took his head in her hands, pressed it to her breasts and bent over his ear. However, she did not kiss him, as Alexander had expected, but only lowered her voice and added quietly in a dreamy voice: ". . . If you want to."

The front of Nina's kimono parted, exposing the white edge of her night-gown. The familiar intimacy of her body suddenly reached Alexander and he tightly embraced his wife's plump, though still supple waist.

"How I love watching your face grow pale with desire!" she whispered, placing her hands on his temples and gazing into his eyes. In fact Alexander's face had not paled at all. Nina had said that on purpose, considering it necessary to arouse her husband from time to time. He wanted to fondle her and rose to kiss the white triangle of skin revealed by the kimono, but at this moment the door creaked open and his mother came in with a saucepan, followed by Vasia, who was laughing, his misdeed and possible punishment long forgotten.

Nine suddenly moved away from her husband, the arches of her brows shot up, and, sighing, she sat down at the table in her usual place. Once again her face, all at once so sad and mournful, bore that common complaint: 'You can see for yourself, your mother's in the way . . .' And this time he too felt that his mother really was an encumbrance.

His mother carefully placed the saucepan on the table and pretended she had noticed nothing. She sat down at her usual place, between her son and daughter-in-law, and to dispel the tense silence which filled the room upon her entry, said:

"A bit on the humid side today . . ."

"That's Uzbekistan for you," replied Alexander, for want of

something better to say, but Nina, who was tying a napkin round Vasia's neck, sounded off at her mother-in-law, not without malice:

"If it's so humid, why on earth did you come here? This is Central Asia, Odarka Pylypivna! The South!"

His mother lifted her melancholy eyes in surprise, eyes once beautiful, but long since faded, forever moist these days. She had not expected her innocent words to provoke her daughter-in-law.

Elbows raised high above the table, Nina ladled out the soup.

"I only said it for something to say," said his mother quietly, as if justifying herself, but Nina would not let slip such an opportunity.

"You shouldn't speak like that! You make it sound as if we're responsible for you ending up here, when in fact . . ."

"It's very hot!" said Alexander, laying his spoon down, to stop his wife finishing what was better left unsaid. "You should let the soup cool off a little before lunch, mother."

"Think your mother ever does things right, so we can eat in peace! Either it's stone cold, or so hot that you can't swallow it!" Nina added, but Alexander saw this quip as superfluous. He took up his spoon again, moved his plate closer and stole a glance at his mother. She was bent low over her plate and ate quickly. A large tear ran down her right cheek. It reached her nose, paused a moment and fell into the plate. It was closely followed by a second tear, then a third . . . The mother lowered her head further still and began lifting her trembling spoon of soup even faster to her equally trembling, twisted lips. And her tears continued to flow and drop noiselessly into the soup.

CHAPTER 6

Yesterday the bonificator notified Alexander that he had found *Anopheles* mosquitoes on some rice plots which villagers had planted in their back yards. The situation was threatening, and yet very delicate too. Rice could not be grown in the village and within a three kilometre radius of it, as laid down by a special decree of the district committee. Rice fields had to be flooded with water in summer and so became an ideal breeding place for mosquitoes. Each year the bonificators spent a lot of time flooding them with diesolene and poisonous chemicals. The large collective farm rice fields contained foul stagnant water in which black leeches wriggled lazily and from which the snakes, immobilised by the heat, poked out their long heads. These unhealthy places where it was hard to breathe in the daytime because of the humidity and in the evening there was no escape from the mosquitoes, always seemed loathsome to Alexander. If it had been up to him he would have readily given up eating rice if only to destroy those continuous reservoirs of malaria. Besides, they always created a lot of trouble: there wasn't always enough diesolène, and it wasn't always safe to flood the plantations with poisons — cattle or even shepherd children might drink the poisoned water. But at least these plantations were quite some distance from the village.

In the last three years, Doctor Postolovsky had succeeded in reducing the occurrence of malaria by forty-seven percent. He was set as an example to others not only by the district mariologist Pischkina, but also by the provincial tropical station, which had even offered him the post of mariologist in a district of this malaria infested province, but since he considered general medicine to be his principal calling, Alexander declined.

From year to year malaria shook fewer and fewer people with its merciless fever and the people began to forget the district committee decree. Not only the Village Council, but Alexander too no longer took any notice,

as he had in the past, when someone in the village began growing rice in their garden. But now it was a different matter. The *Anopheles* mosquito was breeding in the village itself! If this was tolerated, if firm measures were not taken immediately, then in August or September, when the cotton harvest began, half the village would be down with malaria. But the question remained: which measures? To pour poisons or even diesolene onto these small private plots was out of the question, for there would be seepage back into the irrigation channels which supplied water for all the greenery in the village. It was far too dangerous. So they could only destroy these plots, drain them and cut out the still-green precious stalks of rice which would have yielded its assiduous owner rice to go into his pilaf. People had already invested their work, time, and grain into these plots: the future rice crop had already been accounted for by the owner in his yearly income. And now for the theoretical good of the village, some farmers would have to see the fruits of their labour destroyed before their eyes. This was a very delicate situation that would invariably have unpleasant consequences, which Alexander wanted to avoid at all costs. However, there was no other solution. The unpleasant task before Alexander as head of the medical section could not be handled by him alone with his *bonificators* and *akriquisators*; public action and administrative intervention was needed, perhaps even help from the district centre.

Alexander was preparing to go to the head of the Village Council to discuss the problem and decide on a plan of attack. At the same time he hoped to see the Komsomol secretary Yusupov in the Village Council offices and speak to him about the reconstruction of the maternity block. By approaching the younger generation first, it would be easier to persuade the older people.

Nina had gone to Tashkent the day before yesterday to buy paints and hoped to establish contacts within the republic's art circles. Vasia, who was now free as a bird for the second day in his grandmother's care, was exhausted from running around and lay fast asleep after lunch. Alexander could not find his mother in the bedrooms or the kitchen. 'I'll have to tell her I'm going,' Alexander thought and stepped outside. His mother was not there either. The caretaker Ismail was sitting on the dispensary steps, wearing a long white shirt which reached almost to his knees and was rolling a large cigarette in a piece of newspaper.

"Have you seen my mother, Ismail?" Alexander called out to him. Ismail rose respectfully and put his hand to his ear.

"Who? Your mother?" he couldn't understand at first, but

then caught on: "The old woman? The old woman went. She went that way."

Ismail respected only Alexander, who was his superior and from whom he received his wages. Also, he was a man. Everyone else in the yard, including Nina and the doctor's mother, he ignored, for they were all women. By the way he carelessly waved his tanned, almost black hand in the direction of the orchard, by his tone of voice and his body, which was facing away from the orchard, he wanted to show that he was totally indifferent to the affairs of the women in the yard.

Alexander strode towards the orchard, deciding also to inspect his 'market garden', as he had jokingly called his vegetable plot.

The shrill creak of an ungreased cart came from the street, nearby an ass trumpeted its hideous notes, and Uzbek pigeons were cooing next door. Their cooing always made Alexander sorrowful. The pigeons here didn't seem to be cooing tender phrases to each other in their pigeon language, as they did in Ukraine, but were always complaining and admonishing someone.

Alexander passed the wide patch of onions where sharp green spears stood in straight rows like a dwarf army, and regretfully looked at the wasted patch of local cucumbers. The small bushes had grown lush, the long tough vines were covered with an abundance of yellow flowers, but the large pale green cucumbers contorted into half moons and strange curves were unpalatable, being as bitter as quinine. Alexander still couldn't work out how the Uzbeks could eat them, and even run a brisk trade in them at the market.

Behind the cucumbers, as if forming a live fence at the back of the garden, grew a lush stand of maize.

Alexander recalled how as a child he had liked to nibble the hot corn cobs, or *pshenychka* as they were called in Poltava province, and tenderly stroked the dark-brown silk hanging from a ripe cob. Warm memories from the distant past flooded back. He was suddenly a small boy, barefoot, in tiny shorts, and together with his older brother Kostia, who had died long ago, he was sticking the corn silk above his lips with spittle, stuffing enormous long tufts of it under his cap and disguised this way, confronting mother. Mother acted as if she didn't recognise them, asked the two characters what they wanted, and they became even more carried away with their masquerade, changing their thin squeaks to gruff male voices, until someone's moustache fell off and in amazement mother would recognise her Sashko or Kostyk . . . And she always found a hot *pyrizhok* for them or an apple, even sweets sometimes . . . Memor-

ies of childhood!

"Oh, how many long years have passed since then!" sighed Alexander.

"... And now his brother Kostyk is no more ..."

Alexander shuddered. These were not his words continuing his reminiscences. He had heard his mother's voice somewhere nearby, behind the maize. Alexander held his breath. His mother was softly telling someone:

"Sashko is nothing like he used to be ... No, he's a changed person ..."

Alexander took a few steps forward on tip-toe and his trembling fingers parted the smooth, seemingly starched maize leaves. Nearby, beside the vegetable patch, embracing her knees, his mother was sitting on the ground with her back to him. And before her lay the black Uzbek bitch, her only eye riveted to his mother's face. She listened attentively ...

Hearing someone approaching, the bitch pricked up her ears and rose anxiously on her front paws.

"Don't be afraid, Zhuchka! Don't be afraid, doggy! She's left ... " his mother stroked the dog's head. "But when she returns again, you'd better keep away, Zhuchka ... "

Pain stabbed at Alexander's heart and a bitterness filled his throat. He suddenly wanted to break from his hiding-place and run to his mother, and just as in childhood, to bury his face between her knees, to hear and see nothing, only feel mother's warm hand gently stroking his hair, only hear her soft voice: 'No need, Sashko, no need for that, darling.'

He even craned forward, unconsciously clenching a crumpled maize leaf in his fist, but his eyes involuntarily fell on the dog. Reassured by the old woman's words, the dog lay down again and rested its head on its front paws. The dog's only eye now looked directly at Alexander. The eye watched him with a look filled with wisdom and sadness, as if it understood everything, but was unable or unwilling to express itself. Alexander could not stand the dog's gaze. He turned and quickly walked away ...

When Alexander was back in the dispensary yard, he hurried up to the caretaker, Ismail, and said:

"Don't stone the black bitch any more, Ismail. Let her come and go as she wishes."

Ismail gave the doctor a phlegmatic look, nodded his head slightly and replied in Russian for some reason:

“We’ll leave the black bitch in peace, doctor . . . She can go and come as she pleases . . .”

CHAPTER 7

Alexander signed the prescription and handed it to the sick woman.

"Three times a day before meals."

The squat patient, in short jacket and white kerchief, from under which strayed an unruly lock of hair, hastily rose from the stool, and her lively blue eyes smiled coquetishly at the doctor.

"Thank you . . . I still wanted, doctor . . ." But then she hesitated.

"Yes, go ahead!"

Alexander lay his pen on the inkstand, ready to listen to her.

"See, I wanted to . . ." And again the white face of the unknown patient, hardly touched by the tan of the hot southern sun, smiled in embarrassment and she stopped abruptly:

"No, I'll mention it next time . . . Goodbye."

And she quickly left the office.

Alexander watched her go in surprise, and after the surgery door closed behind her, he focused his questioning eyes on Taskira.

"Who is she?" he asked.

"Baranova? A book-keeper from the cotton plant," Taskira replied hesitantly, grinning for some reason. She wasn't sure whether she could smile at work, or whether she should keep a straight face.

"Is she single? A maiden?" Alexander asked.

"A little . . ." The grin left Taskira's face.

"How do you mean, 'a little'?" Alexander asked in surprise.

"She hasn't got a man, Alexander Ivanovich. Nor children . . ."

"So what?"

Taskira blushed, lowered her small immobile button eyes and whispered:

"She had a miscarriage . . ."

"Then she's not a maiden," Alexander smiled.

"No, a miscarriage in only the second month," Taskira hastened to explain. "A very small one . . ."

"So then, she's still a maiden?" Alexander continued to smile, leaning against the back of the chair.

"Yes! Almost a maiden," Taskira agreed, blinking. She still couldn't understand what the doctor was smiling about.

Alexander burst into laughter.

It was a successful day. To begin with, yesterday morning they had begun to destroy the private rice plots in the village, and this tedious operation which could have turned out either way, was so far proceeding well. The tropical station had sent out two experienced bonificators to help Alexander, along with hydropanels and equipment, but there was not much left for them to do — the work was being done by a Komsomol brigade and MTS workers under the guidance of the second district secretary, Fedorov, who had conveniently appeared in the village in his jeep. Besides, the farm books showed that most of the plots belonged to people who did not rely on wages earned at the collective farm. So Alexander's conscience could be allayed: these extreme but necessary measures had not affected the honest farmer's income.

Today Alexander had done two artificial pneumothoraxes, then found that the clean edges of a young shepherd's wound had grown together well under the metal clamps, and briskly extracted an old Uzbek's two strong molar teeth. The latter pleased Alexander immensely: being a physician, he didn't feel at all sure of himself when he had to play the role of dentist in the dispensary. And he avoided directing patients to the district polyclinic; doctors' practices in the villages were there to cure on the spot, and a village doctor had to be 'a butcher, a baker and a candlestick maker' . . .

Alexander was in a good mood; he wanted to rest a little and amuse himself. Assistant Taskira reminded him of a school friend from the junior grades who was famous throughout the whole school for his absurd answers. A geography teacher, listening to his memorised account of the fauna of Australia, asked:

"Are there any elephants in Australia, Petrenko?" And Petrenko, shrugging his back and shoulders, as if amazed and embarrassed at being asked such a naive question, would answer: "It's far too small! There can't be any elephants there . . ."

Taskira too, after Alexander once, by chance, asked her if she knew which people had spoken Latin, replied in a questioning tone, turning red with the strain: 'The Arabs, I think, Alexander Ivanovich?'

Alexander was now in a mood to be entertained by Taskira's answers, and continuing to smile, he asked her:

"So what does this 'almost maiden' want from me?"

Just then there was a knock on the door, and looking back, perhaps at her husband or father, an Uzbek woman timidly entered the surgery. She threw the doctor a quick shy glance from under her long lowered eyelashes and began whispering something at length to Taskira.

"What is it?" Alexander asked impatiently.

"She . . ." Taskira lowered her head again to listen to the patient, but without having heard her out, turned to the doctor.

"She has a sore in her breast."

"A sore?" Alexander screwed up his face: he hated it when his assistant did not use medical terms. "Tell her to undress and show me."

Taskira and the woman again whispered something in Uzbek and the woman adamantly shook her head.

"She won't . . . She's ashamed and afraid: her husband is waiting outside."

Alexander was irritated by this inevitable ceremony which happened so often here during the examination of women patients. To shorten it, he asked Taskira to call in the husband.

"I can't see through clothes. This is a hospital, there is nothing to be ashamed of. Your wife must undress and show me where it hurts," he said to the young Uzbek who shuffled guiltily from foot to foot, continually moving his gaze from the doctor to the assistant. Finally he turned resolutely to his wife, said something into her ear and stood to one side, even turning his face towards the wall so as not to see the examination.

The woman hesitated another minute or two, but did not undress; then overcoming her shame she unbuttoned her front in one swift movement, tearing the shirt in the process, and brought out her full swollen breasts. She remained standing in the same spot, without taking a step towards the doctor, and was showing her breasts to Taskira rather than the doctor.

Alexander rose from his chair with difficulty and walked up to the woman, comparing her full breasts which lay drooping slightly on her small tanned hand, with her thin haggard face which had frozen and no longer showed any shame, fear or protest. Alexander carefully felt the large lump and grew sullen.

"Mastitis, Alexander Ivanovich?" Taskira asked beside him. She had left her chair and was inspecting the breasts with her button

eyes too.

The doctor made no reply. He pressed his palms lightly to the swelling and a rosy drop emerged from the pale pink nipple.

"Does it hurt?" he asked in Uzbek.

Without looking the doctor in the eye the woman shook her head in silence.

Alexander again looked at the patient's grey face, felt the swollen glands under her arms and said to himself:

"Well, yes. Exactly . . . An absence of pain, the lymph glands are enlarged, a general cachexic appearance . . ."

He sighed deeply and turned to Taskira.

"No, Taskira, it's not mastitis."

Taskira sat down at the desk, resting her small feet in lacquered Uzbek shoes on the desk rail, and picked up a pen, waiting for the doctor to dictate his diagnosis, but the doctor became thoughtful and repeated softly:

"It's not mastitis . . ."

Alexander supported his head with his hand and stared at the corner of the desk for several minutes, then said to Taskira with a start:

"Ask her when it began . . . When did she first notice the lump." The woman quickly hid her breasts and carefully buttoned up her shirt.

"How is she eating?" Alexander asked the husband.

"She won't eat anything! I slaughter a ram, for example, mother makes some pilaf, but she'll only eat a bit of rice . . ."

"Write her out a referral to the oncological clinic. Through District Health of course, but on the other hand make it direct, so she can be seen sooner," said Alexander, turning to Taskira for a moment, and then spoke to her husband again:

"Well it's like this: your wife is very sick, you must take her to Tashkent. And immediately — tomorrow, or the day after at the latest — you mustn't delay!"

The patient's husband spread out his hands, uncomprehending:

"No, doctor, nothing hurts, it's only her breast . . . True, she doesn't eat well — no ram or chicken . . . only drinks tea. But apart from that, she's all right . . . Why do we have to go to Tashkent? Maybe you can do something for her here?"

"Put her on the register and check in a week if she's been to the clinic," Alexander ordered his assistant. "Check without fail!" he repeated and added: "Oh, and don't forget to get their

address!" And then to the husband:

"Only to Tashkent: your wife is very ill, extremely . . . You must go to Tashkent!"

"What diagnosis shall I write?" asked Taskira, after she hastily finished with everything the doctor had suddenly burdened her with in one swoop.

"Diagnosis?" Alexander said in surprise, as if he was being asked something which was common knowledge.

"What diagnosis! Everything is as clear as day. There can be no doubt . . . Only Lord help us that it isn't in an advanced stage . . ."

He looked at the patient again and said, using medical terminology:

"Hypermitosis of the breast."

Noticing that Taskira knitted her brows trying to remember the medical term from her assistant's handbook, he tore off a scrap of paper and wrote on it: 'Breast cancer'. With another look at the patient, he moved the paper across the desk to his suddenly silent assistant.

CHAPTER 8

Cancer!

An insidious, sinister disease . . .

Quietly, often painlessly, initially without noticeable external symptoms, its strong clutches grab firm hold of a human organ and destroy it. But that is not enough. Its thirst for destruction is insatiable! It spreads further through the lymphatic vessels, sending its destructive landing parties, the metastases, to near and distant organs to commit sabotage.

And the previously healthy organism, sometimes in the plentitude of its powers, suddenly, like a plant severed at the roots, begins to decline, wilt, dry up. The sick person is overcome by a general lethargy, exhaustion, anaemia, the person withers away, his face becomes an unpleasant sallow colour, his skin grows dry . . . And in the tissue of the diseased organ, the ceaseless work of destruction continues. The cancerous tumour grows, enlarges, its cells, these micro-gigantic assailants, multiply rapidly and spread. Like plunderers, they invade the spaces in tissue, destroy the healthy cells and take root; and there is no stopping them, they show no mercy towards life-giving human organs, or human life itself . . .

In time the tumour disintegrates, the destroyed blood vessels open up and all at once severe haemorrhaging begins. And a human life is put in terrible danger, the haemorrhaging may sever the thread of life . . .

A sick person, weak from the loss of blood, may even feel better for a time and suddenly begin to think the disease has exhausted itself and its end is near, followed by recovery . . .

A miserable delusion!

And, this is not the end of the disease, nor its defeat, not even a temporary, forced respite — this is its first major victory! Its unconquerable spirit of death and destruction has penetrated the organism further, disintegrating into detachments of death, and who knows, perhaps new malignant tumours are growing in not one,

but several places, invading new tissues, wreaking wholesale destruction . . .

Until the tumour disintegrates again with recurring haemorrhaging, till the final blow comes and the powers of life capitulate before the powers of death . . .

Alexander had long since finished seeing patients in the dispensary, but thoughts of cancer would not leave him. He had a quick lunch, and to have time to prepare his monthly report, he went out on a house call straight away, without waiting for the heat to subside. After seeing the patient he went beyond the village to see if there were still *hambuzia* in the nearer channels and because of this, without realising it, walked quite a distance along the wide cotton plantations. Only when he reached the oil-filled rice fields did he turn back.

Things were going well. The patient had only had a relapse of malaria with which Taskira could easily have coped, and the tiny *hambuzias* sparkled silver blue at every step in the shallow channel water; returning home by another road, Alexander entered the offices of the Akhunbabayev Collective Farm where, not really expecting to see anyone there at this time of day, he chanced on a meeting of the farm management. Everyone looked pleased at his arrival, and the tanned hands which stretched out towards him from all sides had to be shaken. Only the farm manager, Rakhimbekov, became wary, but when he slid his short stumpy fingers into the doctor's hand, he had to smile affably out of politeness too.

"*Aleikum selam*, doctor!"

'What a good opportunity to talk about the maternity block!' thought Alexander, though he didn't dare yet raise the question of the farm pledging its resources. He could only hint at it, sound out the ground, then it would be clear how he should proceed. He requested the floor, and addressing first one, then another member of the management, reminded them of the recent past, which now seemed almost history:

"Everyone here remembers how people resisted smallpox injections; now they bring their children along to the dispensary themselves as soon as the apricot begins to flower in spring. And weren't you sorry at first to subject your children to diphtheria injections? But now you're convinced that this must be done, for after those frightful injections your children have stopped contracting diphtheria and dying of the disease."

Alexander noticed that people were listening attentively and some were nodding their heads in agreement. So choosing simple,

easily understood words, he continued :

“And what about how the people dodged having their blood samples taken at home or even at work in the fields to discover those who, though not ill, still carried a malaria infection in their blood; and how people furtively spat out the bitter quinine tablets which they were given to ward off malaria?”

Some of those present smiled in embarrassment, someone guffawed loudly and elbowed his neighbour, pointing at Rakhimbekov who lowered his gaze and silently stared at the table.

“Now malaria has retreated, we are pushing it out of our village . . . ”

Soon there was a discussion about malaria, this repugnant disease which had effected almost every villager, and everyone stirred, becoming more animated. Shouts of approval sounded. The truth was hard to hide; this strange young *oris-doctor* had defeated malaria in the village. Even Rakhimbekov hissed through his black, slightly silvery drooping moustache, either from politeness or sincerity:

“*Yahshi!*”

“Everything I have appealed to people about, everything we have done has justified itself,” Alexander said and proceeded to the controversial subject of the maternity block.

Rakhimbekov by now was scowling and no longer kept saying *yahshi*, but the other members of the management, as if enchanted by the doctor’s previous words, continued to smile sympathetically and nod in agreement.

And then it occurred to Alexander: ‘Why not try and raise the question in its totality? Now? Strike while the iron’s hot!’ And Alexander suggested the collective farm make a pledge to build the maternity block.

Wary of anything new which involved trouble and worry but showed no immediate benefits, Rakhimbekov hoped to back out this time too with only words, with vague and general promises. Words weren’t paper: they were spoken and forgotten. One couldn’t put a stamp to them!

Aware of this, Alexander suggested that they begin to deliver the material this summer. Later, after the cotton harvest, when there were idle hands at the farm, they could begin building.

Alexander must have caught them unawares, by storm, or they had felt too uncomfortable to refuse a doctor who had done so much good in their village, for the proposition brought no opposition; even Rakhimbekov did not say anything against it,

so Alexander requested that it be immediately written into the minutes. The fact that Rakhimbekov's face grew long as soon as the secretary began scribbling the resolution down on paper, and then clouded over completely after the secretary set down the final full stop, signified that Alexander had won. Oxen could not shift whatever was written down! Rakhimbekov was probably thinking bitterly: 'If this business is committed to paper, then it will have to be fulfilled.' Paper cannot be taken lightly!

The difficult beginning to this doubtful business had been accomplished so easily for Alexander, that he was still surprised when he was back in the street, after making friendly farewells to everyone. All the way home and probably at home too, he would have continued to think about the future maternity block. He still had not lost his boyish ability to be fascinated, and after being fascinated by something, he couldn't rest his thoughts until he had brought the business to a close. Even now, walking down the middle of the street, he would have already been planning the building, estimating, calculating, seeing the spacious sunny wards already built, and deciding how to equip them.

But this time after he left the farm office, his thoughts turned involuntarily to the Uzbek woman in whom he had diagnosed cancer that day. And as always when he encountered diseases against which there were no specific cures, he was filled with a feeling of vexation, which slowly turned to grief.

. . . X-rays, radium, electrical operating instruments were available and yet cancer remained cancer. A serious illness with a high mortality.

"We were taught," Alexander said to himself, "that early excision of cancerous tumours often gives good results. All right! But how do you secure early excision, and therefore, more importantly, early detection of cancer? The patient experiences neither pain nor any other unpleasant symptoms at first, so he doesn't worry and is in no hurry to see the doctor. When finally he does pay attention to his strange 'sore', which doesn't hurt, then . . . Had today's patient come to someone like Taskira at an assistant's outpost in a distant village, she would have been treated with ichthyol for mastitis, until . . . until all medical preparations would have been useless . . . But do we doctors always diagnose cancer in time? For diagnosis we have our knowledge, our greater or lesser experience, we have at our service x-rays, laboratory analysis, biopsy, and yet — how often in our dispensary practice do cases of

cancer go undetected, especially early cases! And what do we in fact know about cancer? Not much, compared to other diseases. We know only that for some reason a group of epithelium cells suddenly begins growing at an enormous rate, multiplying, and encroaching into healthy tissue. But what is the reason for such abnormal growth? Why is it that just this and not a similar group of epithelium cells transforms into the grisly beginnings of a malignant tumour? We have a theory of mechanical irritation, a viral theory and a few other theories about the origins of cancer — but not one of them can we finally rest on, not one can provide us with an exhaustive answer . . . Or for that matter, what is cancer cachexy? The influence of a malignant growth on blood composition and metabolism? Intoxication, the poisoning of an organism with toxins produced by the cancerous tumour? But exactly what changes take place in the blood of cancer sufferers? What are these toxins? What is their nature? What means are there of combatting them?

“All this is unclear, vague . . . I only know one thing for certain: cancer is not only an illness affecting a single organ; it attacks the whole organism. I know that cancerous tumours must be diagnosed as early as possible and operated on as soon as is practicable. The operation must be drastic, requiring the pitiless removal of surrounding healthy tissue and nearby lymph glands. But is this enough? Can I be satisfied with this?”

Such moments of dissatisfaction with himself, his knowledge and his experience sometimes overpowered Doctor Postolovsky, but he did not drive them from his mind. This was an honest, sacred dissatisfaction, an ardent desire to seek new means, new methods, a need to deepen his knowledge, which seemed so scanty, to extend and broaden his experience, to analyse and discover the right synthesis, to bring down the impenetrable screen of obscurity and the unknown, which impeded treatment and sometimes even prevented lives from being saved.

As always the depressing realisation of his limited possibilities, his insignificant powers before the might of dreadful illness, gave way to a flood of fierce energy. No, he certainly would not stop at the lamentable statement, that cancer continued to be a serious illness for which there was no known cure, save early operation. It would come. Without a doubt! Mankind had already entered the new, recent atomic age and who knows, perhaps the era of cancer cures followed? Maybe it was not over the horizon, but perhaps in a few years cancer could be treated just as effectively as syphilis, which until not so long ago had been regarded as incurable.

Oncological institutes carry out research into cancer thoroughly and in depth. On the basis of accumulated experience new means of combatting cancer are developed. The oncological departments of provincial and city hospitals, and anti-cancer units in dispensaries — all gained ground on cancer in a single united front, and in this battle cancer stood no chance. Not a chance!

Mankind was always victorious, and it would certainly be victorious here too.

Meanwhile, if the early operation of cancer required the patient to come forward to medical institutes earlier so that these in turn could diagnose cancer earlier, then education on sanitation among the populace had to be stepped up and he himself would have to read a series of lectures on cancer and hold public discussions on the subject to focus people's attention on the disease, to force them to be wary and to examine themselves. He would have to hold several prophylactic examinations, at least amongst the organised workers; to teach Taskira, and especially the medical assistants at the outposts, to diagnose cancer correctly.

"How much there is still to be done and how little I've done! Almost nothing . . ."

CHAPTER 9

Absorbed in these thoughts, Alexander was approaching the dispensary grounds when suddenly, as if awakened, he saw Uzbek children brandishing sticks and rocks on one side of the street, and on the other, not far from the dispensary gate, stood his mother in a long black dress.

'It's so hot and she still goes about in black! I'll have to get her some light cotton . . . ' he thought, and turned from the middle of the street where he'd been walking deep in thought, towards his mother. His mother was saying something to the children and waved her finger crossly at them.

"What's the matter? What are you at war with them about?" he asked gently, gazing intently into his mother's face, and thought: 'How haggard she's grown here! How thin she's become . . . She can't stand the heat at all. No, she definitely needs a light-coloured dress. Walking about all black like a nun . . . '

The mother shifted her tired, sad eyes to Alexander.

"They attacked Zhuchka. Naughty children, they've attacked her with sticks and stones!"

Only now Alexander noticed the black bitch behind his mother's feet. Overcoming its fear of a new person, it stretched its muzzle to his mother's hand, meanwhile keeping its only bewildered eye fixed on Alexander's arms and legs.

"With her again? Even given her a name!"

Alexander shook his head, smiling. He remembered how, long ago when his father, an avid hunter, was still alive, his mother had detested rifles and all those game-bags, caps and shells which captivated her husband every hunting season when he forgot about everything else in the world. Gentle and calm in everything, she detested hunting and all that went with it, especially those repulsive hunting dogs, all kinds of pointers and wolf-hounds of which his eccentric father had bred a whole pack like some country gentleman, though he could not afford them, being only a provincial clerk.

Mother could never see how he could shoot those poor birds and the frightened little hares. However she plucked and fried the dead ducks and snipes herself, pricking the hare with bacon, and her hare pate earned her fame amongst friends and neighbours. But she never ate game herself, always asserting that it smelled of dog.

And now this bond, this moving love towards an ugly one-eyed bitch! Why?

"These bad boys just won't let her breathe," the mother said, patting the dog on the head. "Don't worry Zhuchka, no one will touch you now."

The bitch transferred its eye from Alexander to the old woman and gently licked her dry, wrinkled hand with its long tongue.

"Zhuchka, Zhuchka! My furry one!" the mother quietly patted the dog, responding to its sincerity with a sad smile.

"*Zhuchka yok! Uzbek it!*"¹ a cheeky boy yelled from across the street, stepping forward, and Alexander immediately recognised him. This slovenly ragamuffin with small fidgety eyes had run into the dispensary yard several times offering eggs for sale. '*Bir sum! Bir sum!*'² he said showing one finger and taking out a warm white egg from his dirty shirt. Alexander sent him away; the mother waved her hand at him too: 'Go away, you little devil, Lord forgive me!' She suspected that the young ragamuffin must be stealing the eggs from his mother. But Nina, overcoming her aversion to his dirty appearance, haggled with him often, getting two eggs for a rouble, and later showed off at lunch how cheaply she had bought them.

"Which one is it?" Alexander looked up, pretending he was about to cross the street. The cheeky boy's wide mouth grinned insolently, however he stepped back and hid behind the others.

"Everyone hits her, everyone badgers her, but if you knew how smart she is, Sashko!" the mother said, and looked at the dog which was timidly rubbing its muzzle against her leg. "She even shares her food with someone — perhaps her child, or maybe her mother. She takes her food to someone. And yet she's so hungry!"

"Come on, that's too much! You're imagining things, mother," Alexander would not believe her.

"You don't believe me? Come along, I'll show you," the mother said, and returning to the yard, called the dog: "Zhuchka! Zhuchka! Come here."

1. (Uzbek) "Not Zhuchka! It's an Uzbek dog!"

2. (Uzbek) 'One rouble! One rouble!'

Alexander shrugged his shoulders, smiled and followed his mother. No sooner had he disappeared through the gate, when the boys erupted with guffaws and shouts:

“Zhu—chi—ka! Zhu—chi—ka! Ha—ha—ha!”

The mother emerged from the kitchen carrying a bowl filled with chicken entrails cooked specially for the dog, and placed them before Zhuchka. (Nina was still in Tashkent and the mother evidently felt in complete charge of the household). When the bowl appeared on the ground, the bewildered Zhuchka greedily sniffed the air and without moving from her place, kept giving surprised looks at the bowl and the old woman. She could not fathom that such a delicacy might be for her.

“Eat up, you silly old dog! Come on, what’s wrong?” the old woman urged her on, moving the bowl closer. Zhuchka nervously wagged her blowzy tail, licked at the air in gratitude and gave Alexander another disbelieving look. Convinced that he had no hostile intentions towards her either, she carefully came up to the bowl, sniffed at it from all sides, then froze, as if in deliberation. Suddenly she yanked the entangled knots of cooked intestines out of the bowl with her teeth, tossed them deftly into the air so they wouldn’t fall in the dust, and successfully landed them on her back and neck. She looked at Alexander and his mother again for a minute or so, as if thanking them, then turned round, and lifting her tail high with joy, ran off briskly through the bushes to the vegetable patch.

“She’ll probably bury them somewhere for later,” said Alexander without much conviction, but his mother shook her head.

“No, Sashko, she’s taking them to someone . . . And look,” his mother said after a short silence, obviously deep in her own thoughts, “she took away the best piece, which she would have gladly eaten herself!”

Alexander was curious. Really where and why had the eternally hungry bitch run off with something which most dogs grabbed in flight and devoured on the spot, thinking only of gratifying their hunger?

Alexander walked after the dog, then broke into a run, no longer looking underfoot at the tomato shoots and occasional melon vines which happened to cross his path. For a moment Zhuchka disappeared from view, but then he glimpsed her black fur among the pumpkin leaves and she plunged into the greenery again, as if she was swimming in a green river.

At the clay wall she stopped, squatted on her hind legs and

with surprising ease jumped over the ruins. She continued along a path through the vegetables to the neighbour's house.

Alexander hurried after the dog, trying hard not to lose sight of it. He crossed the neighbour's vegetable patch and approached the house, which lurked in the dense foilage of apricots and peaches, came up to the grapevines and again caught sight of the black bitch through the leaves. With an anxious backward glance at a sleek puppy, which was attacking the tasty chicken entrails with delight, Zhuchka was already on her way back to the hospital grounds to finish the slops in the bowl. Perhaps she ought not to linger here too long, in the yard of the people who had driven her out soon after her litter had grown up . . .

Astonished, Alexander held his breath and watched the dog. In his mind a voice, not his mother's this time, said again:

‘Look, she took the choicest morsel, which she would have gladly eaten herself!’

And he heard a deep sigh.

CHAPTER 10

Now the dog lived and slept freely in the hospital yard. Nobody drove her away any more, and they called her Zhuchka, the name Alexander's mother had given her. They were only surprised that the doctor had been unable to get himself a better dog in place of this monstrosity. Taskira even offered to bring a nice, furry puppy from an accountant friend, because the one-eyed Zhuchka was, in her opinion, not elegant enough for the hospital yard. But to her surprise, Alexander refused.

Meanwhile, having found such a benevolent mistress as Alexander's mother, Zhuchka now looked on the hospital grounds as her home and began to feel more secure. She even began to bark, and then to snarl. The bitch no longer bolted at the slightest harsh yell, and had fattened noticeably, although the empty eye socket began to fester for some reason. Alexander once saw his mother wipe the infected cavity with a clean rag, while Zhuchka patiently endured the ordeal. When his mother had finished and stood up, Zhuchka joyously wagged her tail and gratefully licked the hand of her mistress.

Zhuchka really turned out to be surprisingly smart. During the day when patients were being received at the dispensary and outsiders hung about in the yard, she was rarely seen. But as soon as Alexander left the dispensary, followed by Taskira and Saodat, and the caretaker Ismail locked the door, Zhuchka appeared in the yard from nowhere. Though Ismail no longer took any notice of her, Zhuchka could not forgive him his previous blows and turned her head away from him. When Ismail armed himself with a broom to sweep the yard, Zhuchka lay on the ground near the entrance to Alexander's house, as if wanting to show stupid Ismail by her independent stance that she had equal rights to him.

It seemed as if Zhuchka really felt she was on duty. After eating the slops and leftovers from lunch, which the old woman gave her every day, she took up her watch in the hospital yard till morning. Alexander noticed that in the first half of the day, even if

a patient came very early and loitered in the yard waiting for the dispensary to open, Zhuchka let everybody in and touched no one; but from the minute the dispensary door closed after reception hours, an outsider couldn't enter the yard unpunished. On seeing a stranger opening the door in the gate, Zhuchka growled angrily, displaying her indignation at the insolent person entering the dispensary at the wrong time; if the person continued to enter she rose on her front paws and barked; and when this didn't help and the insolent character pressed towards the locked dispensary door, or God forbid, made for Alexander's residence, fearfully eyeing the dog and holding his cane before him, Zhuchka became furious. Unleashing her anger, she rushed in a frenzy at the stranger, trying to tear the cane from his hand with her teeth, to bite him on the leg or grab him by the flap of his coat. Strangers who passed through the yard in the company of Alexander or the old woman she left alone, only eyeing them disapprovingly, as if saying: 'You should be ashamed, coming outside of work hours, when people must eat and rest after work!'

If the mother went in the morning to the market or the shops, Zhuchka considered it her duty to escort her, to defend the old woman from dogs or any other misfortune which might beset her in the street among strangers.

Zhuchka was no longer the persecuted and frightened dog she had been before. She stood no insult and snapped fiercely at the children, who continued to taunt her. She was no longer afraid of Alexander either, realising, probably, his relationship to the old woman, and wagged a friendly tail whenever he passed by. But when he threw her a piece of bread once and wanted to come up closer, Zhuchka, who had taken a few steps towards the bread, suddenly sprang back. She shuffled from foot to foot, wagged her tail slowly, put out her tongue and then sheepishly hid it again. But she came no nearer. And her eye, which watched Alexander, seemed to be saying:

"No, think what you like, but I still don't trust you."

Alexander tried to coax Zhuchka nearer. He stretched out his hand towards her, lured her with a new piece, but Zhuchka only trampled the earth in one spot and did not budge.

"They say," Alexander remembered, "that dogs and children can distinguish at first sight the good people from the bad . . . Funny, why she won't come to me?" he thought, hurt, walking away. His heart grew heavy, as if this Zhuchka with her one eye could see something in him which he himself had not noticed because of countless worries and work.

CHAPTER 11

"The milk is delicious today!" Alexander had said the night before, amazed that he had suddenly found it appetising. Within a few minutes he had forgotten these words and the milk, to which he was usually indifferent. But these meaningless words, said in passing, became impressed in his mother's mind and gave her no peace all day.

The old woman always had trouble getting milk. They bought milk only for Vasia and Nina. The old woman did not count. Though her weak constitution would have accepted milk more willingly than any other food, it was expensive, and therefore not for her. Small wonder her daughter-in-law did not even think of offering her some, and even now with Nina in Tashkent and her in charge of the house, she did not dare touch such expensive food. Everything Vasia left, she gave to her son, and if he forgot to drink it, she made it into sour milk.

In Pereyaslav she had had her own cow once, drank her fill of milk and even gave some away to her good neighbours. But the cow had to be sold when her sons went off to study in Kiev and Moscow. However, while living in Pereyaslav, she still bought herself a jug of sour milk at the market, or an occasional jar of cream. But it was better not to think of the past . . .

As with everything else, she could never please her daughter-in-law with the milk, no matter how much trouble she took seeking it out and selecting it at the market. It was not unusual for milk bought at the village market to be watered down sometimes or to have hairs floating about in it, or have the cream collected — but where could you get anything better. This wasn't Pereyaslav for you! Having a free hand now in the running of the household, the old woman set out to hunt up some good milk, and found it in the end.

The house she had been going to these past few days for milk was not close, and though such a distance was not for Odarka Pylypivna's feeble legs, she went readily. When the heat died away

in the late afternoon and Alexander went to the dispensary for the evening reception, she took Vasia in one hand, a basket in the other, and accompanied by Zhuchka made her way slowly in the shade of walls to the distant street. She never locked their apartment, for she knew there were no thieves among the Uzbeks, and in fact nobody in the village would cross the threshold of a stranger's house, until the owner answered from within.

Little by little Odarka Pylypivna was becoming used to this strange land where the sun was unbearably hot in summer and in winter there was practically no snow, where everything at first had seemed odd and distasteful. She was lonely among these people who spoke a foreign language and had different customs.

However, after she had looked around, she found that the people here in Uzbekistan were pleasant and the customs good. She especially liked the Uzbeks' politeness, and as for their hospitality, it was unique: you wouldn't see such hospitality everywhere in Ukraine. Whichever house you entered, you would be offered whatever food and drink they had, for this was the unwritten law here, passed on from generation to generation.

Odarka Pylypivna was moved by the gratefulness of the Uzbeks too. Many a time an Uzbek man or woman, having recovered from an illness, brought baskets of grapes, peaches, canteloupe, and at times even their precious rice to the doctor's apartment in the evening; though her son strictly forbade her to accept them, Odarka Pylypivna quietly took the presents so as not to offend the sincere, grateful person and to please her daughter-in-law.

However, the old woman had trouble with the language: she still couldn't understand a thing, unless it was explained to her by gesticulation, and she couldn't get her tongue around the jabber of Uzbek words. She was unable to talk to a kind soul, or utter a word of thanks or greeting. How she would have liked to! How she often wanted to chatter away to someone, to hear a kind word and ease her troubles!

Odarka Pylypivna knew that her daughter-in-law scorned her; if she ever spoke to the old woman, it was only to give orders or to reprimand her. There was never a kind word, such as might be heard in other households, nor a chat about this and that. And her son, because of worries with the sick, the paperwork, the books, his wife, and occasionally his son, had little time for chatting with his mother. Ever since her Sashko had become a doctor, Odarka Pylypivna, with her lack of schooling and antiquated ways, grew a little

embarrassed in front of her learned son. She was ashamed, especially in public, to call him Sashko, since even his superiors called him nothing less than Alexander Ivanovich.

Clearly he had no time for an old woman with her plain, simple talk! But it sufficed that she could feast her eyes on him and take pleasure from the fact that her once small Sashko had come such a long way . . .

However in the house where she had begun to get her milk, she was able to chat away. She liked everything in this house — the two cool rooms with clay floors, just like in Ukraine, and the neat linen curtains which rose over the beds right up to the ceiling, and at the front of the house something similar to a Ukrainian veranda, except that instead of an exterior glass wall, there was a cascade of luxuriant grapevines. Above all the old woman liked her hosts, this small Uzbek family, which consisted of a younger widowed brother and two elderly, still unmarried sisters.

The brother was away all day, working the cotton fields on the collective farm, and only in the evening, when Odarka Pylypivna came for the milk, did he return — weary, exhausted by the heat, covered in dust.

It was quite a sight to see both sisters drop everything they were doing, as soon as their brother came home, and hasten with concern to bring him fresh water to drink and wash with, then a towel and a long white shirt. 'Just like Martha and Mary fussing over Lazar!' the old woman thought, moved by the scene, watching the women's feet scurry about briskly under the hems of their long Uzbek shirts, which fell to the floor. Small weights tied to their plaits slithered up and down their backs. Even though the old woman thought it odd that the Uzbek women should go about only in shirts, without any skirts, it was these shirts, long and patriarchal, these grape-vines and peach trees, and white walls without banked-up earth which made her feel she had been transported back to the times of Jesus Christ, who had taken pity on the sisters Martha and Mary and resurrected their dead brother.

After washing and changing into a clean set of clothes, the brother sat down to dinner and readily exchanged words with the old woman. He spoke a little Russian and the old woman somehow managed to understand him. Though the sisters knew not a word of anything but Uzbek, they were so friendly that Odarka Pylypivna felt she could communicate with them without talking. Each time the old woman came to them for milk, the sisters began to fuss about, not sure where best to make her comfortable. When she was

seated they immediately treated her to a cup of fresh chilled milk, bringing her cherries and apricots. They kept up a constant purl in Uzbek, and in the stream of words the old woman caught only the occasional endearments 'apa', 'nan' and guessed that she, apa, or as we say — grandmother, was being entreated to have some milk and fresh bread. In her own mind the old woman unerringly translated the words directed at her by the friendly Uzbek women: 'Have some more milk, please, try our bread! Please! You are welcome to all we have! Please, help yourself!'

Deeply moved, the old woman wanted to say to these good people: 'Dear, beloved people! How good it is to be alive when there is harmony and goodwill in a home. There's no reason why everyone can't live like this and rejoice . . . Only the wicked, as Taras Shevchenko wrote, cannot find a joyful home in all the boundless world.'

But unfortunately the old woman could not say all that in Uzbek and answered sadly with a short 'thank-you', 'why do you spoil me like this?', 'Lord help you'. She spoke as if she was back home in Pereyaslav, in Ukrainian, because you can't murder and mutilate a language, when you are speaking from the heart.

The old woman was far from the thought of comparing how she was being treated here by strangers, and at home by her son and daughter-in-law. She didn't want to leave this hospitable home and when at last the time came to get up and look for Vasytko, who was playing outside with a small goat, she sighed involuntarily.

CHAPTER 12

The last patient left the surgery and Alexander rose to wash his hands and remove his coat. But just then it suddenly grew dark in the surgery: a figure had appeared at the window. The person raised a hand over his eyes, peered in to see if there was anyone in the dispensary, and seeing the doctor, drew back straight away and quickly made for the front door.

Although it had happened before, whenever anybody came to the dispensary for the first time from a distant village, Alexander could not tolerate such behaviour and prepared to reprehend the ignoramus. What if the doctor had been examining someone's naked ailing wife? And what would the woman's husband have said, had he caught the inquisitive visitor?

But how great was Alexander's surprise when, after a knock on the door, a well-built Uzbek woman strode into the surgery, without waiting for an answer. Casually she came up to Alexander and as if fearing that the doctor might suddenly jump up and tear off without examining her, she said hurriedly:

"Greetings, doctor! Please take a look at why my sores aren't healing. The nurse, he treated them; the doctor's assistant, he treated them, he gave good creams, but they don't help . . . I don't know what's wrong myself."

She slid off the leather whip wrapped around her wrist and thoughtlessly tossed it onto a chair. Hastily she unbuttoned the blouse under the cheap, crumpled dusty jacket and with an industrious rough hand thrust out an enormous breast covered in moist ulcers. Obviously, she had been in hospital often enough, for she turned to the assistant Taskira straight away, so as not to waste needless time while the doctor diagnosed her sores, and said in a business-like tone:

"Sister, you can write down my particulars: Babadzhanov Nazira, thirty-eight years. Turned my husband out for stealing sheep from the farm. Resident of Toda village, Khakul-Abad province. If

you need to, then write: Party member since 1939 . . . ”

The appearance of this unusual Uzbek woman, with her confident, resolute movements, her lack of troublesome shyness, so innate among local women and causing so much trouble in the dispensary during examinations, her quite clear, though not always correct Russian with its characteristic accent, and finally these few short biographical facts — all this so impressed Alexander with its unexpectedness, that he lost his countenance. It didn't even occur to him now to reproach the patient for looking in the window. He only took a quick glance at the moist pinkish ulcers of breast eczema, because all his attention was now focused on this strong, man-like figure, the faded grey scarf covering her head, tied so that its free end dangled from time to time across the back of her neck, the energetic tanned face scored with wrinkles, though not pretty, was somehow surprisingly attractive, and finally, her strong legs disappeared into a pair of men's muddy boots.

The woman understood the doctor's hesitant silence in her own way:

“I'm not yours, doctor, I'm from Toda, but heal my sores, please. Everyone says you're a good doctor.”

On principle, Alexander never refused anyone who came to him from other districts, and he sincerely wanted to help this woman, who had turned to him for medical help; carefully he began examining the wettish skin of her diseased breasts.

“Perhaps you could give me a good cream? The sores stick to my shirt — makes it difficult to ride horseback. Damned indecent!” the woman said mutely.

Alexander smiled. Even this Uzbek woman, so different in all other respects, was not free from favouring pharmaceutical creams to the arsenal of available medicines. For a moment the latter-day Lazar, to whom his mother had taken him recently, flashed through his mind. He was suffering from erysipelas and had eagerly smeared his face with ichthyol, till he looked like a negro. But he did not touch the streptomycin tablets. To Alexander's inquiries as to why he hadn't used all the prescribed medications, the patient had answered calmly: “My head hurts, so I rub it with cream. But I don't need to swallow the white tablets — they'll go into my stomach, instead of staying in my head. Won't be any use.”

“Creams alone won't do much good here,” Alexander said to the woman with a friendly smile. “We'll have to do an infusion.”

“Injections?” the woman asked joyfully, as if she had finally found a way of curing her neglected ailment.

"Yes, injections," Alexander affirmed, involuntarily wondering at the blind faith in injections which he often came across in people eager to be treated, and almost laughing now, he explained: "Hot injections," as sick old men often called intravenous infusions of calcium chloride.

"Yes, doctor, give me a hot injection! Please!"

The woman quickly took off her cheap jacket, threw an experienced eye about the surgery and without waiting to be asked, sat at the examination table, near a shining, nickel-plated sterilizer filled with boiled syringes.

"Will you come regularly every second day? Can you make it?"

"I can come every day, if need be, doctor. I've got a horse. I came on horseback today."

"Where do you work?" Alexander asked with surprise, weighing in his mind whether she was a postman or a store manager.

"I'm head of the Toda Village Council."

Alexander gave his new patient another surprised look. Till now he had seen Uzbek women serving in shops, working as teachers, actors, even a female doctor in the provincial apparatus of the health department, but a female village council head in a remote village, an Uzbek woman-administrator who obviously did not lag behind — this was a rarity. 'Now there's a treasure for journalists and photographers if they ever come to these parts!' Alexander thought, taking a syringe from Taskira. He bent over the tourniqued arm and winked conspiratorially at the patient:

"Don't be afraid. It will be hot, the heat will spread through your body," and half jokingly, half seriously, so the patient could comprehend the action of the medicine, he added: "The heat will burn away your illness!"

When Alexander pulled the syringe needle out of her vein and Taskira covered the spot with cotton wool soaked in alcohol, the woman, red and unmoving from the tension, closed her eyes contentedly and shook her head.

"A nice injection! Thank you, doctor!" she burst out in Uzbek.

They went outside and the head of the Toda Village Council stopped and glanced with an experienced eye over the tidy hospital yard, the white-washed walls of the dispensary and doctor's apartment, rested an admiring look on the flower bed, and then, shifting her gaze to the pockmarked wall with gaping windowless holes, she smacked her lips sadly:

"A good doctor, a nice hospital, but why this? This is bad! Very bad!"

She pointed towards the ruins and brandished her whip in the air:

"We must build! We must build a large hospital!"

Alexander sighed.

"I agree, Nazira. If only our collective farm and village council had people like you!" he said sorrowfully, calling his patient by name for the first time, growing ever more sympathetic towards this energetic, persistent Uzbek woman. "Together, Nazira, we could have built a decent maternity block so Uzbek women could give birth in hospital, instead of at home."

"All right, doctor, let's build a maternity block. For two villages — yours and mine. Why not?"

"There's a resolution to that effect passed by the Akhunbabayev Collective Farm management, and our village council head, Khasanov, promised to back the venture, but there's still nothing to show for it."

"You've got a paper?" she asked again, unknowingly lapsing into Uzbek. And when Alexander brought her a copy of the resolution, she folded up the document and shoved it deep into her bosom, as if it was valuable booty.

"That's all! There's a paper — now there'll be a building too!"

Quickly she untied her horse from the poplar, easily swung her well-built figure into the saddle, and whipped her horse on the croup. A cloud of dust rose in the street behind her. Above it, like a cossack hat, dangled the free end of her faded scarf.

Alexander stood a long time watching her from the gate, until the striking rider and her horse disappeared around the bend. He still could not believe that something would eventuate from the ardour of this enthusiast, but he sensed that he had unexpectedly found a loyal assistant and supporter.

When Nazira returned in two days for her next injection she was followed into the yard by two carts which filled the air with a frightening rattle and squeaking: they were loaded with timber.

Nazira triumphantly placed the agreement between the two village councils to build a maternity block, on Alexander's desk, and removing her jacket, said:

"The bricks and cement will come tomorrow, the tiles I'll get in Khakul-Abad. If there's none there, I'll go to Namangan if I have to, but I'll get them! I talked with the Komsomol — and they'll send you some boys to help with the building. Two carpenters and an

overseer will come from the Toda Machine-Tractor Station. Now you can tell them doctor, how you want it built. It must be built well!"

Alexander still could not believe his ears. He had taken Nazira's words for a declarative meeting as a promise, but the din in the yard, the creaking of the cart being unloaded and the slap of the boards as they hit the earth finally convinced him that the maternity block would now be a reality. He stared, wide-eyed and speechless, at the Uzbek woman's harsh wrinkles, until his restrained inner trepidation broke out: "How can I ever thank you for all this, Nazira?"

Two broken eyebrows shot up and the wrinkles on her tanned forehead deepened.

"Why thank me? We're building for everyone, not just ourselves. The community is a large man — you can't thank everyone . . .!"

CHAPTER 13

Nina finally returned from Tashkent. Alexander saw his wife through the dispensary window when she was crossing the yard to their apartment, with parcels large and small, hanging from her laden arms. One even dangled from the button of her new oddly styled coat, probably the latest in fashion.

Zhuchka, who happened to be in the yard at the time, lay far from Nina's path, yet still out of courtesy, she rose prudently and retreated quietly, looking back cheerlessly at the woman, who though somehow connected with the old woman, did not catch Zhuchka's fancy.

Nina was followed by a small woman in a short jacket carrying parcels, probably helping her, and Alexander recognised her as his strange patient, the 'almost maiden', as Taskira had said. 'When did Nina manage to meet her, and what gave rise to their friendship?' Alexander marvelled. He knew that Nina couldn't stand female company, and if she did make female acquaintances, then it was only those whom she found useful or those who could be of use in the future. But how a book-keeper from the cotton plant could be useful to her, Alexander could not imagine.

On the day of his wife's arrival, he only attended to the seriously ill patients and leaving the rest to Taskira, left early.

"Sasha dear! At last! It's been an eternity!" Nina clapped her hands. Alexander came up to his wife, straining to perceive whether her expression of delight at his appearance was sincere or assumed. Subconsciously he had long been aware of her deceit in dealing with people, and the insincerity of her words, which often masked her actual thoughts and intentions, perhaps even her real nature, which Alexander was uncertain of even now. He tried not to dwell on this and only tried to sense his wife's mood, dismissing all else to the idiosyncracies of 'arty' people, of which he still considered Nina one.

Nina impetuously skipped up to Alexander, grabbed his head in her hands and pressed it tightly to herself. Alexander could not make out whether she had kissed him on the hair, or had just brush-

ed it with her lips and short, white teeth.

"I missed you so much, *Papka!* Terribly!" And she pressed him close again, ignoring the small, jacketed woman, who stood behind her in awkward silence, uncertain whether she ought to go or stay a while longer.

Alexander bowed courteously to her, carefully extricating himself from his wife's embrace. Then Nina collected her thoughts too. Smiling affably, she nodded to the woman as if she was an old friend:

"Everything will be all right! Don't worry. I'll fix things up."

The jacketed woman bowed and left, throwing Alexander a quick, penetrating glance with her crafty eyes.

Once more he was surprised at her appearance and turned to his wife, but Nina was already busy with the parcels.

"Look what I brought you, Sasha dear!"

On the floor by the bed, dressed in a new sailor suit, Vasia was spinning the wheels of a small cannon. His feet spread far apart and oblivious to everything, the youngster closely examined his mother's present. Nina quickly untied a knot, helping her fingers with her teeth and unwrapped the stiff paper.

"Isn't it wonderful!" she exclaimed, bringing a striped silk tie up to Alexander's chin.

"Mummy, how does it shoot?" asked Vasia from his position on the floor. Nina looked down and was horrified.

"In your new shorts — and on the floor? Get up this instant! Get up you scoundrel!"

Still holding his toy, the small boy rose on all fours and Nina calmed down.

"How it suits you, Sasha! The blue goes with your blond hair . . . And the white stripes give some life to the background. Marvellous!" Nina said excitedly, throwing her head back.

Without giving Alexander time to recover, she pounced on another parcel and returned with a skull-cap.

"What do you think of this? Made in Bukhara . . . A great piece of work! Just like a fragment of a Persian carpet! Yes, hand-crafts are one thing the Uzbeks know how to make! It's a masterpiece!" she said persuasively and sat the skull-cap on the top of Alexander's head. "Just look at yourself! How nice you look!" Nina shrieked with enchantment, pushing her husband into a far corner, where a large mirror stood on a small table cluttered with cans of powder, bottles of cologne, perfume and other odds and ends.

Alexander moved reluctantly towards the mirror. Neither the Bukhara skull-cap, nor for that matter the striped tie, which seemed a little too gaudy, made much impression on him. In summer he wore a white cap with a large peak and considered it the most appropriate headgear against the Uzbek sun; as for ties, he only wore them perhaps when setting out for some official conference or convention. At home and at work they were a nuisance. Without realising it, Alexander was imitating the young professor whose lectures he had attended eighteen months ago during a course to upgrade doctors' qualifications, and it was from him he had adopted the habit of dressing simply, but well. Just like the professor, and to Taskira's great surprise, Alexander preferred the old, primitive wooden stethoscope over the convenient present-day phonendoscope, which, with its resonance, amplified noises and wheezes, gave a distorted picture of the heart and lungs. Just like the professor, he dressed, when the occasion arose, in a dark grey suit with a simple grey tie. This new tie was much too gaudy — such ties were all right perhaps for artists, actors, or film directors, but not for a serious, dignified doctor. Still, it was a present from his wife, and so as not to offend her, he looked obediently in the mirror at the high skull-cap and put the tie to his chest.

"Come here, Odarka Pylypivna, see how nice he looks in this skull-cap," Nina said to his mother, who had just brought in lunch from the kitchen. Today Nina was in high spirits and was ready to forgive her mother-in-law her presence. She even turned to her in a friendly voice: "Odarka Pylypivna, you asked me to buy you a thimble and some black thread. Here you are!"

Alexander moved away from the mirror, removed the skull-cap from his head and lowered the hand holding the tie.

"How do you like the tapestry? It's Uzbek too, hand made."

Alexander took a quick look at the lustrous green material embroidered with some patterns covering their double bed and mumbled:

"Well, it's not bad either, nice . . ." But other things were on his mind . . . A thimble and some black thread! . . . It hadn't occurred to her to buy anything more for his mother! His mother still went about in the same black dress in which she had arrived from Ukraine, even in summer, in the heat . . .

"Thank you, Ninochka, for the thimble," he heard his mother speaking behind him. "Pity only that the thread is number sixty, I asked for forty . . ."

"No one can ever please you, Odarka Pylypivna! You're al-

ways dissatisfied . . . So, there was no forty. As it was, I tramped over most of Tashkent to get these!"

Nina's festive mood began to sour. Vasia put his cannon aside and sullenly followed the emerging quarrel. The old woman quickly whispered:

"No, no, it's all right! Of course these will do too! I just said, that these break easily . . ."

"Break! All thread breaks," said Nina, offended but not so angry now, removing the rest of the unopened parcels from the table, and turning sweetly to her husband again: "Ah, but you should see what I was lucky enough to buy, Sasha dear!" Nina grabbed a parcel off the chair and unwrapping it, triumphantly came up to the table. "Real Parisian sausage! Quite by accident, you know, in a small kiosk near the station. Appears so rarely here!"

Alexander, unlike his wife, was no gourmet. As for food, he even went a little too far according to Nina, when he had claimed that for him food was just fuel for his body, to enable it to function without any hitches. Right at this moment the fat pinkish sausage with small white squares of fat did not move him. He sighed and thought: "The sausage, the unneeded skull-cap and the tie, the Uzbek tapestry and the new coat for herself, and whatever else, but for the mother who worked and cooked for them all the time, there was nothing . . . It need not be out of love, which did not exist here, but simply from politeness — at least some blouse or a scarf or something!"

Nina cut the sausage into thin slices. Her festive mood began to return.

"Know what, friends?" she said, laying the plate in the middle of the table. "Let's have a feast now!" Her words emerged with an intimacy, simplicity and sincerity. She was so touched by her own warmth that she wanted to make a sacrifice. "Sasha dear, have some of your vodka today! It will go well with the sausage!"

She poured him a glass from the carafe, and smiling amiably with eyes screwed up, she reached out to her husband.

Alexander drank the vodka without relish and, without any real appetite, set about the sausage, while Nina dug in energetically with knife, fork and teeth, praising the sausage:

"Ooh, how delicious! You just can't have enough of it!"

Small Vasia, sitting beside his mother, heartily gorged himself on sausage and to deal with it more easily took a piece off the fork with his fingers and quickly brought it to his mouth. Nina reprimanded him straight away:

"Eat your sausage with a fork. Pull up your napkin."

The old woman picked up her spoon, ready to have some soup.

"Aren't you having any, Odarka Pylypivna? Here, have some!" Nina invited her mother-in-law.

"Thank you, but I don't seem to feel like any today."

"Really, mother, what's this?" Alexander looked at his mother suspiciously. Her refusal seemed much too demonstrative and out of place. "Have some! It really is quite tasty," he moved the plate closer to his mother, to conceal her lack of tact, but it was too late. Offended, Nina turned away from her mother-in-law.

"It's because I brought the sausage. I know!" And Nina sighed heavily: "Well, you can't force people to like you!"

She shrugged her shoulders, giving by this to mean she had done everything she could to create a good atmosphere in the home. Everything! But what can you do with such difficult people? And she set about finishing her sausage without much enjoyment now.

Odarka Pylypivna, who had fallen silent in her place, suddenly came to life. Timidly she stretched out her hand across the table and with trembling, disobedient fingers took a piece of sausage, taking pains to choose the smallest one. Nina itched to tell her mother-in-law that she should use a fork, instead of reaching into the plate with her fingers, and secondly that there was no need to pick and choose — this was no market! But seeing her husband's grim face, she desisted.

"I'll only have a small one," Odarka Pylypivna announced awkwardly, as if excusing herself. "It hurts when I swallow . . ."

Nina could stand this deceptive trickery no longer.

"Why only a 'small one'! Fill your plate and make a decent meal of it! I can't see what all this messing about is in aid of!"

Alexander ate without lifting his eyes from his plate, not wanting to look at either his wife or mother. He had lost all interest in eating and chewed slowly for something to do. Ever since the day when he accidentally stumbled on his mother's conversation with Zhuchka, he began to observe his mother more closely and to treat her much more gently. He pitied the old woman, whose loneliness and sorrow he had seen then for the first time.

Although today he had at first been inwardly offended by his wife's words to her, his mother's behaviour during lunch really displeased him. After all, it was insulting to refuse sausage which his wife had brought home, and then suddenly to change her mind, like a small child and take some! And then this pretentious 'only a

small one', as if either he or his wife would begrudge her food, watching how much she took! My, how common . . .

Vasia broke the oppressive silence which descended on the room. Finishing the helping which his mother had given him, and probably hoping he might obtain something from his grandmother's plate too, he began to urge her on:

"Eat, nanna! Go on! Eat it all!"

"That's enough!" Nina stopped him threateningly.

Suddenly Odarka Pylypivna hiccupped loudly, and immediately afterwards spasmodic guttural sounds emanated from her mouth.

Vasia grew wide-eyed, opened his small mouth and yelled:

"Nana, don't laugh!"

In astonishment and indignation Nina dropped her fork.

"Choked on it or something, Odarka Pylypivna?" she made a wry face, unable to hide her disgust.

With a bony hand his mother shielded her mouth to hide the gurgling sounds coming from her throat and stood up suddenly.

A fork clanged against her plate, a knife hit the floor, the table shuddered, disturbing the soup so that it spilled onto the white table-cloth, the chair creaked loudly as it was pushed back. Alexander looked at his mother in surprise. His mother, entangled in her long dress and almost stragging, was quickly leaving the room.

"Spewing. Probably had something bad to eat," Nina said calmly now, and magnanimously began to clean up the unchewed pieces of sausage and bread from the table-cloth after her mother-in-law.

"Why Odarka Pylypivna stuffs herself before lunch beats me!" she said, sitting down, and once again, like a long suffering martyr, she sighed deeply.

Alexander eyed the door through which his mother had disappeared and silently began his soup.

CHAPTER 14

But Nina was wrong: her mother-in-law had eaten nothing before lunch. She couldn't. For some time the old woman had noticed a difficulty in swallowing solid food — bread, meat, fried potatoes, and later, to her astonishment, she felt that even liquids went down with difficulty. Reaching somewhere about the middle of her chest the fluid wanted to return. Her stomach would not accept food: what was the matter? At first Odarka Pylypivna wanted to ask her son about it, but Sashko seemed to have enough troubles without her. So many patients! People injured on the job, racked with fever, people with aching stomachs, some woman unable to give birth. And all came to him. He was one, but they all wanted their sores to heal, their pain to subside, their child to be born alive and healthy, and the mother to give an easy birth and live on for her children. How could she bother her son with her ailments, when he sometimes returned home from the hospital so tired that she was filled with pity just looking at him. And he was summoned to the homes of the sick too, and he had to go . . . If only he could relax properly in his own home and have some decent sleep. But no! For that you need a wife who will keep the house tidy and look after her husband, guarding his peace when he rests after work. But could this daughter-in-law ever let him rest! Out of frivolity she would tousele him when he was asleep, talk all sorts of nonsense when he was writing — and yet she herself was utterly lazy! When it came to stubbornness and difficult character — Lord have mercy! Well, let her, old and frail, have no peace because of that woman! She was a mother-in-law, after all. Such is the custom in this world, that daughters-in-law don't like their mothers-in-law very much. But it wasn't all milk and honey for Sashko either! He remained silent, saying nothing to his mother, concealing it in his heart, but his mother saw everything, heard everything . . . Her daughter-in-law did not love her son, oh she didn't love him at all! The old woman had not hoped for such a match for her Sashko.

What had attracted him to her? The mother pondered this question many a time and could but wonder. The snotty girl left Kobeliak for Moscow, stayed there for who knows how long — and now put on airs. 'I'm a Muscovite, I'm from the capital!' And so she scorned her relatives, loathed them. She was conceited. 'Why, I'm an aristocrat now, and you are all rough and uneducated Pereyaslav muzhiks!' But isn't it all the same where a person lives — whether it be in Moscow, or Pereyaslav, or Pidvarky? As long as they are good, sensitive to other people's misfortunes, feel compassion for the poor and unfortunate . . . How could Sashko have fallen in love with such a woman? One could have guessed that she had blinded him with her beauty — but no; all she had to her credit were those painted lips and pencilled eyebrows, like those, of whom it was even shameful to think. As for her temper — no words were necessary! She must have bewitched him, no less, enveloped him in delusion, as the old people would have said back in Pereyaslav . . .

But what could she do? Things had not turned out as one would have liked!

And the old woman imagined what trouble, unpleasantness and perhaps even quarrels she would cause poor Sashko if she too made up her mind to be ill to spite her daughter-in-law and turned to her son with her ailments. What fierce stares she would get from the daughter-in-law if she were to lie in bed and drink medicines instead of cooking meals in the kitchen!

And the mother decided not to complain to her son about her trouble. It would pass somehow . . .

Alexander was mistaken too when he thought his mother was intentionally refusing the sausage because it had been bought by her daughter-in-law; his mother just couldn't eat it. For some time now she had found it difficult to sit down to eat with her daughter-in-law and son: each time she feared she would be noticed, that they would see how she ate and everything would be revealed. The strange disease would be uncovered, and the fragile peace in their house would be disturbed again. And who knows, her son, Sashko, might blame her for his unharmonious and loveless relationship with his wife. The mother ate hastily, trying to remain unnoticed, so as to be rid of this terrible chore, sometimes eating before the others, and quickly dashing off into the kitchen where she could sigh with relief and rest.

But today she had attracted attention. The old woman had not managed to avoid that frightening sausage! And so, to avert a new

disagreement arising in the family because of her, she thoughtlessly decided to do something she was no longer able to do — to swallow in full view of everyone a small piece of sausage.

And it had not come off.

What she had so feared had happened.

Hand clasped firmly over her mouth to stop whatever was tearing at her insides from coming up, the old woman almost ran outside.

'I hope there is nobody in the yard, I hope nobody sees!' she thought, hurrying towards the vegetable garden, feeling her strength draining away and her legs becoming unsteady.

Ismail the caretaker was in the yard. He was seated on the dispensary porch and fashioning something from a piece of wood with his curved knife. He looked sullenly at the old woman and lowered his eyes straight away: what business was it of his, that some old woman was walking through the yard.

At last the mother made it to her beloved spot behind the maize patch and sat down heavily on the ground. She was surrounded by silence and felt safe here. Bending right over, supporting herself on one arm, she brought the other to her chest and gave free reign to her illness . . .

. . . Black rings still glimmered before her eyes and the earth spun beneath her unsteady feet, when she suddenly tasted something salty in her mouth, and the pressure in her chest seemed to ease. The old woman blinked rapidly in surprise and saw blood on the ground before her. At first she did not realise whose blood it was and moved back, but the small puddle of black, dirty blood stretched after her in rich, red drops, her mouth grew saltier and then she realised it was her blood. The old woman paused and lowered her head still further. Inside she felt easier, the spasms, which until now had racked her throat and chest, had died away and only the blood, as if gushing from a slit bladder, came from somewhere deep inside into her mouth and streamed onto the earth.

Zhuchka came running from the yard. She wagged her tail joyously, greeting the old woman, but smelling blood immediately lowered her tail, pricked her ears uneasily and cautiously came up to the small darkish puddle, which was quickly drying up in the hot sun. She sniffed at it suspiciously and sadly eyed the woman. The woman had obviously wanted to say something to her, but the blood in her mouth prevented her and she only feebly waved the dog away. Zhuchka moved aside obediently, not wanting to be in the way. The dog was hot standing there in the searing midday

sun, but it did not wander off into the shade and just stood there — mouth wide open and tongue hanging out. The dog continually watched the old woman, immediately reacting to her every movement, hiding its tongue and pricking one or other of its ears.

The old woman continued to bleed. If it hadn't dried up quickly on the sun-baked earth, she would never have believed that so much blood could have flowed from her. But she could not understand just one thing — what had caused all this? Consumption, or tuberculosis, as people now called it? She had heard that tuberculosis sufferers coughed up blood sometimes, but she had no cough. So this had to be something else. Perhaps a vein or something had burst inside? But why wasn't the blood stopping for such a long time? Sometimes when you happened to cut a finger it was painful, but it never bled this much . . .

At first, when she had seen her blood on the ground, she thought her time had come. Then a thought suddenly flashed through her mind: 'What about Sashko? How will poor Sashko fare without me? . . .' And then her thoughts became all mixed up . . .

Her head spun, black circles continued to appear and disappear before her eyes, her strength ebbed away and the old woman found it difficult to continue supporting herself on her arms. She lay down on the ground, and stretching her dry powerless arm forward, rested her head on it. Zhuchka came up to her, anxiously sniffed at her face, turning her muzzle fearfully from the trickle of blood which flowed from the corner of the old woman's mouth, and twice licked her temple and forehead compassionately. The old woman opened her eyes and gave a grateful smile. Zhuchka shifted her tail uneasily and impatiently shuffled from one foot to the other, as if wishing to say: "Recover! Hurry up, recover! You can't die, you must live . . ."

"But what for, Zhuchka?" the old woman whispered, eyeing the dog sorrowfully. "No, I've lived far too long in this world, Zhuchka. All my family are already buried . . ."

"No, no! You must live!" Zhuchka shook her head nervously: "You will live!"

She licked the woman's temple again, and to prove that she no longer saw anything dangerous in her present state, turned to one side and let her tongue hang out: the danger had passed!

The old woman too felt that death had beaten a retreat this time. Even the bleeding had stopped now. She felt so relieved, so good now! . . . Except for her heart which beat like a snared bird,

and the thumping in her head. She felt washed out . . . It had probably been bad blood, ichor, leaving her, and her illness had run off with it. Now she would recover. She only had to get her strength back . . . Oh, if only someone would bring her a drink of water! Her mouth was dry. What a thirst she had, not for the muddy local water, but for well water — even a drink from the Trubailo, the Alta or even the Dnipro itself! She would have drunk that water from her native land without ever slaking her thirst. And that clean, crystal clear, cold water would restore her strength and health.

In the distance she heard the daughter-in-law call:

“Odarka Pylypivna! Odarka Pylypivna, where are you?”

And then her son’s voice:

“Mother, come inside, lie down and rest.”

The old woman froze and shook her finger at Zhuchka:

“Be quiet! Silence!”

Zhuchka had stood up, but hearing the old woman’s whispers, she squatted on her hind legs, panting, her mouth wide open. The old woman listened fearfully for sounds of footsteps nearby, and when all was quiet in the yard again, she ran her hand down the dog’s back, scarcely touching it and said quietly:

“You’re right, Zhuchka, I can’t die. Who will look after Sashko without me around? Who’ll do the cooking, the washing, the darning? Who? Her? Don’t even waste your breath . . . !”

Zhuchka peered at the old woman and occasionally moved her tail in agreement.

“I must live, Zhuchka!”

The old woman sighed heavily and began to rise slowly on her weak, trembling legs.

“I must live . . . ” she said sadly once again, this time to herself, and slowly made her way to the irrigation ditch to wash her face and quench her thirst. With head hung low and blowzy tail drooping, Zhuchka followed . . .

CHAPTER 15

After lunch Alexander was called out to see two patients in a distant village and returned only late at night. His mother's behaviour at the table, especially her sudden disappearance, had alarmed him, but now when he finally returned home, his mother was asleep. He entered the study, where his mother's bed stood behind the curtain, and listened to the silence. From behind the curtain came quiet, even breathing. This set Alexander's mind at rest: she's asleep, so everything's all right. Sleep is medicine too. Reassured, Alexander sat down at his desk to write.

Recently he had started on an article which he was preparing for publication. In the depths of his heart he nurtured a secret hope that his work would not only be printed in 'Soviet Medicine', but would also appear as a separate book. And who knew, maybe with time it would bring him recognition.

Like many men of medicine who had grown used to hackneyed professional terms and stock phrases in their practice, Alexander was a bad stylist. There were long dry periods in his writing where the predicate became detached from the subject and was lost among an accumulation of added clauses, losing its punch and surfacing somewhere at the end. All this made heavy reading. Also frequent references to this or that source would tax the reader's attention even further and displeased Alexander too. But the subject, the very scientific nature of the work checked his desire to be free of these sophisticated, unwieldy phrases and to revert to plain language. Just sit Chekhov down to write something about 'Certain Aspects of the Progress of Lung Tuberculosis in the Central Asian Environment'. It was unlikely he would have written them in the style of 'Ward Six' or say 'Surgery' . . . !

In these last three years Alexander had amassed a fair amount of material, based on his own comparisons and observations of lung tuberculosis. He had documented a few interesting cases, made a few independent generalisations from his experience and had now begun on his conclusions. But the work proceeded

slowly. The long clumsy title began to annoy him again. He weighed a few other possibilities: 'Regarding the Course of Tuberculosis', 'More About the Course of Tuberculosis', 'Certain Features of Tuberculosis'. But these did not satisfy him either. 'How worn and stereotyped . . . Other people's impotent words . . . People can know so much, understand so well, be able to reason — and yet be unable to express themselves simply and clearly!' he upbraided himself and resolutely crossed out the previous title. Having thought a while, he wrote: 'Lung Tuberculosis in Uzbekistan'.

Yet he was not thoroughly pleased with this title either, though in comparison with the previous one it was an advance. And so finally free of the headache of choosing a title, Alexander felt the urge to continue writing.

But just then Nina sneaked up from behind and gently covered his face with her soft fragrant hands. She rested her head on his shoulder and her fluffy hair tickled Alexander's temple.

"Time to go to bed, *Papka!* I'm so tired today . . ." she said in a thin voice, like a little girl, in Alexander's ear. He lay down his pen and carefully taking hold of her hands, removed them from his forehead. With his eyes still on his papers, he pensively kissed her open palm.

"Working on your article again?" she asked, leaning over Alexander's shoulder towards a piece of paper. "No, Sasha dear, you can't go on like this! You work far too hard. It's terrible! You won't last long this way."

Alexander liked to hear the sympathetic, anxious soft tone of his wife's voice. He did not even check now, as he often did, whether the voice sounded sincere or feigned, but only listened to its intonations. After a week of separation, while Nina was in Tashkent, he had really missed her, even though the first days had been a relief. Towards the end however, after finishing with his work and reading, Alexander had gone to bed with a feeling of longing for her. And now when his wife came up to the desk and brought with her the familiar cosiness to which he had grown slightly unaccustomed, her presence caressed and lulled Alexander's senses. Besides, he remembered how tactfully Nina had acted towards his mother during lunch; how she had silently cleaned up after her without a single reproach; how she had taken a glass of water outside for his mother, and unable to find her, told Alexander in a troubled voice that he ought to examine his mother one of these days. All this had so moved Alexander that he forgave his wife for having forgotten about his mother in Tashkent. He banished from his memory all past

disagreements with his wife and when Nina whispered into his ear: "I've made the bed," he rose willingly from his chair, and stretching sweetly, went into the large room where their double bed stood . . .

When he had turned away, pleasurably tired by her caresses and began to think again about 'Lung Tuberculosis in Uzbekistan', Nina suddenly asked him:

"Sashko dear, if I ask you something, will you do it?"

"Depends."

"No, give me your word, you'll do it."

"Well come on, what is it?"

"What if I ask you very nicely?"

"Don't bargain, out with it," Alexander replied in a serious tone now, and turned over on his back:

"I'm listening, Nina."

Nina remained silent a while in the darkness, but then adopted a business-like tone:

"The fact is there's a person who needs some help . . ."

"Who?" Alexander grew wary.

"The girl who helped me carry my things home from the car today. You see . . ."

Hearing that his wife was talking about the strange 'almost maiden', Alexander became even more wary. Meanwhile, pausing between words, Nina continued softly:

"Her intended has been called up."

"So what of it?" Alexander broke her off coldly, already suspecting nothing good from his wife's request. But Nina continued as if she had not heard him:

"In their last days together she went and got pregnant . . .!"

"Very good. She'll bear a child," Alexander cut in, with an inkling of what his wife was leading to.

"No, she can't have children," Nina said calmly but persuasively, but Alexander hastened to object:

"On the contrary! She's perfectly normal and will give an excellent birth."

"She can't have a child," Nina repeated clearly, but this time, to her amazement, Alexander stood his ground:

"Why not? Why can't she? A mild case of gastritis will in no way stop her giving birth . . ."

"That's not the point," said Nina, losing her patience. "Can't you understand the horror of her situation? No intended, he's in the army, she's all alone and suddenly there's a child . . .!"

"Her intended will return and become her husband and a

father. If he really is her intended and not a lover, a chance partner in debauchery . . . I can see no horror," growled Alexander, putting his hands behind his head in preparation for a protracted and stubborn fight. But Nina's patience had already run out:

"To cut it short I'm asking you to give her an abortion. I beg you!" she stressed.

"I can't," Alexander answered, and the firmness of his tone once again surprised Nina. 'What's with him today? Where has all this obstinacy come from. This has never happened before. Sometimes he has evaded and resisted me, but even so, he submitted in the end. He's just not himself today,' Nina thought and began more mildly:

"But I'm begging you, dear!"

"Firstly, it goes against my convictions, secondly, it's forbidden now by law, and thirdly, it's both unnecessary and harmful."

"Firstly, secondly, and thirdly," Nina imitated him, "it's all rubbish! All jabber . . . ! 'Convictions!'" she hissed in indignation and sat up in bed. "Who needs your convictions . . . ? Smart people have convictions to set themselves up better in life, while all sorts of visionaries like you only torture themselves and their dear ones with their convictions!"

'Aha! So that's what things have come to!' Alexander thought with a chill, but said nothing. Instead he turned towards her, propping his head up with his elbow, and straining to observe her face in the darkness, asked calmly, as if her words had not angered or startled him:

"Tell me now, Nina, why do you want all this?"

Nina had probably not expected such a mild reaction to her words. She thought her husband had begun to submit. Remaining silent a while, she collected her thoughts, then rested a hand on Alexander's elbow and replied in quite a different tone:

"Firstly, I feel genuinely sorry for her. Being a woman, I can understand her more easily than any man would. Then . . . you see, Sasha dear, she's a great dressmaker, people even come from town to place orders with her. She works as a book-keeper at the cotton plant only as a front, so the assessor won't tax her, but in fact she does hardly anything there — her work is at home by her sewing machine. Now she's distraught, she just doesn't know what to do with herself, and I'm very worried about her. The poor thing can't summon the courage to approach you herself and begged me today with tears in her eyes. I'm just repaying favour for favour."

"All right!" said Alexander, for whom everything had become

only too clear, and freed his elbow from under Nina's hand. "But do you realise that by performing this abortion I will not only risk my reputation as a doctor, but my freedom as well? The penalty for an illegal abortion is imprisonment!"

"Ah, that's nothing! She won't tell anyone, I assure you."

"She'll be the first to spread the word about me throughout the whole district!" Alexander cried out. "But that's not the point! That's not the point!" he repeated, turning away from his wife. And all at once what he had avoided and tried not to notice about his wife, stood before his eyes in all its sickening clarity: 'A frivolous half-wit! Chekhov's frivolous rattle brain, Olga Ivanivna, Doctor Dymov's wife!' he thought bitterly and moved to the edge of the bed.

'My views, my convictions, my name, even my freedom — all are nothing to her! It's all rubbish to her! She will spurn and trample everything for these rags and trash!'

He was horrified at the position of the unfortunate Doctor Dymov, whom he had just now identified with. Just like Doctor Korostilyov, Dymov's friend from this same Chekhov story, he longed to grab the fresh, well-starched sheet from under himself, crumple it up and throw it at Nina.

"No, no! I've never done illegal abortions, and I won't now!"

"Then make it so it's legal. . . " Nina clutched at the last illusory possibility, but Alexander cut her short.

"I can't. There are no grounds and above all, there's no need."

"And what about for my sake, for my sake," Nina repeated, almost pleading. "Can't you make a sacrifice just once, just this once?"

"In this — no!" Alexander snapped with such certitude as Nina had never heard before.

Spite and outrage filled her eyes with tears.

"Heartless dullard!" she exclaimed indignantly into the darkness, and grabbing her pillow, stepped disgustedly over Alexander's outstretched leg, as if it was a snake. Barefoot, pillow in hand she stormed into his study. Although Odarka Pylypivna was asleep in the room, she made a racket pulling the drawer out and fidgeting about in the dark for a clean sheet, then slammed the drawer shut and lay down on the small couch near the curtain.

Both rooms became filled with silence, so that the rustle of the poplars outside could be heard through the open window hung with mosquito netting. Only his mother turned frequently from side to side and sighed softly behind the curtain. She probably couldn't

get to sleep. Alexander couldn't fall asleep for a long time either, and not until dawn when the windows began to glow, did he drift into a deep sleep, exhausted by heavy thoughts. Nina appeared not to fall asleep for some time either.

CHAPTER 16

. . . A bright July morning.

There was not a cloud in the sky, not a breath of wind or a human voice, the air was filled with serenity. The sun rose higher and higher over the earth and golden streams of light, breaching the night's barrage in the east, flooded unrestrained into the vastness of the heavens.

A drop of dew on the grass gleamed at the sun, field flowers opened their petals, a red spotted lady-bird clambered up a stalk to look at the world, some bird twittered in a briar thicket, greeting the day. A fiery stallion shook himself and struck the ground, sending an echo down the fields. Neighing joyously, he pricked his ears towards the east. Enchanted, Sashko stretched out his hands towards the sun. How beautiful life was and how one wanted to live! To live!

To live, not selfishly but for people, for good, for life!

"I am a small speck on the vast hand of the world, but I don't want to disappear without trace. Sun, take my glowing heart filled with love for mankind, and whirl it into the blue unknown! So that my short time on earth will not flash through existence without a purpose! Take it!"

A bold joy bubbled up in Sashko's chest and his arms were ready to turn into light, powerful wings. But why was there sorrow creeping into his heart and covering the bright horizon with clouds? Sashko already knew why. Before him lay not only a bright path to the future, but escape as well. Escape from the past . . . Here he was, standing on the other side of the narrow Trubizh River, and his, Sashko's, Rubicon was crossed. And back there, behind him, stood Pereyaslav, containing his childhood, his youth, and Marusia — his first love.

Did this really have to be left behind? Left behind forever . . .

He had to hurry. Time was moving and the sun had risen higher. The horse pounded the earth with its hoof, champed at the

bit. 'You must!' A persuasive voice rose within him and heart thumping, Sashko threw one last fervent look behind him and mounted his horse.

He raced bare-back towards the east. The wind lashed his face, tossing his hair, tore and pulled at his shirt, but he raced forward, towards the Trubizh winding peacefully through green meadows, while the Alta, the Dnipro, and domestic Pereyaslav slipped back further and further. Marusia floated before him and would not disappear. She would not disappear, she would never be forgotten, how could he ever forget his very first love.

The horse moved faster and faster then gradually reverted to a jog and its hooves no longer touched native soil. Although filled with the wild joy of fast movement, Sashko felt a burning sorrow pierce his heart . . .

Dewdrops glimmered under the horse's hooves, as if pearls had been scattered in Sashko's path; distant villages shimmered on the horizon and the Dnipro made its way to the Black Sea in the distance. Whether it was because of the wind, or the sorrow, or the joy — tears began to fill Sashko's eyes, and fell on his horse's dishevelled mane . . .

Pereyaslav was left further and further behind. Back there in those quiet old-world streets people were still sleeping a deep pre-dawn slumber: the sun had not risen for them yet. His Marusia was sleeping too, and so too was the quiet carefree happiness which could have been, but now would never be. He was leaving his first true love, fleeing from this happiness because he was in love with a day-dream. He was ensnared by the exhilaration of moving forward. He felt neither fear of pursuit nor anxiety about the future; he knew only that he had to leave everything dear to him and race into the unknown. It had to be so!

Forward. Only forward!

A raging force overtook horse and rider and their race became progressively faster, wilder, madder . . .

. . . Alexander opened his eyes in surprise. His heart was beating fearfully and his head had slid off the pillow, which was why his neck ached. But he still felt as though he had just been snatched from the crazy horse and was still recovering from the frenzy of the run.

What a strange dream . . .

The bedroom was already filled with light. Because the door to the next room was closed Alexander realised that his mother was up and pottering about in the kitchen. He still had not recovered from

the dream and lay wide-eyed, not wishing to return to reality.

About once every year, sometimes twice, Marusia came from Alexander's distant youth into his dreams. Marusia Khomenko. His first sweetheart. She came to him, the dark hazel-eyed girl. She was fifteen, years ago, and Alexander was not surprised that time had never branded Marusia with its stamp, that it had not left its sad mark on her sweet soft face. Alexander's own youth returned in his dreams then too; and he, Doctor Postolovsky, became a fifteen-year-old dreamer for whom the Pereyaslav sky had once absorbed the world, containing both the gelid pack-ice of the Arctic and the hot sands of the Karakum.

She always seemed to appear statically, without any connection or plot, and disappeared suddenly, as if her portrait had been suddenly brought to life in the old familiar frame only to melt precipitously, like a ghost.

Though Alexander was not one to attach prophetic meanings to dreams, he knew from experience that whenever Marusia appeared in his dreams it brought him joy in reality. He went about all week inspired by that dreamy meeting with his sweetheart, and in everything he was surprisingly successful. For Marusia never came alone: she brought with her his youth, trailed by innocent years of childhood, and made him a different man. Even his personality changed: he was gentle with everyone, attentive and especially loving towards Nina and Vasia, seemingly all because of Marusia, the same Marusia who seemed to be making his life miserable but somehow never did. Why?

And maybe for the first time in all his married life, in all that long time since his break with Pereyaslav and Marusia, Alexander dwelt on the question and to his amazement could find no answer. Really, why hadn't he married Marusia, whom he had loved so much with his first naive love, and whom his mother had known and jokingly called 'daughter-in-law'? Why had he fled that real bliss with Marusia, the bliss he had remembered so vividly today in the strange dream, and thrown himself instead into a search for an abstraction, an abstraction which ironically turned out to be Nina? Why?

There was no answer.

Alexander's mother rose early, overcoming her growing weakness, and set about making breakfast. Her legs bent under her, refusing to straighten, as if they were being hit with a stick behind the knees to make them buckle. She sat down on a small stool, lit the primus and sliced some bread, but her hands refused to move

freely. She felt as if all the blood had been drained from them and cotton wool stuffed in its place. But she stood firm.

"Just don't give in!" she kept saying, to cheer herself up. After all, the bad, evil blood had left her yesterday and now everything would be for the better — if only she didn't succumb to this weakness and could keep her strength up in some way . . .

After the kettle had boiled and the poached eggs were ready (she no longer had the strength for anything more substantial), the old woman left the kitchen and quietly opened the door to see whether her son had woken up. As she peered into the room, she could see that her son was still in bed, although he seemed to be awake.

'I'll have to wait awhile with breakfast,' she thought, returning to the kitchen to turn down the primus, so as not to waste gas.

Another time Alexander may have stayed in bed a little longer, searching his mind for the thing which had once separated him from Marusia, but today, seeing his mother's concerned face at the door, he began to dress at once. Even so, he was reluctant to part with his thoughts of Marusia and to return to sad reality. He immediately decided to go to town that day. Actually there was no special reason for him to go — his assistant Taskira could easily have managed without him, but it would have been too much for Alexander to see his wife that morning or during the day.

Forsaking his usual half hour of exercise, he hastily washed so as not to cause his mother unnecessary trouble and went into the kitchen for breakfast. His mother was not there. He gulped down a glass of tea without desire or appetite, put on his white cap and tip-toed into his study for his briefcase.

His wife was still asleep, curled up in a ball, with her face turned to the wall, away from him. Her dark, fluffy hair, which Alexander liked so much, spilled in unruly, tangled locks over the pillow and hung down the sofa. From under the sheet protruded a fleshy shoulder and back. Alexander took his briefcase from the desk and stole a glance at his wife. He felt no indignation towards her now, as he had during the night; he felt no pity either, as always happened previously after short quarrels. He imagined she was a stranger, an unfamiliar woman, and it was funny to think that only a few hours earlier she had been so dear to him.

Again, on tip toes, as though he was in a strange house and afraid to wake the owners, he went quietly outside.

The sun had already risen, breaking through the branches of an old karagach; its slanting rays painted the dispensary walls pink.

His mother was sitting on a small bench in the yard some distance away and spoke affectionately to Zhuchka, but Alexander could only hear her drawling: "Zhoo-oochka! Zhoo-oochka! Ooh . . . !"

Ashamed and embarrassed by the old woman's caressing words, Zhuchka slowly wagged her tail, arched her back first to one side, then to the other, shook her head and playfully pawed the earth, not knowing how else to show her boundless love for the old woman who patted her on the head while Zhuchka hastened to lick her fingers with her long tongue.

This simple scene of love, loyalty and compassion, and the generous tranquility of the sunlit Uzbek morning made Alexander suddenly feel an inner warmth. He walked up to his mother and saw the terrible pallor of her gaunt face. "How haggard she's become lately. Yes, I really must examine her properly," the thought flashed through his mind, and he said:

"I'm off to town now, *mamochka*."

Zhuchka did not bound away from him as before, but eyed him with affection, licking at the air from time to time. 'How long I haven't called her that!' Alexander thought sadly, peering into his mother's face, which had immediately brightened at the sound of '*mamochka*', almost growing younger, and her sorrowful eyes bathed him in such a gentle, loving look that he wanted to hug her closely and kiss her as he had done in his distant childhood. However Taskira was coming in from the street and Alexander hurried off to remind her to check whether the young Uzbek had taken his wife, who had cancer, to the hospital, and then hitched a ride to the regional centre on the first truck that came his way.

CHAPTER 17

Alexander hopped into the cabin beside the driver. Immediately beyond the village the panorama of expansive cotton plantations and the distant mountains opened up. The scenery of the fertile valley, changing every minute, flew quickly towards the truck, and though everything was familiar, the colourful landscape attracted his attention as always and lulled his thoughts.

Poplars formed two endless rows along the highway and rustled playfully as the truck sped past; on the left a herd of low mulberries, already pruned this summer, hurried past a field of ripened wheat towards the village; and beyond, as far as the eye could see, spread the immense light green plantations of cotton. Ruler straight rows of cotton plants flashed past as if turning in the opposite direction on a giant merry-go-round: row after row, row after row.

In the distance from the north and the south mountains gathered above the plantations. Covered in eternal snow, they disappeared into the bluish haze in the north, stretching their mighty backbones into Kirghizia, and in the south their white sun-soaked ridges bustled along, pushing and shoving, further south across Tadzhikistan to the Pamirs and the Himalayas. The wild chaos of the distant mountains and the straight lines of the plantations were resplendent on such mornings.

Locking together over the horizon in the east, these mountains ran in a horseshoe around the famous Fergan Valley, and the melt from their snows filled its channels and nourished the fertile earth. It was because of these distant mountains with their eternal snows that this land, parched in summer by the hot sun, without a drop of rain from the skies, was able to support cotton plantations, generously bear rice in humid muddy fields, ripen wheat twice in a season and provide people with luxuriant orchards and vegetable gardens.

The truck sped into a village split asunder by the highway. Without slowing down, the roar of its motor splintered the morning stillness of the sleepy street, like a herald announcing the

start of a new working day. A dog, woken from its sleep, began to bark in some back yard; the leaves rustled in confusion on the dense branches of the karagach by the roadside. The truck raced past the monotonous rows of yellowish-grey walls of Uzbek houses, with no windows facing the street. On the right a monument to Lenin flashed by. Beyond the monument, beds of flowers erupted in bright colours, the high windows of the school building glistened in the sun, then a volleyball court with a net strung across the middle flashed past, followed by another house off to one side, and the truck had left the village.

At the same time, coming towards them and slowing down, another truck was approaching the village heavily laden with bricks. For a split second the familiar plait and several tanned youthful faces with black skull-caps loomed from the cabin.

'Nazira and some Komsomol youths delivering bricks for our building,' thought Alexander, and he wanted to wave to her but the truck had already disappeared.

In front of them a two-wheeled cart piled high with *huzapaya* crawled along. Its enormous wheels, the height of a man, turned awkwardly, making figure eights, and creaked so much they could be heard above the mighty roar of the motor and the rustle of the tyres. Deafened by this insane creaking, the Uzbek did not move from the middle of the road for a long time despite the short nervous hoots of the truck's horn. When finally the truck was level with the cart the driver poked his head from the cabin and shook his fist indignantly, but the phlegmatic old carter took no notice, as if it was only the wind rustling past. Evenly rocking in the saddle, with no stirrups, he rode horseback, resting his legs on the long faceted thills. People usually rode horses this way in Uzbekistan, and it seemed the carter was riding horseback and on the cart at the same time; however today this Uzbek carter and his ancient primitive cart flew past Alexander like a ghost from the dawn of history and he thought in amazement: how could this patriarchal cart have survived into our era of jet engines and atomic energy?

To the right near the highway an excavator was digging a new wide channel. Its long boom, erect like a giraffe's neck, dropped a scoop to the ground, and, angrily gnashing its metal teeth, the excavator bit into the dry earth. A minute passed and the excavator, as if even more furious, shuddered with all its iron frame, moved back a little, and victoriously raised its earth-filled scoop towards the whitish, sun-faded sky, as if displaying the spoils of battle. Pleased and proud of its strength, it quickly turned around with the scoop

away from them and suddenly, as if remembering that it had begun work at dawn that day, yawned deliciously with its metal jaws, letting the light grey earth fall to the ground. Realising a moment later what had happened it hurried back, gnashing and biting into the earth . . .

Closer to the regional centre there were more people on the road. They hurried to the market, carrying on their heads large wide baskets filled with juicy blood-red tomatoes, yellow velvet marbles of apricot and green bundles of spring onion. There were many women, but only one of them wore a black purdah and Alexander remembered how astonished his mother had been when, soon after her arrival here from Ukraine, she saw a woman in a purdah. "Like an apparition, God forgive me!" his mother had whispered then and looked after the mysterious figure for a long time. Even back at home she sighed from time to time, shaking her head in disapproval.

The other women had uncovered faces and only the old women had short children's jackets on their heads, as if anticipating rain, and chancing upon men, they brought the flaps of their jackets together to hide their wrinkled faces which were no longer alluring.

Along a path beside the highway an old man in a white turban and a quilted chapan was riding a small donkey. The old man raised his thin grey wedge of a beard into the air and closed his eyes, his long bare feet almost scraping along the ground. A heavy basket covered with colourful rags hung on each side behind the old man's feet; in front of him sat a boy holding a switch. Screwing up its indifferent eyes and folding back its long soft ears the donkey tittuped along briskly with its small feet, kicking up dust, and it was hard to comprehend from where this small obedient animal received its strength to carry such a load.

In front of them on the horizon a clump of trees appeared and before long it had expanded into a long stretch of green extending to the north and south; a little later the shape of tall, single karagaches and poplars could be discerned, as well as the towns's outlying buildings. Like some distant cry, the whistle of the cotton processing plant reached them as they neared the town.

The truck slowed down and moved easily down the wide tree-lined street. They drove past the large, empty yard of the militia with its wide open gates through which they saw an elderly bewhiskered, Uzbek militiaman enter; past the white two-storey council building with its flower beds in front; past the bank with its barred windows; and finally they turned into the main street. Here Alexander asked

the driver to stop, and with numb legs stepped uncertainly onto the footpath. After the roar and clatter of the truck's engine the street suddenly seemed much too quiet for that time of day, and Alexander looked at his watch. It was nine o'clock exactly. Organisations in Uzbekistan usually started early, and took a break during the hottest part of the day, around midday, and so had long been busy working. Through the open window of the regional prosecutor's office a typewriter's nervous crackle spilled into the street, abacuses chattered noisily in the Consumer Society's room, while a group of youths crowded around the open door of the Enlistment Office as a voice from inside could be heard calling out names. Alexander crossed the bridge over the fast-flowing muddy waters of the main canal and turned into a side street which led to the malaria centre or as it was called here, the Tropical Centre. At the door of the building he was met by a short-sighted woman in a white coat, who despite her impressive years was still full of energy. Doctor PISOCHKINA immediately burst out with the news:

"Have you heard? Khodjayev is coming to these parts!"

Snub-nosed, with slightly distended nostrils, PISOCHKINA had a bad cold, but it looked as though her nose, perched on an aged face heavily furrowed with wrinkles, had once smelt something very offensive and had now become so abominable that it sniffed fearfully at each stranger.

"How are things in your district? Are you afraid?" Her screwed-up eyes fidgeted over Alexander's face. "Be warned, he'll be snooping everywhere. He'll come to see you too."

"Well," Alexander threw up his arms and continued with a wry smile: "I am always ready in full armour to meet all kinds of superiors."

PISOCHKINA sniffed twice in disbelief.

"They say Khodjayev is nothing like the previous superintendent who sat quietly in the provincial centre and didn't show himself anywhere. This one's the exact opposite. Besides that, he has enormous authority, not only as a member of the regional and executive committees, but also as a doctor. He's a surgeon; and they say that even after becoming a superintendent he still does complex abdominal operations . . . Everyone agrees he's far too fastidious and too strict. It'll be a thunderstorm!"

"So there'll be thunderbolts from the blue on our horizon?" Alexander smiled again, looking into PISOCHKINA's worried face.

"You bet! Everyone's simply gone mad around here. They're hurriedly whitewashing the hospital, digging flower beds around the

epidemiology centre, hurrying to finish the partitions in the childrens consulting rooms . . . What bad luck! I'm off to get some more coats myself. Just think, only two decent coats in the whole centre . . ."

Pisochkina probably would have continued to sniff and complain for much longer, seeking in her interlocutor the opportunity to console herself, but Alexander, wanting to brush her off quickly, made use of her last words:

"Well in that case, I musn't keep you. So long!" He quickly shook her hand and opened the door.

Inside, he collected the results of some malaria blood tests and asked for more glass slides, then hurried from the tropical centre to avoid bumping into Pisochkina again, whose company he could stomach only in small doses.

Coming out into the main street again, he decided to have a soda water at the kiosk, for the heat had already become stifling, and then entered the pharmacy.

Although it was open for business and there were several people waiting for prescriptions, the staff were frantically washing the floor, and hanging cheesecloth curtains on the windows; even Sharf, the pharmacy manager, was wiping bottles with a wad of cotton wool and rearranging them on the shelves of the glass cabinet. They were preparing in earnest for the arrival of the formidable new provincial health department superintendent. Alexander took a large step onto the washed part of the floor and came up to the prescription counter.

"Sara Abramivna, allow me . . ."

Manager Sharf turned around angrily at the voice and was about to abuse the impatient character who couldn't wait till they had washed the floor, but recognising Doctor Postolovsky, she immediately came up to the counter.

"It's you, doctor? Have you heard?" she sighed deeply and shrugged her shoulders: "I don't know who started this new fashion: no sooner are they appointed than they fly out to the districts to drag everyone over the coals. In the neighbouring district he almost fired the manager of the pharmacy for mistakenly selling permanganate for five copecks more . . ."

Alexander decided he had listened to Sharf long enough, for the sake of politeness, and asked for some potent medicine for the dispensary. He padded his pockets with ampoules of morphine and strychnine, put a bottle of opium into his briefcase, and with a slight nod to disappointed Sharf, who was expecting words of sympathy, he left the pharmacy. He wanted to go to the park to sit out the heat

and think in solitude, but hesitated and two blocks further on turned into a lane leading to the Regional Health offices.

Alexander didn't like offices at all and Regional Health always seemed to him a boring addition to the lively, vibrant business of health protection and the fight for human life. In short, it was more like an appendix than a department. But he had to go in. It would be impolite not to visit the health department while he was in town, if only to obtain, in one clean swoop, all the new directives, instructions and scraps of paper which this medical authority showered so generously on its establishments.

Akhmetjanov, the young director of Regional Health, was out. He was probably racing about preparing for Khodjajev's arrival too. Secretary Hordienko, a woman in her forties, but with a plunging neckline, a magnificent hair-do and a languid stare, ran up to Alexander as soon as he appeared in the doorway.

"How good that you've come! I tried all yesterday evening to reach you on the phone, and there is absolutely no one to send — everybody's out . . ."

"What's the matter?" Alexander asked dryly. He liked the secretary neither for her constant attempts at trying to unseat the regional director nor for her love of gossip.

"What? Haven't you heard yet?" Hordienko was surprised. "Khodjajev is coming here!"

"So what? It's a good thing he's coming," Alexander spoke coldly through his teeth.

"But he'll be everywhere and in your area too!"

"I'm greatly honoured. I would very much like to see him in my dispensary."

Hordienko looked into his eyes in disbelief. She couldn't decipher whether this annoying, notorious braggard, Doctor Postolovsky, was only flaunting, or whether he wanted to complain to Khodjajev.

She strained to remember whether Postolovsky had already received his May salary: Hordienko was also the accountant for Regional Health.

"I wanted to warn you yesterday to put things in order immediately. To shape up . . ."

"I wouldn't even dream of doing a thing!" Alexander cut her short. Once again he felt it was none of her business.

"What do you mean?" Hordienko opened her eyes in surprise and decided at once that without a doubt the hound would be lodging complaints. "Ziya Khaidarovich is very worried that you

haven't been notified yet . . ."

"It doesn't matter! I've nothing that needs altering."

"Well, really . . .! What about all our shortcomings and faults? Who can foresee everything!"

Hordienko lifted her shaggy head condescendingly and stared at Postolovsky once more. She was still dying to know just what he would be complaining about. He had received his money for May, this she now remembered, and was even allocated something extra for renovations. Maybe he needed money for purchasing stationery and instruments.

Alexander interrupted her thoughts.

"Medical institutions, comrade Hordienko, should always run in such a way that they need no special preening when superiors arrive," he instructed her and added: "On principle, I won't change anything — let him see everything as it is!"

"I don't know!" Hordienko smiled maliciously, certain that there would be complaints, and probably more than one. "You're much too high-principled, Doctor Postolovsky."

"Naturally!" Alexander growled and to put an end to the disagreeable conversation, asked, "Any letters for the district?"

"Here! These are all your papers, Doctor Postolovsky," Hordienko said with emphasised politeness, removing a pile of typed papers and a sealed letter from a cupboard. Alexander carelessly shoved the papers into his briefcase and left without saying goodbye.

Hordienko watched his departure with unconcealed spite and thought:

"I don't know how his beautiful wife can stand to live with him. He's an impossible man!"

CHAPTER 18

Alexander was already reproaching himself as he left the Regional Health offices and made slowly for the park:

“More trouble! Why did I begin with her? I don’t think I even said goodbye . . .! Of course Hordienko was trash, an intriguer, a gossip, and had he been in Akhmetjanov’s position he would have fired her long ago. Definitely. After returning to the dispensary he really wouldn’t change anything because of the arrival of the new health department superintendent — let him see everything as it always was, without any frills. All this was fine. But why aggravate the secretary? Hordienko would of course convey his words to Akhmetjanov, twisting their meaning, and it would seem to him that Doctor Postolovsky did not heed the directions of the regional health department director, and even tried to upset them by sabotaging the preparations for Khodjayev’s arrival . . . Impressionable and ambitious, Akhmetjanov would be offended, there would be misunderstandings and unpleasantness. ‘Why have I become so irritable, a real neurotic?’ mused Alexander.

In reply he remembered his night conversation with his wife. But his Pereyaslavian Marusia had shielded it with a light, transparent screen, appearing in his dreams before dawn. Though the more pointed moments of the vexing night scene had dulled and the words had faded, the bitterness still remained. Like an ancient potion on a painful festering wound, Marusia brought unexpected peace and tranquility to his soul. And now Alexander was no longer capable of the same criticism of his marital relations, as he had been that night. But he had to think deeply about it, to appraise the web in which his life had become entangled. And he began to turn over in his mind everything which had happened that night, attempting to calmly analyse their last disagreement.

Actually nothing new had happened. In one variant or another all this had happened previously, only yesterday it had reached its peak, its culmination. But was this a surprise? Couldn’t this culmin-

ation have occurred a year, maybe two earlier? Of course it could have! Was there ever a time in their married life when these quarrels were absent?

Alexander felt there never had been such a time.

Misunderstandings had begun almost the day after they emerged from the registry office, smiling and holding hands, pressing close together, and celebrated their student wedding in the narrow circle of Nina's friends and acquaintances. And then these skirmishes and conflicts grew in duration and intensity like a geometric progression, until with the arrival of his mother, they had assumed unbearable proportions.

After Alexander cooled down and sought the pretext for the row, he either did not find it, or the pretext was so weak he found it unbelievable that such nonsense could poison their life for a whole day.

And yet it did . . . What was the reason for it? His mother? Sure his mother complicated their relationship, but could he deprive his mother of shelter and turn her out of the house? For a while it probably would have brought peace to the family, but for how long? They had quarrelled before his mother's arrival . . . No, his mother was not the main cause. What then? Himself? Perhaps. Well, he had provided Nina with material security, as much as this was possible in the circumstances, had given his wife the opportunity to devote herself to art without having to think about work. He was even pleased that his wife was absorbed in art and it occupied all her time. He had in fact drawn the boundary between them himself: you have your art, I have my medicine, so let's not hamper each other, let's each work in our own field. But did Nina really need her art, would her brush ever create anything, maybe not gifted, maybe not even talented, but simply worthy of attention, needed by someone other than the author, or would she never rise above her 'futuristic exercises', as Alexander had dubbed her paintings? He had never thought seriously about this. But he should! Maybe he should! Maybe he should open her eyes a little for her. Perhaps she didn't need all this painting at all, and she would realise it herself after several fiascos and bitter disappointments?

Alexander thought a while longer and objected to his previous assertion: she would realise it but would not repent and recant! Because she needed this art primarily to . . . And here Alexander said in his mind that which he earlier dared not even think: 'to cover her shallowness . . .' Behind the 'hues', 'chiaroscuros' and 'compositions' there was nothing — only emptiness! But this was not enough:

she wanted to spread this shallowness to him too, to devastate him as a doctor and a man. Hadn't she herself once said: 'The art of healing involves convincing the patient, when medicines cannot help, that it is his own fault and that of his environment, and not the fault of medicine and the doctor.' For her the ideal doctor was a shrewd businessman, a *pepist*, who evaded the tax assessor and smoothed things over with the health department, while lining his pockets with income from private consultations. Nina would have welcomed this, even actively aided him, if he could lower himself to trade in doctor's certificates and bulletins. But he couldn't and wouldn't do it. He found it repugnant.

"Then what has held us together, what has our married life thrived on?"

And his memory prompted a reply couched in an apt phrase which he had read somewhere: 'Together in body, apart in soul.' It had been that way from the beginning, it was the same now, and it was useless to expect anything else. There would be nothing else. Could be nothing else. For it was useless to persuade her, to change her, to re-educate her. She was a closed person. One could only resist her.

If this was so, what should he do, what way out was there?

. . . He had been walking the alleys of the town park, but noticed only now that he was in a narrow side alley planted with smoothly clipped hedges of dark green myrtle. On his right the main canal was very wide and flowed like a rapid mountain river. Its strong current sped the turbid coffee-and-milk water along, churned up waves and swirled near the banks in small eddies.

Fighting the strong current, a flock of domesticated ducks spun about in the centre of the canal, swimming in one spot as though moored by anchors. Now and then they plunged their heads deep into the water, deftly catching food with their blunt yellow bills, sometimes diving after it and then searching again for new prey with the motionless spots of their small black eyes. These monotonous movements of the fat birds, repeated endlessly in the one spot, seemed to stop the flow of water and time about them. Alexander stared blankly at the ducks and asked himself again:

"What solution is there? Divorce . . .?" Words set in brevier type printed at the bottom of the fourth page in the newspaper passed before his eyes . . . 'Postolovsky Alexander Ivanovich, residing at such and such a place is instigating divorce proceedings against . . . ' He felt disgust. When on top of this he imagined Vasia's tiny outstretched arms and tearful voice as he was being taken away

by his now 'divorced' wife, he knew that he could not take the step.

"Daddy! Da-addy!" He seemed to hear the child's last desperate screams and winced.

No, anything but that! Not that!

The ducks paddled energetically in the muddy water and floated on the same spot into eternity. Small waves rose and broke against the clay shore, new ones replacing them again and again. Water rushed past the ducks.

Why is the water so muddy?

Has a wave disturbed it?

Why is the girl so sad . . .

A fragment of a mournful song surfaced from the distant days of Pereyaslav like a broken branch appearing in the swift channel water, spinning around in a whirlpool and disappearing into obscurity . . . Again Marusia stood before him. His Pereyaslavian Marusia whom merciless time had spared and whom none of the changes which had occurred in these long years in Pereyaslav had changed. Simple, hazel-eyed Marusia stood outside time, speaking ancient Pereyaslavian truths: "To take a wife, is not to buy a cow . . .", "To live a life isn't to cross a field . . ." And this wisdom made the soul light and tranquil. It was as if he had appeared in his grandfather's old thatched house on the outskirts of Pereyaslav after a storm. The house was filled with an evening stillness, a cricket chirred in the ingle, an ancient clock quietly ticked away on the wall measuring out time. In the twilight an ancient tale of the distant past lurked about the hearth . . .

Alexander sighed and softly recited into the distant past to Marusia some lines from Turgenev which he had learned at school: 'Life isn't frivolity and diversion; life isn't even enjoyment; life is hard toil . . .' And it seemed to him that he had finally found the answer to everything. A little more time and he would find a solution.

It was too late to sift through the past now that he had a child, a son. Vasia was an undeniable fact. There was no way out. Children needed a father and a mother; this was their natural right, and he dared not deny his son this, he would not maim his small Vasia's childhood. But why was he called Vasia, and not Igor, Oleg, Yaroslav or Yevhen, as could have been expected from his wife's arty tastes? Why did she stubbornly insist on calling the boy Vasia? Alexander's exhausted mind paused a second time on this riddle, as he had done before when registering the child. But then he had

agreed, without waiting for an explanation: if it was to be Vasyl, then Vasyl it would be! After all, a name didn't create a person, but people created a name for themselves through their actions . . . Perhaps Vasyl was the name of one of Nina's first loves, but Alexander felt nothing towards the unknown Vasyl of the past and towards the Nina of the present. The child came first; it needed a normal family atmosphere to develop normally. He had to give his son this. But he would not renounce his attitudes, his positions. No, he would not lower himself to the pitiful role of obedient executor of his wife's whims! That meant more endless arguments, continuous torture . . .

But how difficult, how hopelessly difficult it was to live this way. Was there no other alternative? And then he remembered the words he had once heard someone say: 'Life sometimes turns out in such a way that one must choose between crime and heroism. No middle road is permitted.' To leave Vasia prey to Nina, who could make a moral cripple of him, was a crime; to live with Nina so as to save his son from her terrible influence was heroism. There was no middle way, 'for life is hard toil.' He had to live and toil. Nearby a loudspeaker mounted on a pole was crackling away, broadcasting a concert of Uzbek music from Tashkent. The sun had long passed its zenith and hastened behind the dense lace of leaves towards the west. The heat diminished. A whistle from the cotton plant finally brought Alexander to his senses. He had to leave. He walked down the main path to the exit, listening to the gurgle of a small channel behind the bushes of jasmine.

The small pointed wooden arch with the red star and the faded flags separated the park from the street. To the left, with entrances from both the street and the park, stood a tea-house. Alexander caught the scent of baked bread and fried cottonseed oil and felt a tickle in his nostrils. He suddenly realised he was hungry and made for the high roofed tea-house.

As usual it was crowded inside and Alexander spent some time finding a place at a table in the corner where an old Uzbek and his two small grandsons were finishing their tea. Alexander contentedly stretched his tired legs under the table and looked around. The large tea-house was like an Uzbek club which collected and united the most diverse people through their common love for tea. At tables and on straw mats on the ground sat tanned Uzbeks in quilted *chapans*, long cotton shirts, faded army tunics and freshly ironed serge suits, and all drank tea from small cups with an equal relish. As the porcelain teapots became empty, two energetic youths hurried round with trays of new ones. Lively, earthy conversation filled the

air, exploding here and there in a sudden eruption of rolling laughter, fresh customers were crowding around the entrance, enviously looking inside, where people had fallen greedily on their beloved tea and seemed to have no intention of ever leaving this paradise.

However much Alexander tried to appreciate the Uzbek way of life, he still couldn't discover the flavour of green unsweetened tea, and when he was brought a large teapot and a flat cake, he swallowed only a few mouthfuls of tea to allay his thirst, and then hungrily fell upon the flat cake.

In contrast to the Uzbeks in their black skull-caps there was a gloomy moustached figure in a grey crumpled cap and a dirty jacket rolled about in straw. The figure moved slowly about the tea-house with unsure, shaky steps, hindering the youths bringing the tea-pots. Reeling and hiccuping, the figure stopped at each table, unceremoniously inspected the Uzbek faces, as if seeking someone, and not finding the person, wriggled his moustache with displeasure and disapprovingly shook his head, then moved on.

The old Uzbek in front of Alexander sipped one last time from his cup, wiped the sweat from his forehead with the long flap of his *chapan*, and giving his grandsons a sign with his hand to wait, went outside. Alone, the boys became downcast and looked at Alexander with wild black eyes. The smaller one, who was only a little bigger than Vasia, had a long thin lock of hair left on his shorn head, and it protruded in a black tassel from under his small skull-cap. The appearance of the sullen moustacheod man, who smelled so unpleasant even from a distance, frightened the boys and they huddled together.

The man took no notice of them and was about to move on when his bleary eyes rested on Alexander's blond hair and light eyes, and the long moustache danced in a friendly smile.

"Ah, bless the Lord! I see at least one countryman!" his voice sounded rather loud in the tea-house.

The moustached man, who was quite drunk, cheered up at the opportunity to unburden his soul. Without asking permission he landed heavily on the newly-vacated chair. The two boys shifted away in fright.

"Where haven't I been and everywhere the Uzbeks are drinking tea in their tea-houses, while our fools are out working . . ." The man shook his head sadly and sighed deeply: "And ours are working!"

Alexander frowned. The company of the drunken fool, who had probably come to Uzbekistan on speculative dealings, was

irritating him, and besides he felt sorry for the small boys, especially for the younger one who had become glued to his seat, awaiting certain death in the absence of his grandfather.

"Go to sleep!" Alexander said coldly to the moustached man. The character blinked, uncomprehending:

"What do you mean? If you analyse it, what turns out is that the Uzbeks are drinking in tea-houses . . ."

"Get to sleep!" Alexander repeated more forcefully and lightly rapped his fist on the table.

This had its effect.

"Pardon me!" The character rose to his feet; the recent friendly smile had left his face. When he saw the briefcase across Alexander's knees he wilted completely, thinking he had chanced on someone in authority.

"Every nation has begun to respect itself. The Uzbeks too . . . I'm sorry!" The man hiccuped and scurried away from disaster.

The Uzbek boys began to show signs of life again: they stirred and glanced gratefully at Alexander, who had driven away the frightful man.

"A bad friend?" Alexander asked with a smile in Uzbek. The small boy bashfully lowered his eyes. The older one whispered timidly:

"Yes, bad . . ."

But a minute later the boys had recovered. The smaller one focused his gaze on the teapot which Alexander had moved away, and snorted. He began to fret that such good stuff should go cold without being consumed. Alexander caught the looks of the dark cherry-like eyes and poured each boy a full cup of tea, winked at the smaller one, then broke off a piece of flat cake each. The older one hesitated a minute or two, but the younger one immediately grabbed the cup with his tiny hands and by the time the grandfather had returned, he was blissfully sipping the tea.

Alexander watched the child with a sad smile. His own Vasia held a cup of milk the same way, avidly drinking his beloved *molot-sko* with closed eyes. A white neck with blue veins, tiny feet in sandals swinging carelessly under the table, this small precious, helpless creature seemed so dear to him . . .

"Could I ever live without him?" Alexander thought with sudden alarm, as if something threatened to take away his child from him.

Never!

And he hurried home from the tea-house.

CHAPTER 19

On the outskirts of the town where travellers could usually get a lift, there were no trucks for a long time. To pass the time Alexander took the sealed envelope from his pocket. He hadn't even looked at it, taking it from secretary Hordienko after their slight disagreement. Expecting nothing of interest, apart from the usual directives and instructions, Alexander slowly tore the envelope down one side and pulled out a letter with a strangely written address: 'Uzbek SSR, Namangan, Provincial Health Department, village doctor, Alexander Ivanovich Postolovsky.' The person obviously hadn't known Alexander's address but had wanted to be sure of finding him.

"Who could it be?" Alexander was surprised, unfolding the pages to find a signature. The sweeping feminine handwriting and several quotes from poems or songs suddenly alarmed him for some unknown reason. He quickly ran his eyes over the pages until at the bottom of the last page his gaze fell on the words: 'The same and yet different, Maria Khomenko'. And it froze to them.

Alexander caught his breath. He lowered the letter and stared blankly ahead. What a striking coincidence to receive this unexpected letter from Marusia after the dream that night! As if thousands of kilometres away, the Pereyaslav Marusia whom he had last seen fifteen years ago, had sensed how difficult his life was, had longed for him as she had before and her unrest had somehow been picked up by his subconscious. For a few moments he froze like a dreamer and the reality of time and space left him. Marusia Khomenko no longer appeared before him in distant reminiscence, but almost stood before him, his modest first love, with whom he could have found serene bliss in Pereyaslav but somehow never had . . .

He came to and immediately began reading the letter. It was not addressed to anyone and had no date, so he could not find the beginning straight away.

I'm not sure how to address you now. So much time has

passed since that time when you were simply Sashko to me. And later, when I could have called you only Alexander Ivanovich, I didn't have the opportunity to meet you again; therefore you have remained in my memory as Sashko, whom I once knew in Pereyaslav. Knew and . . .

Next, there was a heavily crossed out word, but without straining his mind Alexander guessed that it could only have been 'loved.'

That is why I've decided not to address you at all so that you can choose what would suit you best and I will agree to whatever you decide . . .

Recently I was attending an agriculture conference in Moscow when quite by chance I bumped into Petro Kravchenko who, like me, is also an agronomist. Only he was representing Western Ukraine while I came all the way from Sovgavan in the Far East. Do you remember him? A shy, fair-haired boy whom we used to tease in Pereyaslav. He still has ties with Pereyaslav and even went back there last year. As I've been away from home for six years, I clung greedily to Petro as we viewed the Exhibition of Progressive Development and wouldn't let him leave my side all evening. We remembered our childhood and adolescence, reminisced about friends from Pereyaslav and Kiev (we attended the Agricultural Institute in Kiev together) we remembered you too of course, even though you're quite a different fish to us. I found out from him that you were practising in Uzbekistan, somewhere in Namangan Province. He couldn't give me your exact address as he knew nothing definite about you himself; only that he had heard from someone in Pereyaslav that your mother had moved to Namangan Province two years ago to live with you. (Remember how she used to joke and call me 'daughter-in-law' and silly old me, I really was a little scared of her being my future mother-in-law). So don't be surprised at the crazy address on this letter.

I don't know whether this letter will reach you, whether you'll answer it. I don't even know whether it was worth writing to you. I only feel that I must.

I did not write and could not write to you when you first left to study in Moscow without saying goodbye; especially after you came to stay with your mother once for a few days and didn't even drop in to say hello. But now I feel I must write. Why, for what reason, you may ask, as I ask myself? But do I know? I've wanted to write ever since Moscow where I walked about and thought: 'Sashko walked these very streets while he studied here.' But especially

today I long to talk to you.

It's growing dark now. The end of April is here. In Pereyaslav people are already sowing wheat, but here, though we've had a thaw, there has been such a blizzard that it's impossible to see the distant hills or even the farm hot-houses nearby. Outside the wind is blowing hard, as if all hell has been let loose and I am pacing the room and singing (no wonder they once nicknamed me Melody Marusia in Pereyaslav), singing the old song I once learnt from my grandmother and which I often sang woefully after you left. I'll write down the words for you, so you'll remember our distant Pereyaslav, those blissful times when we were still naive youngsters running to the Troyetsky Bridge and Lazanko's meadow. I want you to hear once more the gentle rustle of the willow in Brovarky where you first kissed me clumsily and timidly on the cheek . . . so that you can remember everything. Yes, hear my singing through the dreadful distance which lies between us:

Grey geese have descended
To cavort on the lake,
Young chumaks have come
To spend winter in the village.

The grey geese cavorted,
Then rose and flew off;
The chumaks stayed the winter,
Then rose and drove off.

Oh why didn't you, my mother,
Wake me early in the morn,
When the nice young chumaks
Were leaving at dawn?

I didn't wake you, my daughter,
So early in the morning,
For your chumak left first,
So you wouldn't grieve . . .

I am singing and I genuinely feel that you can hear me. It's regrettable that our paths will never cross again . . . even if only 'to meet again and part again, to poison my sad heart . . .' (This is from a song written to the words of Oles or a Vorony).

A few words about myself, as you probably can't for the life of you guess what on earth brought me here, to the very backwaters of the Soviet Union. You knew me only as that meek Marusia, who lived in Pereyaslav and who did not show herself anywhere. I really once believed that the edge of the world lay just out-

side Pereyaslav. Even when I went to study in Kiev, I dreamed of returning immediately with my new knowledge to serve that same Pereyaslav. But my generation has already stirred from age-old roosts and no power can keep it in ancestral nooks like Pereyaslav and Khorol. A craving for travel and knowledge pushes us into the large cultural centres, the vast open spaces of the Soviet Union beckon to us, we are enticed by the Arctic and the Antarctic; our old planet will soon be too small and boring for us because we are already striving for the distant stars. I'm sure you didn't go to Uzbekistan to make a fast rouble, as they say in the Far East; your intentions were more noble. But you moved too, like the rest of us.

On my trek into the unknown I landed on a state farm in the taiga north of Sovgavan. Who and what am I? I'll tell you openly: I haven't flown over the north pole yet, I didn't split the atom, I didn't even discover the yarivisation of wheat. I don't have apples and pears growing on my birches and larches like Michurin – I make do with cucumbers, radishes and tomatoes, and these from hot-houses. In other words I wage a never-ending battle with the taiga and the climate. Does this satisfy me? Of course it does. Each person should determine his place in life, find the field in which he can be useful to others. I have found it in agronomy, and this has given substance to my life, given me the joy of work, the conviction that my work and I myself are needed by people. Maybe you'll say it's not enough? Narrow desires, low aspirations, petty concerns! Let it be so. I am an ordinary worker, not some 'exceptional individual' burdened with talent and popularity. Only they, the talented and famous, must worry about a place in history, but for me a humble place in our today is enough.

And yet, I too have leapt into history with one 'exceptional individual.' I must confess it wasn't only the craving for novelty, interesting hard work and an insatiable thirst for knowledge which brought me here. There were personal reasons too.

While still a student in final year, I thought I had fallen in love again. I write 'thought,' for after my feelings for you I never supposed anything similar could ever happen again. (You probably never realised how much I once loved you, Sashko!) My female pride had been shattered when you broke off our friendship for no reason at all, without even writing to say why, and my senses were numbed for a long time.

And then fate, whimsically and unexpectedly, brought me together with a composer. Quite attractive in appearance, he bore resounding fame as a song writer, a creator, and his name flashed

now and again from posters, papers and journals – you can imagine what an impression all this can create on a country girl, especially one as melodious as me! He seemed to me a wizard who had opened the curtain to the alluring world of melody and colour. I even believed him when he said that my ancient songs helped him to create, that I was his bridge to the people from which the bustle of the capital had torn him . . .

I won't hide the fact that my involvement was partly a belated desire to take revenge on you . . .

A year passed, it was then the middle of the exams, and I learned accidentally that my creator had other 'sources of inspiration' apart from me (this was his own expression which he used to try and justify his depravity).

I wanted a child but was offered callous roubles for an abortion; I strove for music and a little fantasy, but was offered debauchery and cynicism. Not a trace remained of my Pereyaslav dreams . . .

I left him. Because I had already experienced one such 'betrayal' before, I must have developed an immunity, as you doctors say, for I surprisingly took the drama in my stride. Despite everything, I even got good results in my exams. I only felt very sorry for music and songs. I still can't comprehend how such beautiful sounds can be born in such vile hearts. Is talent something greater and loftier than its bearer, something independent of a person's quality? How sad, if it is so.

Now you can understand with what eagerness I accepted an appointment in the Far East and left Kiev without looking back.

I want you to understand me well and not to think for a moment that I'm striving for the impossible, trying to return that for which there is no return. I know you're married, that you have a child, and believe me, never in the slightest possible way do I ever want to upset the harmony in your family. I'm just happy to know you're alive. My feelings toward you are completely changed. Like in the song I used to sing to you in Pereyaslav, without thinking about the words:

Be happy with the one you love,
But none more loyal than me shall you find.
I will pray to the Lord for your happiness,
Whether with me, or another – you are forever my beloved.

There followed a signature and a short postscript: *If you ever get the urge to write, my address is:*

But Alexander did not read the address. He stood, holding the letter by his side and stared unblinking into space. A few trucks had driven past him and stopped nearby. People hurriedly clambered onto them, but he saw neither the trucks nor the people. His whole rigid figure stood as if paralysed and only his lips whispered: "Marusia, Marusia . . .!"

He was brought back to reality by the shouts of a truck driver from the Machine and Tractor Station:

"Alexander Ivanovich! Doctor! Come on, I'll give you a lift."

Alexander shuddered as if woken up and rubbed his forehead. He hid the letter and slowly climbed through the open door into the driver's cabin.

The garrulous driver complained at being unable to obtain some spare parts, recounted a comical situation at the front, told of the visit to the MTS that day by the second secretary of the district committee who dressed down the director for something and threatened to take strong action. Alexander nodded his head in silence, pretending to hear everything so the driver would not force him to speak. The letter from Marusia had really shaken him, stirring so many memories and thoughts that Alexander could no longer think independently. Thoughts surfaced and disappeared of their own accord; he was only an observer. The cynic-composer, whom he had never met, appeared before him and beside him stood not Marusia, but Nina with a palette and brushes. 'What a suitable pair,' Alexander observed as if he was a stranger, without sarcasm or jealousy. Several under-exposed stills flickered before him like images from some old film — his departure from Pereyaslav for Moscow — and Marusia's sorrowful voice somewhere in the background:

*Oh, why didn't you, my mother,
Wake me early in the morn,
When the nice young chumaks
Were leaving at dawn?*

A voice reproached him: 'How could you leave such a nice girl! Exchange a swallow for a hawk . . . !' Alexander had no answer. But the voice did not relent, reaching into the depths of his soul: 'Even as a stepmother Marusia would be a hundred times better for your Vasia than Nina the mother . . . ' Not only did Alexander not argue, he agreed, arriving even at a logical conclusion: 'Why hesitate? Why continue to torture yourself? Write to her today, set things straight. Take special leave and go off to see her . . . Everything will be settled — the old wrong will be righted and the needless

lingering hopelessness with Nina will be ended . . . ' But Alexander heard Marusia's sad words: 'My feelings towards you have changed completely . . . Never in the slightest possible way do I ever want to upset the harmony in your family . . . ' At this moment Nina began dragging Vasia away from him, but the boy resisted, stretching his hands towards his father and screaming: 'Daddy! Daddy! I want to be with you . . . '

Alexander shuddered all over, so that even the driver turned his head in surprise:

"You're not feeling ill, are you? Not malaria by any chance? I had it the year before last, shook me like that too."

"No, I'm just very tired," Alexander replied softly, feeling very exhausted.

He took out Marusia's letter again, looked sadly one last time at the sweeping handwriting, and turning to the open window slowly tore it up. He looked at the pieces of paper once more, crumpled them in his fist and thrust his hand far out of the window. For a minute or so the fist remained clenched, then the fingers slowly opened out. A gust of wind caught the white scraps and carried them far from the roadside. Alexander sighed softly: 'Let her think I never received the letter. And now to be home quicker and to get to bed. To sleep and dream of Marusia . . . '

CHAPTER 20

But he was unable to rest at home.

From afar he saw the two hard-run horses tethered to a tree beside the dispensary gate and thought: 'They've come for me. How untimely . . . !'

He had wanted to relax on the sofa, to play with Vasia, and finally he had to examine his mother one of these days, but already a young man in an army tunic rose to meet him. Alexander knew the fellow, having treated him for tuberculous lymphadenitis. He was from the remote 'Comintern' farm and Alexander sadly estimated that the call would take at least three hours. Should he send Taskira instead? 'In the event of anything, I can visit the patient tomorrow . . . ' Alexander rationalised, seeking a way to stay at home, but the lad had already come up to him.

"Doctor! The accountant's wife is screaming like crazy."

The youth had been discharged from the army recently because of his illness and so could speak Russian.

"Is she sick?"

"She's in labour."

Alexander grew wary — when an Uzbek villager requested a doctor at childbirth, it meant things were bad.

"Has she given birth yet?"

"She can't . . . The accountant begs you, doctor, make her give birth."

It was clear to Alexander that he himself had to go, although in fact the accountant, a civilised person, might just want his wife to receive qualified help and there may be no pathology at all. However it was well known that for every hundred false alarms, where the assistant would have managed on her own or everything would have been all right without her, there might be one case when it was a question of life and death and a doctor's immediate assistance was required.

Alexander hesitated no longer.

"We'll leave now. Wait," he told the youth and hurried to the gate.

Zhuchka was standing guard in the yard. She took several steps towards Alexander, wagging her tail affably, and head bowed shyly, saw him to the door.

Vasia emerged from the apartment, running to tell his father the news:

"Daddy! Some horsies have come . . ."

Alexander snatched up his son, kissed him on the forehead and pressed him tightly to his cheek. The youngster encircled his father's neck with his arms and looked into his father's eyes, asking:

"Will you go riding? Will you go riding a horsie?"

Nina was doing a new sketch in charcoal. Hearing her husband's footsteps, she emerged from behind the easel. She greeted Alexander as if nothing had happened the night before.

"Ah, what a nuisance — you're being called out again, Sasha dear! Maybe you'd like to eat first and rest, or even go tomorrow?" she said anxiously.

"I have to go now," Alexander answered sadly, kissing Vasia's cheek one more time and carefully returning him to the floor.

"How's mother?" he asked for something to say to his wife.

"All right. She's resting now . . . Why not have a bite to eat! It'll only take a minute . . ."

Alexander shook his head:

"There's no time."

"You never listen!" Nina sighed softly.

"I want to have a ride on the horsie! I want a ride, daddy!" Vasia begged affectionately, bending his head to one side.

"Later Vasia, later."

Alexander brushed his hand over Vasia's head and to avoid the temptation of staying a while longer with his son, rushed off to the dispensary to fetch his obstetric bag.

Alexander had neither the ability nor the inclination to ride horseback, but here in Uzbekistan collective farms were still unable to offer a doctor any better means of transport, so he had been forced to mount a horse on several occasions. You couldn't take all day to reach a patient by cart, sitting huddled up like a caged monkey!

Now was the busy time of the year and everyone was at work. For the full length of the road leading to the village where the 'Comintern' farm was, they came across nobody.

While Alexander dusted himself, the youth took both horses'

reins in one hand and with the other banged loudly on a gate with a tiny window.

"Ibrahim! Hey, Ibrahim!" he called into the yard.

"What's the matter — is it locked? His dog savage?" Alexander asked, impatient now to examine the woman in labour.

"No, he hasn't a dog . . . There's a woman in the house," the youth answered reluctantly and resumed banging energetically on the gate: "Hey, Ibrahim . . . !"

"Come on, what are we standing around for?" Alexander asked in surprise. "Lead the way!"

"No. It's the law. The owner must show us inside."

Meanwhile the gate creaked and before them appeared a slender handsome man in a smart robe tied at the waist with a scarf and invited them to enter. This was the master of the house, the farm accountant. His no longer youthful face smiled affably. Alexander saw neither fear nor alarm in his expression and thought everything had gone well without him.

"Has she given birth?" he asked in greeting.

The man's face darkened.

"No, she's in great agony . . ."

Alexander hurried into the house. In the end room a woman was groaning loudly. Though a spotless bed stood against the wall, she was squatting on the floor. A small wrinkled granny, also squatting, was fussing beside her. As soon as the doctor entered the room the old woman jumped up, shielded her face from the stranger with her hand, and scurried out noiselessly like a mouse. The slender man hesitated in the doorway, not daring to enter the room. The woman in labour threw her head back, wringing her fingers in unbearable pain. When the doctor ordered her onto the bed while putting on his coat, she submitted slowly and reluctantly.

Alexander moved her night-shirt up and seeing the extended crosswise swelling of the belly, he turned black.

"Transverse lie?!"

Intently he felt the swelling at the edges, and each touch of his fingertips against the taught skin of the belly confirmed his educated guess.

Sighing, he moved the wooden muzzle of the obstetric stethoscope over the fundus and a short distance above the distended navel heard the muffled beating of the infant's heart. 'The child's still alive,' he said to himself, 'but its position is definitely transverse . . .'

"Have the waters passed?" he asked the husband without

turning around.

"Waters?" The husband did not quite understand and darted outside to ask the youth to act as interpreter. But when Alexander turned away from the bed and slipped a thin rubber glove over his hand, he looked down accidentally and saw a damp, recently wiped stain on the spot where the woman had first been sitting. This told him everything. The waters had passed. In this state the woman would be unable to give birth on her own.

Such a case had not yet occurred during his practice. When he had been a student he had once seen a breech birth in the clinic, but there the pregnant woman had been placed in the ward beforehand, and everything was ready. The obstetrician ruptured the membranes in time, and keeping the woman under heavy sedation he turned the baby around deftly, and in a few minutes, like a magician, displayed the then easily born infant before the interns. That had been under clinical conditions, but here . . .

'And I wanted to send Taskira!' a late reproach flashed through his mind as he quickly began to swab the thin shiny glove with alcohol.

From the door the accountant responded quietly:

"Do you need boiling water? I've got some on the boil."

"How many children has she had?" Alexander asked in reply, leaning over the woman.

"This is the fifth," the man said from the doorway.

This too supported his diagnosis. Breech births usually occurred in women who had given birth several times previously. And when he began an internal inspection in the vagina, his fingertips immediately came upon a tiny slippery hand which had fallen from the uterus. No doubt remained in his mind . . .

The situation was extremely acute . . . A terrible danger hung over the life of the mother and her unborn child. He had to act. Alexander turned towards the door.

"When . . . ?" He was lost for words and pointed nervously at the large stain on the floor. "This, this — when?"

The husband quickly disappeared and a minute later yelled on the run from the adjacent room:

"One hour . . . " And then repeated quietly from the doorway: "About an hour ago . . . "

Alexander frowned. The waters had passed an hour ago. But had it been an hour? Could it have been longer, maybe? Either way the case had to be considered as neglected. The only thing to do was to deliver by Caesarian section in a hospital or to try to turn the

foetus on end alone. But this would involve a risk. A great risk! Stretched thin by prolonged futile contractions, the weak uterus walls might not withstand the pressure exerted upon them during such a sharp turning of the foetus. Then the uterus would rupture, there would be terrible haemorrhaging, exitus and death . . .

For a moment Alexander imagined the sour face of the regional gynecologist—obstetrician, Hrynkevych, his eyebrows raised high above his glasses, and heard his drawl: ‘You know, my friend, e-e-eh . . . if I were in your shoes I wouldn’t take such risks. Such pathology, especially in these primitive conditions . . . Why have an added death in your reports? Send her to us and shift the weight from your shoulders . . .’

‘Yes,’ Alexander started, ‘I’ll refer her to the hospital. A village doctor shouldn’t take on the responsibility when he has such obviously complicated pathology. Why put my reputation on the line, subject my name to the whispers of jealous colleagues who will hiss behind my back: ‘Went out of his depth, the presumptuous shallow-brain, laid a woman in her grave. Qualified obstetric help would have saved her in hospital . . .’ Besides,’ he realised, ‘I’ve got no anaesthetic with me, which authorities recommend should be used during such a manipulation.’

Alexander turned to the husband to voice his decision and to advise him to find transport quickly. But when he saw the man’s face, he stopped in mid-sentence. The strained look on those black eyes held so much alarm and blind faith in the doctor who would save his wife. Only now did Alexander realise that the smile on the man’s face when he had invited them inside was only forced Uzbek politeness, which placed hospitality above all else. Again Alexander hesitated. Look for a car? Where would they find one at this time of day, when everything was in the fields? And would Hrynkevych be in the hospital at such a late hour? Maybe they would have to look for him too? The danger increased with time. Another hour, hour and a half, and rupture would be inevitable . . .

A fresh powerful wave of contractions convulsed the woman on the bed. She uttered a delirious scream and stretched her imploring arms towards the doctor.

Alexander made up his mind.

‘Warm water! Soap! Quickly! Lay the woman across the bed! Support her head and shoulders!’ he gave orders sternly like a commander in a storm to the crazed husband and the small old woman who had again appeared in the room.

Alexander ran his hand over the distended female belly once

more, whispering to himself:

"Position two, anterior . . . The cervix is not fully dilated . . . Right! We'll risk it!"

Baring his arm to the elbow, he swabbed it liberally with iodine and took a deep breath.

For a minute the woman was quiet and the room filled with a tense silence.

With fingers drawn tightly together he carefully followed the tiny protruding arm, found the shoulder, then the chest, and stopped. Gently he applied pressure to the tiny slippery body and it slid back. 'The foetus is not fixed,' he thought with satisfaction and pushed his fingers further in. The woman groaned. Under his fingertips the umbilical cord pulsed rhythmically. 'Pulse present! The child is alive! Let's move more boldly now, Alexander!'

The woman writhed and began screaming, arching her back in pain.

Trying not to hear her delirious screams, which seemed to move the whole house, he quickly located the tiny foot and grabbed it at the ankle between his middle and fore-finger. Now everything was in the balance. He would either save her, or . . . He took a deep breath and raised his head. Intense goggle eyes were riveted to him. Horrified, the woman stared at the doctor — in his hands he held the balance between life and death.

"Bear with me! Just a little longer!" he said softly and pulled again at the foot.

An inhuman scream tore the air. The husband's face turned canvas white. The old woman quivered beside him. Alexander's breathing stopped. 'A rupture . . . ?' No, his hand could not detect this in the uterus. 'Just extreme pain. It is after all without anaesthetic! Then don't delay! Quick!' Disregarding the screams and writhing he pulled more resolutely at the small foot, gently nudging the fundus from the outside with his other hand. Running a sharp eye along the distended length of the belly, he sought in its configuration the menacing hour-glass profile — an external sign of uterus rupture. But the swelling of the belly took on a normal elongated appearance. There was no rupture! A little more and . . .

He glanced at the woman's face, deformed by pain, and whispered reassuringly:

"Just a little longer! A little longer, my dove!"

His hand, holding a pale infant's foot, was outside. And now a small slippery leg, like that of a frog, slid out up to the knee . . .

"We're almost there, turtle-dove! Just a bit more . . ." he said

in Russian, forgetting that the Uzbek woman could not understand him. But life's great instinct translated the doctor's words for her and she began to realise that death was retreating. Rising on her elbows and clutching the crumpled sheet in her fist, she studied the doctor's lips and executed his every command . . .

"Don't breathe! Strain yourself! A little more . . . More!"

A final weak scream filled the air and astride Alexander's hand appeared a tiny blue body, its head hanging limply to one side . . . Asphyxia. Blue asphyxia!

Alexander quickly slapped the child's bottom, his eyes searching for the syringe on the table. But the syringe wasn't needed. The room suddenly echoed a thin crying . . .

The father grew wide-eyed, unable to believe that everything was all right. The woman, mouth agape, listened intently to the new sounds in the room and her face gradually lit up with a bright smile. 'It's screaming — so it's alive! Now it's alive!' And even the petrified grandmother began to fuss about, looking gratefully at the oris-doctor who saved her daughter-in-law, no longer shielding her face from him.

Finishing with the umbilical cord, Alexander handed the small bawling infant to the old woman and cheerfully winked at the still motionless father:

"Bala!"

"Yakshi bala!" the old woman whispered, carrying the child out, and the father began to fuss joyfully.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his coat, Alexander descended heavily on a chair. He was suddenly seized with such fatigue, that he wanted neither to remove his coat, nor even to wash his dirty, sticky hands. He only wanted to drink. He softly asked for some water, and the man and the old woman rushed up to him, handing him a mug, a pitcher with a long thin neck and a copper bowl.

Alexander was thirstily gulping down the vapid channel water when the woman on the bed groaned quietly. He gave the old woman the mug and came up to the bed. The woman clenched her teeth, shook her tousled head about and suddenly drew a sigh of relief. On the blood-stained sheet lay the newly-born placenta in an azure-grey lump.

Overcoming his fatigue, Alexander carefully studied the shining placental surface, and pleased at finding no anomalies, turned to the woman.

Everything was fine here too: bleeding was slight, as it should

be after childbirth, the pulse was satisfactory, well filled, the temperature of 37.2 was quite permissible, especially after severe pain . . .

He looked at her face one last time, to say a cheery word in farewell, and met with her imploring gaze, which wordlessly called him closer. At first he did not understand, and bent over to ask her what was the matter. But the woman smiled wearily and said almost inaudibly:

“Rahmet . . .”

Alexander nodded to her and his eyes seemed to go damp. He smiled gratefully at the dark sky which peeped into the small window of the house and began to pull the rubber gloves off his hands.

Muffled steps on felt and the hushed talking of men came from the adjoining room. After Alexander had removed his coat, washed his hands and collected his instruments into his bag, the already cheerful host invited him to dinner with a sweeping motion of his hand. Alexander wanted to get home sooner, and he didn't like the fatty Uzbek pilaf, but so as not to offend the host, he accepted.

In the next room four villagers were sitting cross-legged on a carpet around a low table. Alexander joined them, awkwardly sitting down cross-legged on the carpet.

The host served them. For his age he moved around easily, and went into a third room, bringing out a plate of fried mutton and a large platter of rice. But first of all he brought out the familiar pitcher filled with water and the copper bowl. A towel was draped over his shoulder. Beginning with the old grandfather with the scanty white beard, he put the bowl before each person and poured water onto their hands. He did not omit to do the same to the doctor, even though he had just thoroughly washed his hands in the adjacent room, for such was the custom. When the washing ceremony was finished and the food placed on the table, the host joined the circle of men and the grandfather took over. He took a curved knife from his belt and solemnly cut the meat up so that there was a piece for each man present. After this he pompously handed out the large fatty pieces and righted the skull-cap on his head. Out of respect he served the doctor first; the host received his portion last. The grandfather grabbed a handful of rice from the platter, tapped it with his other hand and just as solemnly began slowly working his toothless jaws. The others began to eat after him. Because he was an 'oris', the doctor was given a metal spoon, and Alexander ate a little rice for appearances sake,

desisting from the mutton. Everyone ate in silence, only occasionally exchanging short praising remarks aimed at the pilaf, which was comparable to nothing. In all this time not one woman appeared in the room; even the busy old woman did not steal past.

After the grandfather, having satisfied his stomach, put his hands on his hips, the others stopped eating too. While the table was being cleared, the grandfather licked his greasy lips and studied the doctor with undisguised interest. He was the host's father-in-law, the father of the woman who had given birth. He had never visited the dispensary himself. There was no need for the faithful to go there! If malaria was cutting you down or any other misfortune attacked you, there was the mullah who would always help a sick person: and if it was the will of Allah, you would die at home or in hospital. It wasn't a good thing to turn to doctors, especially to unfaithful *orises* who ate pork and had even disowned their Isah-ibn-Mariam. Even today, when he had heard of the misfortune with his daughter, he advised Ibrahim to call the mullah, but Ibrahim, who had already taken in that unfaithful spirit too, preferred a doctor. And the old man could do nothing: his daughter was a severed piece, and Ibrahim, who had taken her for a wife, was now her master.

When the oris-doctor arrived, the old man sat in the son-in-law's yard, uneasily listening to the groans and shouts of his daughter. She had borne Ibrahim four children and had never known such suffering . . . No, Ibrahim had done wrong befouling her last moments on earth with the presence of the *oris*. A frail human hand was unable to avert the will of the Almighty Allah . . .

But the oris-doctor had averted it. Think of it, he had saved his daughter's life, after the shadow of death had already fallen on her forehead!

And now studying the doctor, the old man could not stop wondering why Allah had agreed to give this young person such power? True, the doctor didn't appear to be an evil person, but still, he belonged to the unfaithful, whose accomplice was Satan himself!

When the host took the leftover meat and the remaining rice into the first room for the women to eat and brought out tea, the old man asked the doctor out of politeness whether there were grapes in his fatherland. Receiving an answer, that it grew in some parts, he nodded his head and lifted the *phiala* with tea to his drawn out lips.

Everyone took to the tea, although the host ran to the first room from time to time, offering dried apricots and figs, and finally

brought last season's rockmelon. Everything he placed closer to the doctor, thus emphasising that the doctor was the guest of honour.

Alexander had long felt a discomfort in his back, his feet were numb from the unusual practice of sitting cross-legged, and he began to think of how to excuse himself from this long entertainment quickly, without being discourteous. He ate a slice of the rockmelon, hardskinned as a pumpkin, and thanking the host and excusing himself because he was in a hurry, rose to his feet with pleasure. A young man sitting beside him, who had been heartily tucking into everything being offered, in silence, rose too. As it turned out he was the driver of the farm transport and was specially invited for the pilaf, to take the doctor home afterwards.

As he went outside through the first room, Alexander saw the women in the corner. They ate in the twilight standing up, and whispered about something amongst themselves. Seeing the doctor, they stopped eating and for appearances turned their backs to him. The women looked sad, as if driven into a corner to finish off the dinner, and their appearance moved in a cloud over Alexander's good humour after the successful visit . . .

The host saw him into the street and from time to time, pressing his hands against his breast, kept repeating continuously: "Rahmet! Rahmet, doctor!" He supported Alexander by the elbow, helping him to enter the cabin of the vehicle, bowed respectfully and pressed his hands to his breast once more.

The vehicle drove off and in twenty minutes was at the hospital gates.

CHAPTER 21

It was growing dark and a full moon rose slowly in the cloudless dark-blue sky, when Alexander went inside. The rooms were filled with the night's stillness. Vasia and Alexander's mother were asleep. Bored, Nina was leafing through old issues of 'Krokodil'. Hearing the door creak, she moved the magazines away and looked intently at her husband. In the past twenty-four hours he had somehow wilted and become perceptibly thinner. 'Perhaps,' she thought, 'I overdid things a little yesterday . . . '

In talking to her husband she was accustomed, with mixed success, to using medical terms, and with her pyoderma had long since replaced ordinary pimples, colds and coughing had become an influenzal condition, a fool was a defective, and dumbness had become oligophrenia; and now when she thought of her husband, these terms flowed into her head: 'A reaction is present,' Nina ascertained, catching the look of Alexander's devastated eyes which rested on her forehead for a moment.

Deliberating which tactics were best to employ towards her husband, she decided that kisses and hugs which had helped earlier in such instances were now dangerous. She would succeed better by employing soothing words to try and neutralise the harsh after-taste of their night conversation.

"Probably a needless trip, eh? Nothing exceptional, I bet?" she asked, artfully adding intonations of pity and concern.

"No, it was a difficult breech birth . . ." Alexander replied quietly, seeking a free hook on the stand on which to hang his cap.

"The Uzbeks can't do anything properly! Breaking legs on flat ground, trying to bear children sideways . . . What a people!" And Nina sighed. "Still, the nightingale will not be sated on songs," she hastened to add and rose from her chair.

"Actually, I've had dinner . . ."

Alexander wearily rubbed his hand over his forehead.

"What did they give you? Pilaf, probably, which you don't

eat. Rubbish!" And she disappeared into the kitchen.

Alexander looked about the room. Everything was as it had always been: the cheval-glass, the double bed, the wardrobe, the easel, his wife's paintings on the walls . . . Yet still he couldn't shrug off the strange feeling of having walked unexpectedly into a stranger's house at this late hour. Now that his wife emerged, he had to consider how to conduct himself . . .

In the corner Vasia giggled in his sleep and grew silent. Alexander tip-toed to the cot and looked at his small son through the mosquito netting. The youngster wriggled, throwing back his arms and smiled with his tiny mouth open. Maybe he was dreaming of his father? Or he may have heard the grandmother's entreat, 'Peasie-beansie'. His son's bright, carefree dream brought Alexander home.

By the time Nina brought in a plate-covered frying pan and clinked about in the cupboard, getting a knife and fork, he felt completely at home with his family.

"Odarka Pylypivna and I prepared some stuffed tomatoes for you today," said Nina, knowing that though he was indifferent to the culinary creations of his mother, her husband still preferred this dish.

His wife's level behaviour, devoid of deceptively fired passion, as Alexander had fearfully expected from experience, had a soothing effect on him. He really began to think that there had been no unpleasant scene yesterday or grave thoughts today. To his own amazement he hungrily set about the grilled tomatoes drenched with cream.

Gradually Alexander became talkative, and revealed that in the next few days they were expecting the arrival of the new superintendent of Provincial Health, who would probably visit them too. Nina sat on her knees in a chair, and resting her elbows on the table, listened attentively.

"Is he Russian or Uzbek?" she inquired.

"From the name, I'd say he was Uzbek — Khodjayevev."

"Then he's as much a noodle as Akhmetjanov!"

"On the contrary. Akhmetjanov is only a medical assistant, whereas this fellow is a surgeon. And it's said he's a good one. Even after becoming superintendent, he continues to practice. He still does many involved abdominal operations in the provincial hospital."

"I just can't imagine an Uzbek working as a doctor, especially as a surgeon or a gyneacologist."

"Why not?" Alexander objected. "There are fine Uzbek doctors, engineers, agronomists . . ."

"You know, each nation has its calling: the Chinese cultivate tea, gypsies tell fortunes, Jews trade . . ."

"Come on, come on!" Alexander interrupted her, fighting to maintain his tact. "You reason," he said softly, "like the author of an old children's book described in one of Gorky's works. Well, this author wrote: 'In China all the population is Chinese, even the emperor is Chinese.' See Nina, you must . . ."

"You must look at things realistically, not through books and newspapers!" Nina interjected enthusiastically. "I can perhaps envisage an Uzbek as a teacher, an actor, even a poet (though people say they write boring verse), but a doctor, an engineer, or an artist — never! I would never entrust my health to an Uzbek. Never! It just doesn't suit them."

'Nonsense!' Alexander wanted to say, seeing that the more they talked, the more absurd Nina's assertions became, but it was a pity to upset the peculiar harmony and family cosiness which he had regained with such difficulty that day. He checked himself and said quietly:

"That's being naive, Nina."

Nina rose from her chair to be in a more comfortable position to argue, but just as she was about to open her mouth, a dog began howling in the yard.

"B-r-r, what an unpleasant sound!" Nina shuddered, as if she was cold. "Creepy almost . . . Why keep such a monster in the yard?"

Alexander rose from the table and walked to the window. Through the netting he could make out Zhuchka howling in the middle of the yard, her muzzle lifted towards the moon. Nina gave Alexander an alarmed look and listening to the howling, whispered:

"I think this prophesies something bad . . ."

"Rubbish!" Alexander said, though the dog's lament made him uneasy too, and to dispell the depressing feeling which filled the room and seemed to be a premonition of some calamity, he forced a laugh.

"Howling to Khodjaye's coming. I'll probably cop it properly from him for some trifle."

But this did not calm Nina. She shook her head doubtfully and asked loudly into the next room, where the mother-in-law was sleeping:

"What does it mean, Odarka Pylypivna, when a dog howls

like that?"

The old woman was not asleep after all. She too had obviously been listening to the howling, for she replied at once:

"It means there will be a misfortune — a fire or a death . . ."

"There, see!" Nina said, turning to her husband, completely in agreement with her mother-in-law this time.

"I'm scared, Sasha dear . . ." she whispered fearfully, cuddling up to her husband.

"Stupid superstitions!" Alexander said loudly to break the heavy silence in which the dog's eerie howling, filled with hopeless grief, could be clearly heard.

"I'll scare her away!" he said and strode from the room.

In the middle of the yard, her tail mournfully drawn in, and crouching as if shaking with fever, Zhuchka stood with her side to Alexander and howled at the moon.

"Go away, Zhuchka! Git!"

Alexander bent down as if to get a stick, but Zhuchka did not move. She only stopped howling and turned her muzzle towards Alexander. In the moonlight Alexander clearly saw her doleful bent form and he saw in the dog's only eye such a deep, painful, almost human sorrow, that this heart ached and a cold shiver slithered down his spine.

Zhuchka slowly moved her head from side to side, as if wanting to recapture in vain something forever lost in the fresh night air, then turned and quietly walked away.

A minute later she was howling in the far corner of the yard and Alexander again saw her raised muzzle, as if Zhuchka was weeping in earnest and complaining to the heavens about some inconsolable canine grief . . .

CHAPTER 22

From the street, through the open window, came the rattle of a motor which was silenced outside the hospital gate.

Alarmed, Taskira rose anxiously from her desk and made for the window.

"Someone to see us, Alexander Ivanovich! Probably Khodjayeve and the committee . . ." she said in a low voice and grew pale. Taskira had visited the district town on Sunday and heard all kinds of horrors about the new superintendent of health.

Alexander had scarcely finished making an entry on a patient's dispensary card when, before he could file it, the door opened and a man dressed in a plain cotton jacket and matching pants and cap, entered the room with a firm confident step. He was followed by the district mariologist PISOCHKINA, carefully sniffing at the air in the dispensary.

"Greetings, colleague, I'm the new superintendent of health," Khodjayeve said simply, with a hardly discernible eastern accent. He took off his cap and offered Alexander a wide strong hand. "And this, obviously . . ." he turned to Taskira, who was frozen with fright and becoming as red as a peony.

"Our assistant. She's also in charge of the local tropical centre," Alexander introduced a totally embarrassed Taskira.

"Bettering our fight against malaria? Good! We need women like her!" Khodjayeve said cheerfully, shaking Taskira's small hand, which she offered uncertainly to the formidable superintendent, her forefinger sticking out.

Taskira was awaiting loud pomposity, the arrival of a committee with Khodjayeve, a whole escort of doctors and secretaries, but seeing instead a not-so-frightening man in the company of PISOCHKINA, whom she already knew, she was so disconcerted, that for no reason at all she whispered a 'thank you' in answer to Khodjayeve's greeting and turned a brighter red.

"I'm doing the rounds of the districts to see how prepared we

are for the cotton harvest this year."

Khodjayeve sat down on a chair which PISOCHKINA ingratiatingly offered him, and thanking her, continued as if informing an old friend:

"It's almost August and the cotton harvest will begin soon. That is when we have our greatest outbreaks of damned malaria."

Alexander listened to the superintendent and studied his face. Really, it was somewhat stern — a wide, slightly protruding chin attested to his energy and determination; two curved wrinkles, running from his nose to the corners of the mouth, and his tightly pursed lips, showed Khodjayeve to be an independent and resolute person; his black bushy animated eyebrows, which often met at the bridge of his nose, created a general impression of a strong, perhaps even a dark nature. With their sullen appearance, these bushy eyebrows eclipsed the small brown eyes, which at first seemed inconspicuous, but when Alexander looked closer he saw they were quite bright and even gentle.

"On the way in I noticed your young orchard; whose work?" Khodjayeve asked with interest.

"Ours. All of us. Using our own resources."

"Great, great!" Khodjayeve praised him and picked up a magazine. But in a minute he lifted his head and asked:

"The bricks and timber in the yard, are they for renovations? District Health's endeavour?"

"No, the voluntary pledge of the collective farms of two village councils. We're building a maternity block."

"Voluntary pledge?" Khodjayeve was unable to hide his amazement and delight. "But this is great! And you have a resolution?"

"Yes," answered Alexander with a slight grin.

Khodjayeve grinned too.

"Resolutions make a lot of difference. In Uzbekistan, the main thing is to have a document. A piece of paper often has a hypnotic effect on many people. Though to drag things out, to delay and procrastinate, even when there is a resolution — they know these things here too. Great specialists when it comes to red tape!" Khodjayeve laughed with a joyful sparkle in his eyes. "But tell me, how did you manage it?"

Alexander briefly recounted how he had seen the resolution through at the meeting of the Akhunbabayev Collective Farm management and how he had received unexpected support from Nazira Babadjanov. Khodjayeve almost leapt from his chair several times while listening to Alexander.

"A village maternity block is a new thing in Uzbekistan. This should not only be praised, but also encouraged. Have you written about it to the press?"

"No, I make a bad journalist," replied Alexander.

"I understand," Khodjayevev nodded his head, "modesty won't let you write about yourself. But there are times when modesty is irrelevant, when it must be pushed aside . . . All right! I'll write about it myself to the republic newspapers and *The Medical Worker*." And he resumed leafing through the magazine in his lap.

At her desk Taskira was whispering to PISOCHKINA, explaining something. Suddenly she turned uncertainly to the doctor.

"Alexander Ivanovich, we need the malaria journal . . ."

"By the way, I would like to have a look at the discharge journal," Khodjayevev tore himself from his reading.

"It's at home. I was preparing the monthly report yesterday." Alexander nodded at Taskira: "Would you fetch them. On my desk on the right."

In a few minutes Taskira returned with the journals, but before Khodjayevev had finished studying the first page, Nina appeared in the surgery door.

"Why aren't you inviting the guests in, Sasha? Lunch is ready."

"Please, I'd like you to meet my wife," Alexander introduced Nina to Khodjayevev, overawed at how she had learned about the superintendent's arrival, and managed to change and even paint her lips.

"I don't know about the others, but Maria Andriyivna ought to be glad at the invitation," joked Khodjayevev, smiling good-naturedly at PISOCHKINA. "I've been tormenting her with hunger from six this morning. We've visited two field centres and three medical outposts . . ."

"Wonderful!" Nina smiled affably, meanwhile unobtrusively studying Khodjayevev's face with interest. Only please excuse me, it's a very simple meal. You can't get anything here . . ."

"Well, then! If the woman of the house is inviting us, we must submit," Khodjayevev folded the magazine, took his cap and followed Nina.

Zhuchka was back in the yard, waiting for Ismail to lock the dispensary door. The appearance of strangers who took no notice of her and moved boldly across the hospital grounds as if they were at home, attracted Zhuchka's attention. She pricked up her ears in bewilderment, but seeing Alexander with the strangers, she calmed

down. Gazing intently at Khodjayeve, she sniffed at the air, grasping in her own way the importance of the stranger and his right to walk about the yard so freely outside of working hours. Zhuchka lowered her tail and wandered off.

Alexander's mother stood not far from the kitchen door beside the bowl of leftovers and followed Zhuchka with sad eyes.

"Who are you feeding, gran?" Khodjayeve asked affably, coming up to her. "I can't see any ducks or geese . . ."

"No, it's for the dog, but for some reason it won't take anything three days now . . ."

Seeing the bowl with the leftovers, Nina gasped: 'She did it on purpose! Undeniably. The old witch has brought the bowl outside on purpose,' she fumed, and so that the mother-in-law would not compromise them any further with foolish phrases, she hurried to open the front door. Still, Khodjayeve paused and turned questioningly to Alexander.

"My mother," Alexander said in reply to his gaze, also looking sideways at the inopportune bowl.

Khodjayeve bowed and respectfully shook the dry, bony hand which the old woman wiped against her apron just in case, before offering it to the visitor.

She liked the visitor. She too had found out from her daughter-in-law that superiors had come to see Sashko and this left her a little anxious. Even though she was still weak and did not feel the best, she helped all she could in the kitchen, so the superiors would be pleased. The superior showed himself to be less haughty than she had imagined; he was clearly an ordinary person, without airs. And the old woman relaxed, pleasantly thinking that everything would go well for Sashko with such a superior.

Seeing Vasia by the window, unable to take his eyes off the canvas-covered jeep outside, Khodjayeve went over to him.

"Well, let's be friends!"

Vasia pouted suspiciously at the dark stranger.

"What are you: a doctor, engineer, or pilot?" Khodjayeve asked, squatting before Vasia, and offered him his wide dark hand. "Come on, give me your small paw."

Vasia looked apprehensively at the outstretched hand with black hairs and asked fearfully:

"Are you a bogey man?"

"A bogey man?" Khodjayeve asked in surprise. "Why should I be a bogey man?"

But Nina was already hurrying towards them to subdue Vasia.

"You should be ashamed! You bad boy!" And afraid Khodjayevev might be offended by the 'bogey man' title, immediately began to justify herself.

"Granny scares him when he misbehaves, saying the bogey man will take him away in a sack . . . You can't look after them all!"

Nina was not telling the truth: it was she, not her mother-in-law, who had scared the boy in this way when he was too mischievous, and Vasia had already opened his mouth to refute his mother's lie. But at this moment Khodjayevev let out a roar of laughter.

"So that's the bogey man you have!" He picked Vasia up in his arms. "Yes, I'm the bogey man! A very angry bogey man. I take all the children who don't listen to their granny or mother away in my car."

"Take me too!" Vasia begged, having begun to like this merry, amusing bogey man, but Nina carried him outside for Taskira to look after, so the youngster wouldn't upset anyone over lunch.

When they sat down at the table, Nina took the running of the meal into her own hands. Like any hospitable housewife, having filled the plates with soup, she kept inviting Khodjayevev to eat, leaving Pisochkina in the care of her husband and his mother.

The old woman was sorry that she was unable to treat such a pleasant superior. Sitting beside him, she assiduously took advantage of the small opportunities left to her and diligently kept offering the guest bread and salt. Then, remembering that their guest was an Uzbek and like all Uzbeks probably liked to pepper his food, she dashed into the kitchen for some pepper. She even livened up and broke into conversation with the guest. In vain Nina had several times sought her mother-in-law's ancient slippers under the table, to give her a sign to be quiet and stop upsetting the guest's meal with her nonsense. But Khodjayevev's feet were in the way and boiling inside with powerless fury, she heard her mother-in-law forgetting her place and asking Khodjayevev:

"Have you ever tried our Ukrainian borsch?"

To tear the guest away from her annoying mother-in-law, Nina stretched her hand towards Khodjayevev's plate, even though it was full to the brim, and smiled amiably:

"I'll fill it up."

"Thanks, thanks, I've got enough," Khodjayevev brushed her off and turned to the old woman again.

"I've had occasion to try it in restaurants. Ukrainian borsch is delicious."

"Eh, those restaurants!" the old woman waved her hand.

"Do you think they can cook anything? That's not borsch! When you come here again, let me know in advance. So I can find some red beets. Borsch isn't borsch without beetroot. Then you'll have a feed of borsch! Real borsch! And cheese *varenyks* with cream . . . In those restaurants — ha! They're only after your money!"

"You'll make me burst, Odarka Pylypivna! But why aren't you having anything yourself? You must eat. Look how thin you are."

"I can't . . ."

"Why not?" the guest asked in surprise.

"I have great difficulty in swallowing."

"Have you told your son about this?" the guest asked, looking closely at her.

The old woman wiped the saliva from the corners of her mouth with her fingers and shook her head.

"No. What for? Sashko has enough worries as it is . . ."

"Really! Your son's a doctor and . . ."

"You see I felt a bit better before, but now it's worse . . . Before I only had trouble swallowing hard things, but now I can hardly manage porridge. But with water — I feel I could drink all the canals dry . . ."

"So thirsty?" the guest asked, leaving his food and turning towards the old woman.

"Yes, my word. I've got such a thirst sometimes . . ."

Nina could stand it no longer:

"Odarka Pylypivna, you're keeping Sayid Mukhtarovich from his food. Why don't you bring in the second course . . ."

"Wait! Khodjayeve stopped her sharply, raising his hand above the table, and turned to the old woman again.

"Tell me, does it hurt when you eat?" he asked sullenly, studying the face, hands and the whole afflicted, extremely thin figure of the old mother.

"It hurts now."

"Where exactly?"

"Here," and the old woman prodded herself in the upper part of the chest.

"And how long has this been troubling you?"

"Half a year, maybe longer . . ."

The guest's face darkened, his thick eyebrows met at the bridge of his nose and a stern furrow appeared between them.

Nina, who hadn't taken her eyes from Khodjayeve, noticed the change in his expression and became worried. Had her mother-in-law foolishly let something slip which had offended the guest? She was

so tactless!

Alexander had wanted to talk to the superintendent too, but between Khodjayeve and him sat Pischkina, who questioned him in detail about the recent outbreak of malarial coma in the village. Replying to Pischkina, and lending an ear at the same time to Khodjayeve's voice, Alexander only noticed that Khodjayeve seemed to be talking far too long with his mother. After Pischkina ran out of questions and set about the rest of her soup, he caught Khodjayeve's last words:

"All right, Odarka Pylypivna, we'll talk some more about it after lunch."

"What's this about?" Alexander asked. Khodjayeve threw a short sullen questioning look at him.

"Haven't you heard what Odarka Pylypivna has just been telling me?"

"No. What's the matter?" asked Alexander, not comprehending and wondering at the sudden change in the director's expression. Khodjayeve sighed and looked at Alexander with what appeared to him a scornful look. Then he turned to the old woman.

"Tell us about your complaints again."

At the word 'complaints' Nina glared destructively at her mother-in-law, then transferred her indignant eyes to Alexander, as if to say, how can anyone be so insolent?

Alexander stared incredulously at his mother, unable to comprehend a thing. Pischkina moved the emptied plate away and turned her nose in Khodjayeve's direction.

Realising she had become the centre of attention, the mother became startled, embarrassed and would have gladly been buried alive rather than have to repeat everything she had spilled so indiscreetly to Sashko's superior. The daughter-in-law glared straight at her with undisguised hatred.

"I . . . well, it's nothing much . . ."

And she began to wipe the saliva from the corners of her mouth with the tips of her fingers. It appeared on her lips today as if on purpose.

"Well out with it, Odarka Pylypivna, now that you've begun!" Nina said in the tone of a judge, who had already made up his mind about a criminal and had prepared a deserving sentence for him . . .

Khodjayeve looked questioningly at Nina, then at Alexander, sighed and obviously guessing at the mother's status in the family, said quietly:

"All right. We'll talk about it later . . ."

The rest of lunch passed gloomily, almost oppressively. Khodjayevev was silent and picked more at the food with his fork than he ate. To fill the unpleasant silence Alexander began telling PISOCHKINA loudly about another outbreak of malarial coma. But the woman listened inattentively and twice took guarded sniffs at the air; even Nina, despite all her ability and desire, could not pretend as if nothing had happened.

Rising from the table after lunch, Khodjayevev thanked Nina dryly and immediately took Alexander by the elbow and led him away to a far corner.

"Haven't you ever examined your mother?"

Alexander was unprepared for such a question and hesitated with his reply a second or two.

"I understand — we doctors are always treating others, paying little attention to our own ailments and the diseases of people close to us. We even consciously avoid treating our kin, especially if we suspect something serious, but still . . . Has your mother never complained to you about her malady? Haven't you noticed yourself that she isn't too well?"

"Actually, I've often established the relapse of tropical malaria in mother, which has given rise, in my opinion, to acute anemia . . ." Alexander began shakily, as if justifying himself, still unable to comprehend what the superintendent was driving at. But Khodjayevev stopped him:

"Granted, granted . . . This could be so. But let's go to her."

Astonished, as if emerging from a trance, Alexander walked up with Khodjayevev to his mother, who was clearing the table, and looked at her uneasily. For the first time he suddenly saw her thinness so vividly. Surprised, as if someone had substituted his usual picture of his mother, he examined her bony, yellow, almost wax-like hands, her wrinkled neck, the wan complexion of her sagging cheeks . . .

Sensing that the conversation was about her again, the mother gave an embarrassed smile, but it was so miserable and distressed that it seemed she might burst into tears at any moment. This impression was strengthened by the mother's continued action of bringing her hand to her mouth to wipe her moist lips.

"What's the matter, mother?" Alexander asked softly, perceiving more as a son than as a doctor, that his mother really was not well.

"I don't know, my mouth won't stop dribbling today . . . It's embarrassing!" the mother said hurriedly, so they wouldn't ask any

more questions, but Khodjayeve seized on this and quietly pointed out to Alexander:

"This, actually, is also one of the symptoms . . ." And then aloud to the old woman:

"Tell us, Odarka Pylypivna, do you have constipation?"

The gentle voice and good, warm look of Sashko's superior cheered up the old woman.

"Oh, that happens!" she lit up, as if pleased that she had constipation, about which the fine guest inquired. "At times it drags on for two, maybe three days . . ."

"Another symptom," Khodjayeve looked knowingly at Alexander.

"Show me again where it hurts when you swallow."

Nina had gone outside to fetch Vasia, and the old woman willingly turned back the edge of her dress near the collar and pointed to the top of her breast-bone, which showed clearly through the thin dry skin.

"Here."

Khodjayeve tapped the skin with his bent finger.

"Hurt?"

"Yes . . ." the mother answered softly.

"And now," Khodjayeve said, turning towards Alexander, "when we add dysphagia to this, pain under the breast-bone during swallowing, then thirst, sialorrhea, and finally a general cachectic appearance . . ."

"What do you suspect?" a pale Alexander asked in a whisper, already guessing at Khodjayeve's diagnosis, and his mouth went dry.

"In this case, doesn't the possibility of . . ." Khodjayeve paused, led Alexander away several steps, and finished quietly: "the possibility of, say, *cancer oesophagi* come to mind . . .?"

Alexander's breathing stopped and he stared into Khodjayeve's face with open eyes full of horror. Khodjayeve prudently took him by the elbow and quietly escorted him into the study.

They stood in silence beside the desk for several minutes. Checking his own emotions, Khodjayeve gazed pensively outside and said calmly:

"Of course, until we x-ray her and do some exploratory work, we can say nothing definite. This is only a supposition, a likely guess . . . We mustn't discount the possibility of a functional disorder of the oesophagus, the possibility of a new growth of mediastinum, or finally even aortic aneurism . . . Of course, you realise this yourself . . ." Khodjayeve eyed Alexander sympathetically and finished in a

subdued voice: "The symptoms are very suspicious . . ."



If this had not been his mother, but somebody else, he would have felt disappointed, as a doctor, that the disease had been diagnosed by another doctor and not by him. He would have been displeased and ashamed before the superintendent of health that he had overlooked cancer in a patient where the symptoms had been so obvious that the case could be called a 'textbook cancer' — easily detected by even an inexperienced medical student. But this was his mother, a mother who had lived by his side, whom he saw each day, a mother who withered, wasted and was dying before his eyes, and he had noticed nothing! Noticed nothing — neither as a doctor nor a son . . . How could this have happened?

Not as a doctor now, but rather as a person whose mother was dangerously ill, he no longer doubted the accuracy of the terrible diagnosis. He recollected how his mother had recently refused some sausage, then taken a small piece and been sick. And he remembered many other details which had earlier become mechanically fixed in his mind. Then he had attached little significance to them, but now they confirmed the diagnosis with implacable objectivity. They flooded back one after another and he kept asking himself: 'How could it have happened, how could I have not noticed a thing?'

Everything happening about him now seemed to be veiled in a dense mist. He heard Khodjayevev telling him that the thorax had to be x-rayed as soon as possible, telling him to take leave at once. Alexander realised the others knew about his mother's ailment too, for PISOCHKINA was persuading the old woman to go to the regional centre the next day and promised to send a horse and cart for her from the tropical centre. He even heard his wife whisper to PISOCHKINA: "Is it contagious?" But it all seemed so remote to him, as if it was being enacted on stage in some heavy drama, where he had already played his role and the others were still acting . . .

His brain only accepted words, unable to decipher their meaning, casting them carelessly aside. He stood face to face with the bared pain of reality, so frightful in its truth: his mother was suffering from cancer, cancer of the oesophagus — one of the most serious and hopeless forms of cancer, especially in advanced cases.

Again and again the question to which he could find no answer kept emerging: how could this have happened?

CHAPTER 23

At his request, a bed was made on the sofa in the study, but he could not sleep. His mother was asleep behind the curtain, or at least pretended to be. Alexander strained his ears to hear her breathing, but there was silence behind the curtain.

His mother would still live a while — two, three months, perhaps half a year, maybe even longer, but she was already doomed. Slowly but ceaselessly a dreadful destruction was spreading through her frail body. Nothing, nothing except a timely surgical scalpel could stop it. Timely . . . Cancer of the oesophagus did not manifest itself at the outset and the first symptoms, a sufferer's first complaints appeared only after the disease was at an advanced stage. Mother never complained. Even today she asked neither Khodjayevev, nor Alexander after Khodjayevev's departure, about the disease Sashko's superior had detected in her. She must have noticed Alexander trying unsuccessfully to control himself and be calm.

When, oh when could this insidious unmerciful disease have begun? Alexander tried to remember just when his mother had begun to pine away, when her mood had changed, when she had become sad and taciturn. But it seemed that ever since he had taken her in, his mother had remained unchanged: thin, silent, and sorrowful. But today, from this evening, something else came between them, sharply isolating his mother from everything that lived and would live. Like a live third being this something was now in the room, invisible. It lurked behind the curtains beside his mother's bed and was noiselessly ousting his sad submissive mother from this life. This something had brought an air of doom and inevitability into the apartment. Even Nina had changed abruptly, speaking only in whispers, stealing fearful glances at her mother-in-law, sighing affectedly and not allowing the mother-in-law to do a thing. She brought the dinner in from the kitchen herself, but apart from her and Vasia nobody touched the food. She made her mother-in-law's bed, beating the mattress and the pillows well so the old woman

would have a softer bed, and was not a bit surprised when Alexander asked her to make him a separate bed in the room where his mother slept. But his wife's zeal and desire to please, displayed in so many little things, only tended to reinforce the feeling that everything was over, that his mother was dying and his wife was only hurrying to dispatch her decorously on the final journey . . . This irritated him and when his wife passed nearby he tried to avoid her gaze.



Yes, mother did not complain of anything. She never bewailed her fate. And when fate, which coddled some while unfairly ignoring others, thrust new sorrows and misfortunes at her, she only said sadly: 'It was destined to be . . . The future's not ours to choose. . .' With striking submission she bore her sorrow, her love, her broken solitary life to an uncertain goal . . .

Even today, if Alexander had explained everything to her about the disease, objectively painting the helplessness of her situation, she probably would have sighed and repeated: 'It was destined to be . . .'

Father was destined to die early, when Alexander and his older brother Kostia were only boys. Their father left them a quality Belgian hunting rifle, pedigree dogs, a bicycle, some clothes reeking of naphthalene, and worn furniture. There was also an old cow which their mother, it seemed, had once brought into the household as part of her dowry. That was all. Shortly afterward the sons had to go off to high school. Kostia, the elder, left for Kiev, while the younger, Sashko, travelled all the way to Moscow. Their mother was left alone. 'The future's not ours to choose!' She never imagined that having had children, sons, she would have to spend the last years of her life alone, and she couldn't comprehend why people had to travel to the ends of the earth for an education. Couldn't one study in Pereyaslav, or at least in Rzhyschcha or Kaniv, or even in Poltava? However she did not thwart her sons and, by selling off their father's things, things from which the sons had taken a bicycle and rifle for amusement without thinking twice, the mother found a way to send her sons money every month.

So senselessly, while a student in second year at the veterinary institute, Kostia suddenly died in three days from a perforated appendix. Mother survived this also. Only now her love and everything tying her to life concentrated on Sashko. Sashko continued studies at the medical institute. Only two or three times during his

course did he call on mother in quaint old Pereyaslav, which slept peacefully between the Alta and Trubizh rivers. But the student could not last long in that dark boredom, where even his brain seemed to waste away for want of better things to do. And in those few days no new thoughts were born inside him. He couldn't wait to return to effervescent, bubbling Moscow, to its crowded railway stations, streets and squares, museums and libraries, stadiums and theatres, to the mighty bubbling pulse of the planet, a small cell of which he already felt himself to be. His mother did not hold him back. Her son aimed for the wide paths of life, so why should he sit amongst the burdock and nettles of Pereyaslav's backwaters? The son appeared briefly, but before his mother had time to see him properly he returned to Moscow, leaving his mother standing alone in an unsealed street in Pereyslav's outer district, her hand shielding her eyes from the sun.

He knew that everything that could be sold at home had already been sold long ago, and there was actually no more home, for his mother had taken in boarders, leaving herself only a tiny cubby. Although he received a scholarship, his mother continued to send him money. It was a mystery where she obtained it and how she managed to survive herself. But he took the money without thinking twice, as if it was his due.

After graduating from the institute and marrying in Moscow, he came to visit his mother for three days and then proceeded straight to his doctor's appointment. He arrived alone, without his wife, without a 'daughter-in-law' as his mother had wanted. Although Nina had nothing against seeing the 'periphery' and perhaps even catching something on canvas if anything interesting turned up, he was ashamed to show his city wife either the squalor his mother lived in or antiquated Pereyaslav. And so he had not taken his wife along.

Only then did he find out that his mother went out to do washing, to white wash walls and to scrub floors. In spring she dug gardens like a servant girl, and even chopped wood in winter . . . His cheeks flushed a deep crimson in belated shame for squandering his mother's money on fashionable yellow shoes, a velvet hat and a leather briefcase, on gay evenings with vodka and wine in the company of male and female friends. Yet even then he did not refuse his mother's present — a new light overcoat for himself and muslin for a dress for the daughter-in-law. Thanking his mother and hiding his embarrassment, he tried the coat on to the old woman's delight and was pleased with it. The coat was just what he needed

at the start of his doctor's career. Only it was a pity it was so old-fashioned, for new styles were now appearing in Moscow. So as not to burn with shame in front of his wife over his mother's simple-hearted present, which revealed her squalor, he flogged the muslin at the nearest market at half price. Flogged it and forgot about it. And with time forgot about the coat too, as he had forgotten about the fashionable shoes. His child's toys were forgotten much sooner, as were mother's hot meat *pyrizhoks*. All had existed long, long ago, at the dawn of his life . . .

All was forgotten.

'Am I really so stale, such an egoist?' he asked himself, going cold. And seeking justification, added: 'Or was it the usual egoism of youth about which so many books have been written? How heartless and . . . cruel this egoism is!'

He sighed heavily and turned over, while bitter memories continued to surface and parade silently before him.

Like many others, he had accepted since childhood the ancient unwritten law that mothers are supposed to love their children, to sacrifice their lives for them, to renounce everything for their children's sake, to look into their eyes with a saintly motherly love which children do not value, but by which they are often even irritated. Until now he had not been an exception. But from this day the difference was that mothers of other people were living and would continue to live for a long time, while his mother was already departing from this life, just when he had finally grasped the irredeemable price of her great silent love. He was terribly indebted to his mother, but his mother was already leaving him, going into nonexistence, demanding nothing for herself. Now there was no way he could repay his debt. It was too late to break off the best piece of himself and radiantly hand it to his sad, smiling mother . . . It was like Zhuchka giving the chicken entrails to her already grown pup. Again he remembered the words his mother had used then about Zhuchka: 'Look, she's taken the best piece, something she would have gladly eaten herself!'

Unlike Zhuchka, he had not given his mother such morsels! In fact he hadn't even known what his poor sick mother ate, when she should have been on a strict diet!

Something hard moved up to his throat and stopped there. He raised his head from the pillow and listened to his mother's breathing. It was quiet behind the curtain even now. A late waning moon peered sadly through the branches into the room and in its deathly greenish light the room and the things in it seemed even

more melancholy. It seemed as if not only Alexander, but these things too understood that the mother was being isolated from them and would soon leave the room forever.

Suddenly Zhuchka began howling outside again. Alexander winced from the cold which shot up his spine and rose to his feet. His mother stirred behind the curtain.

"Don't hit her Sashko!" she begged softly. "It's because of me . . ." And she finished mutely. "She's grieving . . ."

The usual motherly voice he knew was now different, already alienated, sounding as if it had broken the silence not from behind the curtain, but from the other side of the border which people cross only once, never to return . . .

The hard lump in his throat rose and was joined by a second, and a third. A scream fought to escape his chest:

'Mum, mummy, don't die!'

It required great strength to restrain himself and he left the room almost at a run.

Zhuchka was howling in the yard by the wall where the rubbish bin stood. The dog's muzzle was turned to the sky, earnestly reproaching, begging and complaining.

He walked quickly across the yard towards her and his trembling lips whispered:

"There's no need, Zhuchka. No need for this."

When he reached her and squatted before her, Zhuchka was quiet for a minute. She looked him in the eye sorrowfully, then turned her head to one side and continued her plaintive whine. He hugged her hairy neck and pressed it to his cheek. Shuddering as if she was weeping, Zhuchka shook her head inconsolably from side to side, while he stroked her back, pleading:

"There's no need, Zhuchka. No need, doggie . . ."

CHAPTER 24

Today Alexander came into the dispensary for only a short while to give Nazira her calcium chloride infusion, for he was still afraid to entrust Taskira with this, and returned to his room. He opened the curtains so there would be more light and fresh air for his mother, who looked at him gratefully with tired silent eyes. Today she didn't even try to get up; the disease had finally cut her down.

In the other room Vasia played quietly with his toy cannon, as if he too understood that something which called for silence had happened in the house. Nina rushed about between the kitchen and the room on tip-toe, murmured with someone in the hallway and went outside into the yard. When the door opened, the sound of the measured chewing of a saw drifted in, together with the ringing chop of an axe and the guttural talk of men. As he returned from the dispensary Alexander saw the carpenters at work in a corner of the yard, and through a doorway in the half-demolished building he saw bricklayers with trowels laying a fireplace in the maternity block. It was the first day the long-awaited work in the yard had at last expanded to its full breadth, but this failed to make Alexander happy . . .

The acute pain which cut up his heart like a scalpel after Khodjayev's arrival, melted and settled in his soul in a heavy layer of cold metal. Outwardly Alexander appeared very calm, but his jaded, tortured thoughts would not be appeased. Occasionally his mind grasped feebly at a fantastic possibility to refute the cruel diagnosis and save his mother. Deep down he knew that Khodjayev's diagnosis was unerringly correct, but neither his heart nor his brain would accept that all attempts, all endeavours were now futile and the inevitable end was near. More as an ordinary person than as a doctor he sought the slightest glimmer of hope.

A final conclusion could not be drawn until everything was ascertained, until all other possibilities were discounted. Why did

it have to be cancer of the oesophagus? Maybe it was just a foreign body in the gullet, maybe a fishbone which mother had swallowed unnoticed. They often had fish in winter . . . Maybe it was a non-malignant growth on the mediastinum which pressed on the gullet and caused difficulty in swallowing. Maybe . . .

He stole glances at his mother and her thin waxy hands. Her haggard deeply creased face told him this was no ordinary gauntness or aenemic exhaustion, it was too much like the characteristic appearance of cancer cachexy . . .

But the mind seized at shadows of hope even now: 'Suppose it is cancer cachexy, suppose it is cancer of the oesophagus, but haven't we numerous examples of amazing recovery after radical surgery?'

Once again his heart, not his brain with its knowledge and experience, cautioned him: only early operation can give good results, only an early diagnosis . . .

His heart was ready to continue with bitter words of the frightful truth: 'You have neglected your mother! In your pre-occupation with work, wife and self you have forgotten your own mother.'

Knowing his heart would speak just these words, he tried not to listen further.

An x-ray. An objective, unbiased x-ray would reveal the truth. And yesterday the x-ray had spoken.

From the slow steps of the woman radiographer who appeared with the x-ray and gave him a long look through her horn-rimmed glasses, he knew there was no hope.

Pointing at the x-ray, the radiographer had said quietly:

"There is a constriction of the oesophagus here . . . Note the characteristic swelling and bursting of the mucous membrane plica . . ."

After a silence she bit her lip and said more quietly:

"The case is obviously advanced . . ."

The almost inaudible words boomed a formidable judgement in his ears, a judgement not on Doctor Postolovsky, who had overlooked cancer in a patient, but on the son Sashko, who had failed to notice his mother's life being extinguished . . .

With trembling hands he lifted the black copy of the judgement, a stiff celluloid x-ray, to the light of the window, and holding his breath strained his eyes till they hurt. There was no doubt. Level with the seventh jugular vertebra the oesophagus was clearly constricted and the plica of its mucous membrane had broken up.

Yet like a condemned criminal clutching at the hope of cassation after the sentence, a pardon, he too seized at another possibility.

He forgot whether he spoke the words out loud to the radiographer or merely thought about them, but hope again flashed a pale shadow before him.

"Burns in the oesophagus have a similar appearance. Identical constriction, broken up mucous membrane, the same dysphagia."

He turned sharply, and quickly went up to his mother. She was sitting silently on a wooden bench in the hallway, waiting patiently.

"Mother, tell me . . . Only the truth! Have you ever accidentally swallowed any acid?"

The mother slowly raised her sad tired eyes to him and ever so slightly shook her head:

"No, Sashko, never."

"Try and remember. Perhaps undiluted vinegar essence — you buy it often. Or maybe . . ."

He faltered, looking entreatingly at his mother, but she shook her head again and wiped with a handkerchief the saliva which had collected on her lips.

'She won't tell,' he thought. 'Because of her extreme delicacy she won't tell even if there was something, so as not to worry me, so as not to make herself a burden . . . Sialorrhea too,' he looked at his mother's handkerchief at her mouth, 'occurs with internal burns. In the first instance there will be sialorrhea . . .'

"I'd like to do some probing," he said to the radiographer and took his mother by the arm.

Weak and indifferent, the mother rose with difficulty. When they left the x-ray clinic, his mother placed her fingertips lightly on his hand:

"There's no need, Sashko. What for . . .? Just give me some powders at home."

She looked at him and smiled such a feeble and at the same time loving smile, that his heart again missed a beat. He pressed his mother's elbow closer and hurried to the veranda of the oncological clinic.

Not only his breathing, but time too seemed to stop when the oncologist and nurse pushed a probe into his mother's mouth and she choked painfully. He looked away and tried not to hear his mother's groans and sobs.

At last everything became quiet. The mother breathed heavily

and wiped her mouth with a handkerchief. The oncologist stepped towards the window and studied the tip of the probe. He sighed and wordlessly extended the nickel-plated end to Alexander. It was smeared with blood and puss.

"The obstruction appears to be at the sixth or the seventh jugular vertebra . . ."

Only the oncologist's first words reached him. After that he heard nothing. Everything was unmercifully clear now.

That evening, when his mother was resting completely exhausted on the bed after returning home with him, he found the strength to tell her as calmly as possible that she would have to go to Tashkent, and perhaps even undergo an operation. Obviously he could say nothing definite at present. She would have to be examined by a specialist — and, well, the operation itself was not such a frightful ordeal . . . She had to be treated properly, to take serious treatment. It was time she looked after herself.

He was speaking with such calm to his mother, so immersed in his difficult unaccustomed role that he was mollified by his own voice. 'Perhaps,' he thought, observing the peaceful expression on his mother's face, 'perhaps the disease has not progressed all that far? Perhaps the surrounding lymph glands, those defense 'bunkers' in our body, have played their assigned role in his mother and stopped the cancer cells which had broken away? Then there would be no metastases in the other organs. This was quite possible. In that case it was operable. An experienced surgeon's dexterous hand — and his mother would live. Only it was better to go to Tomsk rather than Tashkent. At the Tomsk Oncological Hospital it was known that Academic Alexandrov performed real wonders!'

The mother listened quietly with drooping eyelids. Again she asked her son nothing about the illness. She knew he would never tell her the truth, and the daughter-in-law's attentions, the false cheerfulness with which she assured her mother-in-law that everything would be all right, that there was no need for excitement, that she would go to Tashkent and return completely cured — all this only convinced the old woman even more that death had finally come for her. Death had tarried so long, roaming all over the place, but now it had arrived for her . . .

When she heard her son ask cheerfully, as if in league with the daughter-in-law: 'Well, how about it, mum? Shall we go for a little treatment?' she looked away to a far window so as not to see the lies, albeit benign, on her son's face.

Her gaze, Alexander noticed, was already distant, remote . . .

When her son leaned across and asked uneasily:

"Will you agree to an operation, mother?" she looked at him and said almost inaudibly:

"What for . . . I'm past operations, Sashko."

A voice brimming with sorrow whispered:

The world

is devoid

of miracles,

It's useless

to hope . . .

And following it a sadder, softer voice from a song or a Ukrainian magazine read at high school in Pereyaslav:

Mother dear, you will certainly,

Sleep soundly . . .

He moved away from his mother's bed to his desk and closed his eyes tightly in pain.

How he wanted to sit down and write to Marusia! Not a reply to her unexpected chaotic letter, but a cry into space to that sweet tender Marusia who was and was not:

'Marusia! My one and only Marusia! How I miss you now! Only you can understand my grief, my despair, my hopelessness. Only you, my Pereyaslavian Marusia, simple, without any falseness or deception, only you can truly share my sorrow, comforting my poor mother these last days. You are the only person I can tell frankly how hard it is for me . . . Where are you, my Marusia?'

He regretted having so rashly destroyed Marusia's letter with its Far East address.

CHAPTER 25

The hospital ambulance which Akhmetjanov, the director of Regional Health had promised to send for his mother, still had not arrived. However a cart pulled by two horses from the tropical station sent just in case by the far-sighted PISOCHKINA, arrived at exactly seven. The horses were now standing in the dispensary grounds shaking their heads and munching on fresh, recently-mown hay.

The mother was pleased to hear about the horses. She welcomed setting out for the final time by horse and cart instead of in the stinking car which made her head ache and back hurt. She would travel just as she occasionally travelled from Pereyaslav to her now departed sister in Demianka. The horses stood tamely in the yard, just like those village nags in provincial Poltava, and there was plenty of hay on the cart, just the way her brother-in-law used to pile it up for her. How fragrant it was . . .

"I'd rather the cart, Sashko," she begged her son. "It won't bump about and hurt on the hay, so we'll make it somehow."

Alexander still waited for the ambulance. He wanted to shorten as much as possible this extremely difficult time, so unbearably slow. He suffered while waiting for the last minute when his mother would be leaving the house forever. And when he reluctantly pictured this traumatic moment, the word 'leaving' was substituted by another, more appropriate to the occasion — 'removed', as if his mother would not be leaving the house, only her body would be removed . . .

This last night he had hardly slept. After finally deciding to go to Tomsk he calmed down a little, calculating from memory that the journey from Tashkent to Tomsk via Turskib, with a change in Novosibirsk, would take no more than three days. He even dozed off, but soon woke up with a fresh thought: maybe it was better to go to Kiev? There were excellent surgeons in Kiev and the best clinical conditions. Most importantly, if his mother died he would

at least be able to bury her in her native soil, which he knew was what his mother wanted, though she never said so. If that was how it was destined to be then he would take her body to her dear Pereyaslav and bury her in the cemetery beside his father . . .

. . . The mother's soul doth come

From Ukraina to her son . . .

Words of a long-forgotten Ukrainian poet again surfaced in his mind and amazed him:

"Why is the past returning to me today?"

And he immediately dropped his new plan.

Such a long journey would only finish off his mother. For if the tumour had not yet sent metastases to other organs, then time was the only consideration. Onto the operation table as soon as possible. And he would have wasted precious time on a long journey to Kiev . . . No, they would go to Tomsk.

He was impatient now to deliver his mother to the Tomsk Oncological Hospital and to speak personally with Academic Alexandrov.

After it had grown light he thought of catching an aeroplane from Tashkent to deliver his mother more quickly, but when he told her this, she only smiled bitterly:

"What's the use of flying, Sashko, when . . ." and hopelessly waved her hand without finishing. But he understood what his mother had wanted to say: "What's the use flying when it's time for me to rot in the damp earth . . ."

At these last words his nerves strained to their peak and he ran outside to see if the long awaited ambulance had finally arrived.



It was approaching eight, and it would be useless to wait for the ambulance any longer if they were to make the train. Besides, it was not right not to accede to his mother's last simple wish. Alexander dropped his arm with the watch, the bonificator began to take away the hay from the horses and carefully spread it out on the cart.

The final minute approached. Afraid his nerves would not hold out when his mother took her first step on this mournful journey, Alexander went outside. So as not to be left alone with his thoughts, he asked the carter purposefully, even though he knew there was still time, whether they would cover the eighteen kilometres in time for the train and began painstakingly rearranging the hay on the cart

where his mother would be sitting.

Nearby, not far from the horses, Zhuchka sat on her haunches and followed Alexander's movements. The usual flow of time had been upset for Zhuchka, time divided into morning and evening receptions at the dispensary. It was either the people who had come into the dispensary grounds with the sick to saw, chop, plane wood, and raise a new wall of brick, which forced her to howl at night, or it was that unknown and unseen thing. Zhuchka went about these last few days as if she was exhausted, never barking at anyone, only looking sadly at people, her tail drooping. Today she wasn't even disturbed by the presence of strange horses in the yard at such an early hour and a strange carter beside them. It was as if she already knew that it was meant to be this way, that the horses, the stranger, and the tumult they brought into the dispensary yard — everything was because of the old woman. But why had the old woman lingered so long? Pricking one ear, then the other, Zhuchka looked searchingly at the open door to the apartment, from which Nina rushed out to the cart with pillows and a rug, then returned inside and brought out a basket of food and finally, bending to one side, dragged out a suitcase with glittering nickel-plated corners. Zhuchka sniffed at the air without moving, indifferently letting the pillows and food pass, only stopping her sorrowful eye's gaze on the suitcase's glittering corners, unable to comprehend why they were here.

At last, leaning on a cane and supported at the elbow by her daughter-in-law, the old woman emerged. Slowly shifting her weak disobedient feet she quietly approached the cart. Zhuchka rose at once, wagging her tail and craning her neck forward, and joyfully walked towards her.

"Here already, Zhuchka?" the old woman was feebly surprised, knowing that at this time Zhuchka usually caught up on the sleepless hours of her night watch. In reply Zhuchka wagged her tail energetically: how could she be asleep on such a day! It was evident that she had to be here . . .

Nina made her mother-in-law comfortable on the cart and stuffed unneeded trusses of hay under her legs. The old woman looked deeply with sad eyes at the bitch.

"Don't chase her away . . . Let her live by you . . ." she said without taking her eyes off Zhuchka, speaking maybe to her son, or her daughter-in-law, or both. "She is so . . ."

Alexander turned towards the horses. Had this last minute passed, or was it was still dragging on? If only it would pass

sooner . . .

Suddenly the apartment door was thrown open and Vasia burst out, pink with sleep, dressed only in a short singlet. Screwing up his eyes from the light, he ran to the cart.

"Grandma! Granny, what about me? Why aren't you taking Vasia? I want to ride the horsies too!" And his feelings hurt, the youngster broke into sobs, his little hands stretching out towards grandmother . . .

'No, this terrible moment is not over yet. It is just beginning . . . ' Alexander thought painfully and firmly gritted his teeth . . .

"Not now, not this time! Granny is going far away. But if you behave she'll return soon and bring you a rifle," Nina reassured Vasia and lifted him up to the cart. "Say bye-bye to granny!"

In bewilderment Vasia pecked his grandmother on the nose and hugged her neck:

"Don't go, granny! I don't need a rifle! Don't go . . . "

The old woman quietly patted him on the head and whispered:

"Don't cry, Vasylo! Don't cry, my little turtle-dove . . . "

Without turning around Alexander tapped the carter on the shoulder. The carter looked around silently and gave the reins a light tug.

"Grow big and happy, my little one! The lord is merciful . . . "

Alexander prodded the carter in the back again. He had wanted to say 'Get going!' but uttered forcefully instead: "End it!"

Without turning around the carter cracked the whip. Nina still managed to kiss her mother-in-law on the cheek, Vasia yelped one more time and the horses pulled the cart through the gate into the street.

This endless moment had come to an end at last. It was left behind in the yard, and Alexander instinctively turned around. One last time he saw his wife holding their son by the hand and bowing far too low after them, bending almost double . . . Either he received her thoughts by telepathy, or it occurred to him alone:

'I am bowing to your misfortune, not to you. Only before it I bend my proud head . . . '

He froze. Now it was all over. Everything domestic, everything up till now was left behind, only Zhuchka continued to run alongside the cart, casting anxious looks at the old woman.

It was all over . . .

But no, the rattle of the wheels and the clatter of hoofs

was suddenly joined by a woman's screams from across the street. Alexander shuddered. The drawn out almost desperate 'a-a-ah', though falling behind the cart still lingered and was obviously aimed at them. He ordered the carter to stop the horses, and as if suddenly waking, looked in amazement over his shoulder. Hindered by the hem of her long caftan, an Uzbek woman was running towards them, her arms outstretched. Alexander recognised the older sister 'Martha', as his mother had christened her, when buying milk at their house. Evidently this sister of the Uzbek Lazar had somehow found out about the old woman's departure and now hastened to say good-bye to her. She shouted something to his mother while still running, but Alexander caught only the words: 'Hey, apa, apa . . . !'

Racing up to the cart at last, she grabbed the ladderbeam and placed a yellowy block of butter wrapped in burdock on the hay beside the mother. Embracing the mother's legs while catching her breath, she chattered quickly in Uzbek.

Alexander gave his mother a sidelong glance. The old woman was nodding her head, her face lit up and smiled, and abundant tears rolled down her cheeks. She bent over the Uzbek woman and kissed her three times.

Alexander lightly touched the carter's elbow. Once more the words 'Apa, apa!' filled the air and the horses moved off.

When the cart was rolling smoothly along the highway, the mother wiped her tears with the corner of a handkerchief and heaved a sigh of relief. Now it was all over for her too. She pitied the good Uzbek soul, she pitied her grandson too, and even felt a stab of pity for her daughter-in-law. But although the old woman had suffered much because of her (God forbid lest anyone should endure such treatment), she did not wish her daughter-in-law any harm. No, no. Let evil pass her by, let her live in harmony and love with Sashko and let not their years together grow overcast without her. Because no matter what she was like, she was still the mother of his child and a wife to him. Let it be . . . And the old woman gave the daughter-in-law a last friendly smile. Live in peace, be happy! Farewell!

She was parting with the sad home of her son, the yard where she talked to Zhuchka, and the street along which she went to the market with Zhuchka. She only found it hard to think about her son. How would he fare without her? But there was nothing to be done now. The old woman could feel the life draining from her already, and her soul was just holding in this powerless, heavy body. For as long as she could, the old woman had worked for Sashko, but

now she had worked her last. If death turned away from her now, she would only become a burden to her son. God save her from such a fate! But death was already sitting beside her on this last journey. Death was already freeing the old woman from her earthly obligations, and the old woman felt relieved. She thought neither about her illness nor the operation, not even believing that she still had to go to some Siberian Tomsk. What for? No, she was going with her son to that distant holy land where she was born, where her parents and ancestors were sleeping an eternal sleep, where she too would rest her head . . .

Ever since the night she had heard Zhuchka howling in the yard, she knew she would not be trampling the earth much longer. Death, which had sought her in Pereyaslav, had finally tramped all the way here and entered the yard. But man was not given to see her with living eyes, only a dog, only Zhuchka heard her insidious steps and howled at night . . .

Death had come, so there was no turning it back, no use pleading or retreating . . . This did not frighten the old woman or worry her. Everything was born to blossom, wilt, and die. People, animals, and plants — all die, and others are born in their place, to die themselves. It was nothing to wonder at. But it was not this which troubled the old woman. No, it was another thing. Where, in which soil would they lay her down when she closed her eyes forever? Even though her only son, whom she loved above all else, had sent out roots here, even though he seemed to have set himself up well in this Asian land and was respected, even though the local people, after she had come to know them, were friendly, and some even very nice, it was not her native land. The soil was so hard here you couldn't dig a garden with a spade and had to use a heavy mattock, as if you were clearing nettles and orach. This sunburnt thirsty land grieved in the summer, and with it the old woman, longing for warm summer showers with rolling thunder and joyous rainbows, as happened in Pereyaslav, where the rainbows rose from the Trubailo and fell into the Dnipro, drawing from them the life-giving water for their splendid colours . . . No, the old woman did not want to rest forever in this dry, clayey soil.

They passed the old mosque with its tall slender minaret, which still carried a thin metal crescent, like a cut fingernail. And the old woman remembered how strange everything had appeared to her when she first arrived here two years earlier and had seen this Moslem church and an old man wearing a turban nearby, just as if she had been in Turkey. It suddenly occurred to her then

that she hadn't arrived in Uzbekistan to spend what was left of her life beside her son, but was sitting in a theatre in Poltava or even in Kiev with her late husband watching a performance of *The Zaporozhian Cossack Across the Danube*. A few more streets down and she would see cossacks in red *zhupans* amongst these Turks, and further on the chatterbox Odarka would be telling Karas off:

Where have you appeared from?

Where have you been all this time?

And drunk Karas, in black skull-cap and quilted jacket, would break out in his bass:

Now I'm a Turk, not a cossack!

I'm dressed rather fancily, eh?

And how's it happened,

That I've become a Turk?

That performance had finished long ago, as had her girlhood and married years, and now the end of her widowhood had come. But even now, when she was leaving the earth and drove past this mosque one last time with her son, she could hear the chorus singing the final lines:

Across the calm Danube

Is God's paradise on earth.

There, oh there, we desire to go

To our dear, native land.

Yes, she would go only to that native land, that blessed land which blossomed across ten Danubes from here. Only there did her joyous soul yearn to be, not wanting to rest in these foreign parts. Where else could her son take her, except home, to Ukraine?

The old woman looked meekly at the overlaid ass which bent its hind leg and stood in the shade awaiting its master; at the long green rows of cotton plants which someone was laying out before her eyes like strips of expensive carpet; at the pruned mulberries which huddled together like sheep beside the neighbouring village; and to all she said: 'Farewell! Farewell!' Her soul was so glad, so joyous now, that she could have sung:

Give me a boat, oh give me a boat,

I want to cross!

To cross and see at least once

My native Ukraine!

But the old woman had not sung for a long time and now was no time to begin; she hardly had the strength to whisper a single word. And she only listened to her soul singing.

Tongue hanging out, Zhuchka ran beside the cart. Terrible

dangers preyed on her in villages they passed through in the form of strange dogs and boys, and on the open road, where fast vehicles shot past her from time to time, choking her with the horrible stench of petrol.

But Zhuchka took no notice. All her attention was focused on the cart where the old woman was sitting, and she cared only not to fall behind the back wheels. When the old woman turned her head towards the cotton plantations and the street walls of Uzbek houses, Zhuchka raised her tail and wagged it to tell the old woman: 'I am here! Oh, I'm here! I will stay with you till the end! The very end . . .'

Zhuchka knew that the golden age of her life had ended. But she did not think about what was to follow, what the future would hold for her, she knew only that her place was beside the old woman. And she ran alongside the back wheels, glancing at the old woman with devotion and saying with her bleary eye: 'Go, if you must, only live! Live for your son, for the small son of your son, and well, for me too . . . Maybe your death, which I watched over each night, has been left behind in the dispensary yard. Then don't return. We have left nothing behind, other than bitter memories. And if your distant land will cure you, then go there and leave everything. I will find it hard without you, but I will not reproach you, I am prepared to remain alone if only you will live! Wherever you may be, as long as you exist! Healthy and alive!'

When the old woman finally looked at Zhuchka, as if hearing that voice wearied by the love and devotion of her canine soul, her heart began to ache so painfully that she had to close her eyes for a moment.

"What will become of you when I am gone, Zhuchka?"

Zhuchka wagged her tail cheerfully and licked at the air with her tongue: 'It's all right! It's all right! Get well! Live!'

And for the first time that day the old woman regretted that her arms had become limp and she could feed Zhuchka chicken entrails no more . . .

Not far from the regional centre they were met at last by the ambulance, which was racing towards the village in fourth gear. It had broken down unexpectedly the night before and had only just left the workshops after urgent repairs. But now not only the mother, but Alexander too refused its services, for there were only two kilometres left to go.

They arrived at the small stone station nestling under tall poplars. The train had not arrived yet, but in the small dark hall

with a stone floor two long queues had already formed before the tiny window — one of Uzbek women, the other only of men. This disturbed Alexander and woke him from his detachment. They could miss out on tickets, not to mention a reservation for his mother on a bottom bunk. He looked in desperation at the long row of men pressing against one another and decided not to wait his turn, remembering that not so long ago he had by chance attended to the stationmaster in the regional hospital, and rushed off to find him. Ten minutes later the old bespectacled booking-clerk unceremoniously pushed aside the impatient people surrounding the ticket-office and called out:

“Doctor! Doctor Postolovsky! Two tickets and reserved seats to Tashkent!”

Extricating himself from the sweaty crowd around the ticket-office, Alexander sighed with relief. The tickets and reservations were in his pocket. But a minute later, when their luggage was brought onto the platform with the carter's help and his mother was wearily settled down on a heavy trunk, a fresh anxiety entered his soul. This horrible parting scene, his mother's final farewell with everything that remained to live, was not over yet. Zhuchka stood on the platform before his mother and with her single eye, loyal until death, looked into her eyes . . . His mother dolefully bent over her and gently stroked her shaggy head. Zhuchka probably couldn't bear the mother's sad, devastated look either, for she occasionally shook her head, showing her long tongue and her whole body shuddered.

The pain of parting was suddenly broken by a frightful roar which deafened Zhuchka. A cloud of hot steam and the thunder of metal had appeared as if from nowhere. Zhuchka fell on all fours, but did not move. She thought that some mighty unearthly force would sweep away both her and the old woman, and she closed her eye, burying her muzzle between the old woman's feet. The old woman gently continued to stroke her back. When Zhuchka, trembling all over and frightened, opened an eye filled with fear, she was surprised to see a whole street of iron huts before her, which did not stand on the ground but on high black carts with iron wheels. Crowds of people poured out from these huts, hurrying off somewhere, while others pushed and shoved towards them with baskets, trunks, and children, jostling each other and twice poking Zhuchka painfully in the side . . . Behind her something let out a clang, like a hammer striking a large empty cauldron . . . Zhuchka was bewildered. She had never seen such things. Even in the workshop yard,

where hunger had once accidentally driven her long ago, there had been nothing like this. There had been the clanking of iron and the splutter of a smelly tractor, and one of the young men had hit Zhuchka painfully with a nut, but everything there remained in its place, and people were people. Here everyone was in a hurry. Even the old woman's son and that man from the horses, who had become a friend to Zhuchka in this hell, both grabbed the luggage, the old woman rose too and her hand left Zhuchka's back forever. People's legs and belongings immediately hid the old woman from Zhuchka's view and the bitch just managed to pick up her scent on the ground, for she was surrounded by the smells of bread, grease, roast meat, and stranger's feet. Countless other smells tickled Zhuchka's nose and confused the dog. Finally she completely lost track of the old woman and whined in despair. But fortunately the crowd thinned in front of her and suddenly Zhuchka saw the old woman climbing the stairs into one of those strange iron huts and behind her, supporting the old woman under the elbows, was her son followed by the man from the horses with their things. Zhuchka was utterly confused and could comprehend nothing. She ran up to the hut and even tried to scramble up the steep steps after the old woman, but she was kicked away painfully. She realised there was no way she could slip into the iron hut which had swallowed up the old woman together with the others.

Yelping dolefully, Zhuchka ran the length of the carriage, lifting her muzzle to the open windows, but she saw only strangers looking out. She ran under the train and again ran the length of the carriage, but the old woman was nowhere to be seen.

Alexander thanked the *bonifactor*, placed the luggage on a shelf and began making his mother's bed. The steam train's whistle, the bustle of the crowd and the din created by the arrival of the train imperiously engaged him in their whirlpool, and for a time he was overwhelmed by only one desire — to reach their carriage as quickly as possible and make his mother comfortable. Now he was worried that his mother should have a soft bed and not catch cold from the draft coming from the open windows.

A small girl with a blue ribbon in her hair stood beside the window opposite and annoyed her mother, who was laying out breakfast, with ceaseless questions. Alexander was about to ask if he could close the window when the small girl stuck her head outside and asked in astonishment:

"Why has the doggie got only one eye? Mummy, the doggie's crying. Why's it crying?"

"It's Zhuchka!" she whispered and stood up. "She's looking for us, Sashko . . . " His mother grabbed hold of the end of the top shelf and made her way to the window.

Down below, opposite the carriage, Zhuchka was sitting despondently. She yelped dolefully, lifting her muzzle.

"Zhuchka!" the mother called out, summoning the last of her strength, filling her lungs with air and stretching her arm outside.

Zhuchka jumped up in ecstasy, but it was too far now to the loving old hand. However, she was happy just to be able to see this hand and hear the kind, familiar voice.

"Sashko, give me something to throw her, she hasn't eaten today . . . "

Without thinking, Alexander grabbed a roll and a boiled drumstick from the basket.

The mother hastily threw pieces of roll and then the drumstick through the window, throwing it some distance from the carriage, continually repeating as she had done in the garden:

"Eat Zhuchka, eat, my shaggy one . . . "

Zhuchka sniffed at everything thrown to her in flight, but touched nothing. Arching her shaggy body and getting down on her hind legs, she jumped up high, trying in vain to reach the old woman's hand . . .

The gong sounded a second time, somebody whistled sharply nearby and up front the hot monster snorted angrily, hissed and sneezed. Again everything exploded in disorder and Zhuchka cowered in alarm. After she had recovered a little, she noticed that the wheels of the iron cart were moving and the strange hut with the old woman in it sailed past and moved off. Faster, faster, faster it went, the old woman's hand growing smaller and smaller, waving to her from the window, still waving . . .

"Live, Zhuchka! Farewell, farewell!"



Long after the 'Namangan-Tashkent' express had departed, the stationmaster and the old bespectacled booking-clerk, while sauntering along the platform, saw near the tracks not far from the empty station a black bitch with her tail between her legs and fur creepily ruffled, howling quietly, stretching her muzzle towards the horizon, towards where the train had turned west before the rail bridge and lengthened into a dark-green snake, then later stretched into a black thread and finally melted completely in the blue haze.

CHAPTER 26

A little later Zhuchka was seen by another man who had hammered up to the station in a small jeep and hurried onto the platform. He looked sullenly at the empty tracks and the distant ribbon of the train's smoke, and finally rested his dissatisfied gaze on the cowering body of the bitch yelping dolefully some distance from the platform. Khodjayeve, of course, did not recognise in this neglected, homeless animal the nursling of Doctor Postolovsky's sick mother, though since early morning he had thought only of the mother and her doctor-son, whose tragedy Khodjayeve had taken to heart.

He had been delayed at the Kara-Daryinsk Hospital yesterday, where inadequate prophylactic work and a high incidence of malaria demanded a more thorough investigation and personal intervention. But though he was busy, Khodjayeve had kept trying to get through to Akhmetjanov, and finally succeeded in contacting Khakul-Abad after long futile attempts. He engaged him to be personally responsible for providing a vehicle to transport Doctor Postolovsky's sick mother to the railway station.

This morning Khodjayeve had telephoned Akhmetjanov again, but learning that the sick woman had not been transported yet, because the ambulance was undergoing unforeseen repairs and would be ready soon, he exploded with such anger and berated the non-plussed Regional Health director so much, that the fellow began shaking fearfully as if the telephone was a fierce live creature, and jumped up from his chair and began to stutter.

"Assistant Akhmetjanov!" Khodjayeve said in a calm voice, having moved away and taken a hold of himself. However the mere fact that he had addressed him neither by name and patronymic, nor by position, as he usually did with his subordinates, filled Akhmetjanov with even more fear, so that he lost his breath.

"We are talking about an ailing person, more so — the mother of one of your doctors. I don't care where you go, the executive

or the district committee, but get a vehicle and despatch it immediately. I'll be there in an hour at the outside. By that time I want a notice ready granting Doctor Postolovsky a month's leave, his pay for the last month and his holiday pay. I'll give them to him personally. Don't sleep, act! I don't like to joke, especially when it comes to sick people."

Overcome with indignation once more, Khodjayeve slammed the handset down on the phone with such force that something tinkled inside the instrument; hurriedly he shook hands with the director of the Kara-Daryinsk Hospital and rushed to his car.

Twenty-five minutes later his jeep stopped outside the high melancholy dispensary gate, through which Khodjayeve slipped easily; without even looking at the dispensary, he made straight for Doctor Postolovsky's apartment.

Inside he found only Nina with her hair dishevelled, clad in a tattered dressing-gown. Seeing the health department superintendent so unexpectedly, she was filled with terror for her unpreened appearance, for which she embarked on endless apologies. But he took no notice of her, feverishly searching the apartment with his eyes: there was obviously no one else. Learning that Alexander's mother had already been taken by horse and cart to the station he knitted his thick black brows, and losing his temper whispered under his breath.

"Fool! What a fool I am!"

Without even saying good-bye to the disconcerted Nina, Khodjayeve disappeared from the dispensary yard and in twenty minutes was already at the health department offices. Everything there had been in such a flurry, that as soon as Khodjayeve's jeep pulled up at the veranda outside, Akhmetjanov came running down the stairs, followed by secretary Hordienko carrying a packet of paper money, a pay slip and a ball-point pen.

Akhmetjanov blurted out that the ambulance had already been despatched, and earlier still a horse and cart from the Tropical Centre, but Khodjayeve only momentarily flashed the angry sparks of his dark eyes at him and retorted: "We'll discuss this another time." Hurriedly he signed the pay slip, took the packet of money without counting it and nodded to the driver.

Looking around the deserted platform from which the station-master and booking-clerk were already disappearing into the open door of the station building, Khodjayeve hurried up to them.

"Could you possibly tell me whether a doctor from the Khakul-Abad district boarded the train with his sick mother?"

"Doctor Postolovsky? Why yes, yes! Sure," the stationmaster replied willingly, and the old bespectacled booking-clerk, whose experienced nose immediately smelt a superior, joined in with his ingratiating thin voice:

"I issued him with two tickets with reserved seats to Tashkent! Car number three."

"When does the train arrive in Andyzhan and how long does it stop there for?" Khodjayev asked, knitting his brow. Despite all his outward severity, he despised the fawning tone of subordination and self-degradation from anyone.

Without hearing out the stationmaster and the booking-clerk who vied to please the unknown superior, Khodjayev ran off to his jeep, completely surprising and disappointing the two men, and called to the driver:

"Andyzhan! The railway station! We'll just make it. Only step on it, please!"

The jeep made a sharp turn and in a minute all that remained of it on the Andyzhan road was a long cloud of dust which slowly melted in the haze of the hot day.

On the searing platform in Andyzhan Khodjayev managed to jump onto the second last carriage of the Tashkent train, which had already begun to move out, the conductors having set out yellow flags in the doorway. Moving from car to car he finally located Doctor Postolovsky and his sick mother.

At Khodjayev's greeting the mother feebly moved her lips, straining to say something nice to the good man, but only an inarticulate rustle emanated from her lips, which neither her son nor Khodjayev could decipher. Only the fact that she slowly closed her eyes twice with scarcely a smile showed that she was pleased to see Sashko's good superior on her last journey.

Ever since the conductress and Alexander had made her bed on the bunk and the mother had stretched out her heavy, almost alien legs, she suddenly felt worse. It was as if all her weak strength, overtaxed while travelling to the station and walking to the train, had finally given out. She strained one final time to throw Zhuchka some food through the window, but that was the last of her strength. When the train moved off and Zhuchka disappeared from sight, and then the station and the town, the mother realised that not only had the last page of her life in Uzbekistan been turned, but it was also the end of the long book of her existence . . . And then she felt that she no longer had any strength left and never would have. Her soul still managed to cling to her body, but it too felt alien to the infirm, heavy flesh. When it was time to move to her bed from her son's bunk, on which the mother had fallen heavily after stepping back from the window, she could no longer stand up and hung limply in her son's arms. Khodjayev's appearance brought her back

for a while to the memory of her past reality, but then the mother grew quiet again, listening to see if her soul had begun freeing itself from the now unneeded body . . .

"I'm off to Tashkent too — a few pressing matters. Has anyone taken this bunk?" Khodjayeve asked Alexander, and looking into the old woman's pale, bloodless face, added, as if by chance: "By the way, I picked up your pay and holiday bonus at Regional Health."

Alexander found Khodjayeve's arrival unexpected and unwelcome. He wanted to be alone with his mother, and he was grateful to the guard for putting them into a compartment on their own. The presence of an outsider, even someone like Khodjayeve, was difficult now. Alexander guessed at once that it was not by accident, or because of business or private matters that the sullen health department superintendent boarded this train, but rather to help him and his mother in such hardship. And for the first time on this frightful day he felt a little relieved.

"Seems to have fallen asleep . . . Let's step outside for a smoke," Khodjayeve whispered, bending slightly towards the head of the mother, who lay with eyes closed. Alexander sensed that Khodjayeve wanted to tell him something in private and he rose wordlessly and followed him out.

"Finding it hard?" asked Khodjayeve, when they stood in the empty passage and his black brows came together at the bridge of his nose. "I understand, my friend, I understand. But take courage!"

He grew silent, then took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. Alexander, who had quit smoking, after the birth of his child, blindly took a cigarette from the offered packet and, lighting it with a match which Khodjayeve brought up to him, greedily inhaled the tobacco smoke.

"In our time more is demanded from each of us than ever before in the entire history of mankind. It has fallen to our lot not only to transform our reality, but ourselves too," Khodjayeve said, deep in thought, leaning against the wall. "We are born to turn dreams into reality, but in our reality especially our Uzbek reality, we sometimes meet with such throwbacks of the past, such hidden reminders of feudalism that one wonders how they could have survived to our day!"

Alexander knew that Khodjayeve wanted to turn his thoughts from the inevitable which hovered over his mother, and which was painful to even think about. For this reason he began the conversation with things which could not captivate Alexander in his present state. Though continually thinking about his mother, Alexander still heard Khodjayeve's words, only he couldn't sustain the conversation and looked absent-mindedly out of the window at the distant mountains beyond which lay Kirghizia. Khodjayeve continued:

"I inspected the Kara-Daryinsk Hospital yesterday. Walked into the surgery and the flies rose in swarms. What was wrong? I looked accidentally behind the curtain and there on a dresser lay some stale bread and leftovers from breakfast, and on a nail near the dresser hung a coat dirtied with smears of blood. In the surgery, mind you! But on the surface everything was fine — flowers on the sills, white screens and clean curtains . . . And 'Doctor' Ikramov, what's he worth! I looked through his diagnoses, just sin and laughter: 'Irritation, impatience' (read this as neurasthenia), or 'Because of an unsatisfactory stomach (obviously gastritis) can only do limited work in the collective farm . . .' No wonder Ikramov doesn't notice the flies, and isn't worried by the high incidence of malaria, in fact he carries out no prophylactic work. However he has his own curtain to hide behind: a diploma from the Samarkand Medical Institute and unfortunately a . . . Party card. Compare them now: our foremost Uzbek scientists, our outstanding engineers, agronomists, selfless cotton workers, and among them this Doctor Ikramov, who would have been better placed in the role of a physician in the court of a Bukhara emir . . . Such is our reality, such is our Uzbekistan today, where much is still hidden behind curtains . . ."

Khodjayevev stopped and lit another cigarette. Everything he had said till then passed through Alexander's consciousness without settling there. Only the word 'curtain' caught there, and after Khodjayevev repeated it a second time Alexander grew attentive and began to listen to his words. At the last phrase he cringed and sharply turned his head in Khodjayevev's direction, as if awaiting a direct blow to the face from him. He had suddenly pictured that old curtain of his mother's which he had taken from his room that day for the last time as it was no longer needed, and perhaps because of this he suddenly felt that it was to this allegorical curtain that Khodjayevev was alluding. But the man remained silent and looked through the window deep in thought at the cotton plantations stretching towards the mountains. Alexander flinched, as if he'd had a nightmare, asked to be excused and hurried back to his mother.

His mother lay on her back as before, her eyes closed. Her expression was calm; the familiar features of her face were now covered with a veil of sorrow and deep fatigue, and seemed different now. It seemed that only now the mother had finally rested after endless hard work.

'Poor thing!' Alexander thought bitterly, trying in vain to reconstruct in his mind from this wrinkled, bloodless and sorrowful face the gentle picture of his mother, unclouded by any wants or troubles, as he had known it in his distant childhood. 'She worked all her life to rest properly only in this carriage amongst chance strangers . . . And what about her distress here in Uzbekistan in my awkward family, where she worked for everyone, but lived behind a

curtain.'

Once again Khodjayeve's words about the curtain in the Kara-Daryinsk Hospital and the curtains of life rang a distant echo inside Alexander. If he had heard about this earlier, before cancer had been detected in his mother, he would have laughed condescendingly at the strange Ikramov. But now Alexander was overcome with such despair; he was extremely envious of Doctor Ikramov. The lucky fellow! His mother wasn't dying of neglected cancer, Doctor Ikramov had only indiscreetly forgotten to look behind the damned curtain in his surgery before the arrival of the health department superintendent. But behind Alexander's curtain his sick mother was dying and in two years he had not looked once to see what was happening in his own rooms behind that curtain . . .

When Khodjayeve returned, Alexander was sitting with his elbows on his knees, covering his face with his hands.

Khodjayeve quietly squatted by the bunk and wordlessly watched the old woman's head rock in time with the train, the wheels of which were rattling over a branch in the tracks before some large station.

CHAPTER 27

Khodjayev asked Alexander to wake him at two in the morning, so that they could take turns at keeping a vigil till morning. They had only to survive the night somehow, and in the morning would be in Tashkent. But Alexander did not wake him at two, nor three, not even at four, when the darkness thinned and in the grey light of dawn things slowly began to assume their usual appearance.

Exhausted by a whole day of running around, Khodjayev slept soundly on the upper bunk, while Alexander sat leaning against the small table separating him from the top of his mother's bed and thought: how annoying, how offensively annoying to die at sunrise! Not in the evening, nor during the night, but at sunrise, at the threshold to a new day, when everything came alive, woke up, was resurrected . . . The more he thought about it, the more convinced he was that this terrible conclusion would come exactly at sunrise. For this reason he was afraid of falling asleep.

His mother lay as if in a trance. Occasionally she opened her eyes for short periods and stared blankly up at the ceiling where the ventilation fan rustled from time to time. Then Alexander leaned over her face and asked in a whisper.

"Some water, mother? Or maybe you want something else?"

His mother did not reply.

He did not hear her breathing, did not trouble her with the futile checking of her pulse, however through some special sense characteristic of a son rather than a doctor he knew unerringly that his mother was still alive.

Before morning he dozed off without realising it, his eyes closed of their own accord, and for a time he ceased perceiving the existence of himself and his mother . . . When he awoke with a start, as if someone had called him, it was light in the carriage and passengers were beginning to wake here and there. A child cried sleepily on the other side of the wall, someone rushed past with towel and toothpaste, the guard ran through the carriage, but the activity had not woken him, it was his mother's stare. His mother's head was turned to one side and her eyes looked at him. That was probably why it had seemed to him that someone had called him. He jumped up and rushed to his mother's side.

"What do you want, mother?" he asked in a trembling voice, sensing that right now the thing he had been expecting all night would come, something he did not want to happen.

His mother's blue lips moved and parted slightly. Was it his imagination or did his mother really want to say something, unable to utter the words any more. Alexander's strained hearing caught only the first syllable of a word, something like "re . . .".

"Remake the bed?" he asked and brought his ear to his mother's lips. But in reply he heard only a drawn-out sound:

"S-s-s . . ."

"Want something from the restaurant?" he asked, turning to face her, and he saw her eyes fill with disappointment and longing.

"Pereyaslav?" he almost yelled out and his mother's eyes closed silently.

'She's dreaming of her Pereyaslav . . . ' thought Alexander and hastily, so his mother would still hear, said loudly: "I'll take you there, mother."

But his mother made no more replies.

Above them Khodjayeve woke up and immediately jumped down.

"Morning already?" he was surprised, looking in the window where the sun's rays were about to appear. "Well, why didn't you wake me?" Khodjayeve looked angrily at Alexander. "You need sleep too, to gather your strength, and you . . . " He looked over the shoulder of Alexander, who stood with his back towards him, shielding the mother's face, and asked him: "How is it?"

But when he saw the motionless blue lips and the wax-grey hand hanging limply from the sheets, he realised that there was no longer any need to ask questions. Still, he picked up the hand and though it took some time, managed to locate a very faint pulse.

"Agony," Khodjayeve ascertained and carefully lay the bony hand on the bed.

Just before Tashkent the mother opened her eyes again. Everything still living inside her tensed up, her chest and mouth winced convulsively and her eyes grew wide open. Cold and alien, they no longer saw the son or his superior, but looked with a distant stare at a point near the fan on the ceiling and stopped there with an astonished look, as if the mother had seen and realised something there which other live people could not see or understand . . .

. . . What the orderlies carried on the stretcher into the first-aid room of the Tashkent railway station was not his mother, but something else, and Alexander turned his eyes, red from sleeplessness, away from it. He looked dully out the window at the empty, now sad train, which he had caught to Tashkent with his mother, and he felt sorry when the train moved slowly back into the park . . .

Who knows how long Alexander would have stood there star-

ing out of the window seeing nothing, if Khodjayev had not come up from behind and asked softly:

"Where do you want to bury her?"

Alexander turned around in surprise, not quite understanding the question.

"What do you mean — where? In Pereyaslav." He shrugged his shoulders and helplessly spread out his arms. "Where else? Only in Pereyaslav . . ."

Khodjayev studied his haggard face, aged several years in one night, not sure whether Doctor Postolovsky was speaking about some Pereyaslav consciously, or whether he was lost in grief. However, when a little later Khodjayev deliberately asked what the terminal station was and which line it was on, Alexander answered soberly:

"The station bears the same name — Pereyaslav, it's on the Southern Line, but the town is about twenty-five kilometres away by road."

Then Khodjayev took him by the elbow and lightly squeezing it, promised softly, but firmly:

"I'll make all the necessary arrangements. Don't worry."



And he did make all the arrangements. In the second half of the following day he brought Alexander a train ticket and a baggage check for the galvanised coffin with the body of the mother to the hotel where they had spent the night. Handing Alexander his pay and holiday bonus, Khodjayev offered to lend him a few hundred roubles of his own just in case. Alexander put his own money in a side pocket of his jacket and refused the loan. Forgetting to thank Khodjayev, he lowered his frozen stare at the baggage check, and held it in his hands a long time, not sure of what to do with it.

"You'd better put it in your passport," Khodjayev advised him, and Alexander silently obeyed. But for a long time afterwards he continued to run his fingers over the spot on the jacket where the passport and check lay, as if making sure that he had not lost them; or maybe something pained him there.

Khodjayev took Alexander to the station, put him on a train to Moscow and a few minutes before the departure said in parting:

"I appreciate your loss: it is immeasurably great. What can I say? The human mind finds it hard to agree with the absurdity of death. But be brave. People like you are needed by many . . ."

Whether it was because of these simple warm words or because the last minutes of being with this generous, considerate person, who had done so much for him in these days of grief were coming to an end, something heavy shifted in Alexander's chest and he uttered

painfully, almost screaming the words out:

“If only you knew what a debt I owe her! How can I repay her, when . . .” He could not finish saying, ‘when my mother is no longer alive.’

Khodjayev leaned over to Alexander’s ear and whispered:

“We are all in debt to our parents and our fatherland. We are debtors to our people. Pay *them* back — the people are immortal.”

Khodjayev rose sharply, for the loudspeaker on the platform loudly announced the train’s departure. He took Alexander’s limp hand in his, looked sadly into his tired face, and suddenly placing his strong hands on his shoulders, hugged him tightly to his chest. Then he moved away, looked at him again, and disappeared into the passage.

CHAPTER 28

In Mykhailivsky Khutir Alexander left the train for a breath of fresh air, the first time he had stepped outside since changing trains in Moscow. Though the station building did not differ much from the others down the line, and nearby a pine wood encircled the station just like the one he saw from the window near Briansk — this was Ukraine. The change was evident even in the name 'Khutir', written in Russian and Ukrainian over the main entrance, and also in the dissonant chatter of voices along the platform. His attention was drawn particularly by the gentle voice of an aged woman shouting into the crowds for all to hear:

"Nice fresh *ohirochky!* Anyone for *ohirochky?*"

He savoured the long since heard soft pronunciation of Ukrainian women and thought: 'How happy mother would have been now, hearing these voices, so like the ones in her beloved Pereyaslav, seeing this woman in old peasant boots offering everyone her cucumbers . . .'

He wandered to the head of the train where the steam engine was resting, ready to race off again, and he felt strange that he was already in Ukraine, but without his mother, alone. His mother no longer existed; all that remained was a galvanised coffin with her body . . .

A verse from one of Pushkin's poems came to mind, something he had probably once read in a school text in Pereyaslav:

*And though it's all the same
Where my dumb body rots
I would still prefer to rest
In my native land . . .*

Alexander came up to the open doors of the baggage car where bast bales were being unloaded, and someone called out to someone else 'take the check,' moved carefully around the bales labelled with sloppy black addresses, and holding his breath looked inside. In the left corner, between a sewing machine and a child's bicycle, the coffin's galvanised side reflected a dull gleam. It was hard to believe that it contained only his mother's body, that she herself was gone

and would never be! Never . . .

He turned away and stared into the distance. The endless tracks stretched south to where his rueful mother's thoughts always soared, to that distant Pereyaslav, and he said firmly to himself:

"I'll pay off everything, mother. Everything!"

Whether it was the gentle warm breeze which blew in from the south and lightly stroked his face, or whether it was something else, he didn't know, but for the first time since all this began, tears came to his eyes and left him relieved. As if he had reconciled with someone or something, as if he too had been forgiven everything that lay behind him. He was only sorry that Marusia from Pereyaslav was not there beside him. She would have been just the person to meet him here with his mother's body at this first station on Ukrainian soil . . .

DICTIONARY

- Akriquisator – one who distributes medicine to combat malaria.
Aleikum salam (*Uzb.*) – said in reply to the greeting 'Good day'.
Anofeles – mosquitoes which are carriers of malaria
bala (*Uzb.*) – boy
bonificator – one who eradicates malarial mosquitoes.
borsch (*Ukr.*) – beetroot soup.
cancer oesophagi – cancer of the oesophagus.
chapan (*Uzb.*) – a short coat.
chumak (*Ukr.*) – in the past, those who travelled with oxen teams to Crimea to bring back salt and other goods to Ukraine.
disphagy – a swallowing disorder.
hambuzia – a small Italian fish introduced into malarial areas of the USSR to control mosquitoes by feeding on their wrigglers.
huzapaya (*Uzb.*) – dried stalks of the cotton plant used for fuel.
Isah-ibn-Mariam (*Arab.*) – Jesus, Son of Mary.
mariologist – specialist in tropical diseases.
molotsko (*Ukr.*) – baby talk for 'milk'.
MTS – Machine and Tractor Station.
mullah – a Moslem versed in theology and law.
oris (*Uzb.*) – Russian.
pepist – jocular term used in Soviet medical circles to describe those doctors who make money on the side through private practice.
phiala – small cup used to drink tea from.
pilaf – spiced dish of rice and lamb.
pyrizhok (*Ukr.*) – a type of pie.
rahmet (*Uzb.*) – thank you.
varenyk (*Ukr.*) – dumpling.
yahshi (*Uzb.*) – good.
zhupan (*Ukr.*) – a warm coat.

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ISBN 0 908480 01 6