SHORT STORIES SERIES

YEVGEN GUTSALO

A PREVISION OF HAPPINESS

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Yevgen Gutsalo

A PREVISION OF HAPPINESS
AND OTHER STORIES

PROGRESS PUBLISHERS • MOSCOW

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ЕВГЕН ГУЦАЛО

ПРЕДЧУВСТВИЕ РАДОСТИ

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Ever since I was a child I loved books. They not only opened up a new, unknown life, new countries, new peoples, they were also wise counsellors. They taught me to understand myself, to open up in my own consciousness whole archipelagos of emotion and thought, and they taught me to reach in another that which constituted his individuality.

It was probably this interest which led me to begin writing myself.

Writers of my generation never had to fight. We saw the war of 1941-45 with the eyes of children. Yet we felt compelled to write about the war, like our older comrades who themselves knew the terror of death and pain of loss.

I can still see that tragic summer of 1941, when the invading fascist hordes came to our land. My ears still remember the scream and explosions of bombs.

I was born in 1937 and we lived in a pretty village of Novaya Greblya, Vinitsa Region, where my father was a teacher. I remember the faces of those fascist twentieth-century barbarians—they all seemed to look alike; I remember that dreadful winter of occupation. And I remember the time when the Soviet army pushed the fascists back, when they retreated, killing and burning as they went.

Many were the houses burned down in Novaya Greblya, many the families ruthlessly killed. We children hid with our mother in the cellar, among the potatoes. When the ceiling shook from explosions, soil seeped down on our heads. And how inexpressible our joy when we knew that Soviet Army units had entered the village!

We writers of the younger generation who came to literature when the last shots of the Second World War had long ago been fired have no right to forget our childhood. Remembrance is our duty.

I have turned to the war theme, the theme of fascist occupation in many of my novels and stories. The heroes are ordinary people—mothers with their children, old men, old women—those who could not fight, but upon whom fell the horrors of wartime. Their behaviour under occupation, their manner of thinking, of feeling developed from silent protest into one that was active.

In the stories "A Nocturnal Cock" and "The Old Teacher", included in this collection, I have taken the theme of childhood mutilated by war. Children live in this warring world, they absorb it, it becomes etched in their memory, and remains with them all their lives long.

How tragic that war-scorched childhood!

But even childish consciousness is resilient. Like a frail flower it reaches out to the sunshine of goodness and justice, the sunshine of a harmonious life, to peace. In children their innate nobility, their instinctive urge for all that is humane comes out on top, and from the difficult wartime conditions they emerge matured, courageous, with stern experience of life.

I love my country where I was born and grew up. Its people, its history, its landscapes, its songs have long become part of my consciousness, determining it. And landscapes have for me an especial significance. In such stories as "A Vision of Autumn", "A Memory of a Blue Spring", "Gloaming, Gloaming" and others I have tried to recapture the atmosphere when a human being merges with his surroundings, that condition when a man feels a deep understanding of nature. In other words, I have tried to show pictures of nature as interpreted within the human consciousness, arousing sensitive, kindly emotions, when a person becomes, as it were, a participant in those eternal processes which occur within nature.

I truly envy those people who live close to nature—foresters, hunters and fishermen. I like listening to their tales, I have the feeling that

they are people of a special sort, able to hear within themselves and within nature that which others cannot hear. Probably the harmoniously developed person of the future will learn not only to understand his own emotions, not only to read the book of his own heart, but will certainly learn to understand the wise, talented book of nature.

I try to disclose the best traits in my characters in their relations with one another. When I think of people among whom my life has passed, I always remember responsive, kind women always ready to help, upright men who are ready to defend the weak or those suffering injustice, children whose enquiring minds are wide open to the world.

Love, they say, is an eternal theme where it is easy to be repetitious and difficult to be original. Yet this theme has always stirred people and still does. In love, the characters in my stories ("Bathed with Lovage Root" and "A Campfire in the Night") stand out as personalities. I always carefully watch my characters, when visited by real love, changing inwardly, acquiring a kind of spiritual glow. Warmth and sensitiveness, the ability to feel for another, the desire to understand another—these are the qualities I try to give my characters.

I have to confess that the most difficult thing for me is to write about the present time, my contemporaries, although I know them best of all. Perhaps this difficulty arises because I am writing about living people with whom I am in constant contact, and they will most certainly be

the strictest critics of what I write, of the extent to which I have understood their inner world, their hopes and dreams....

I think about the present time, I write about it. I write about my native Ukraine—a region of big towns and boundless fields, of picturesque mountains and mighty rivers. In pondering about the times, about himself, and the socialist society and its future, a writer makes his own contribution to life, inasmuch as he moulds its artistic image, one that will influence contemporaries and descendants.

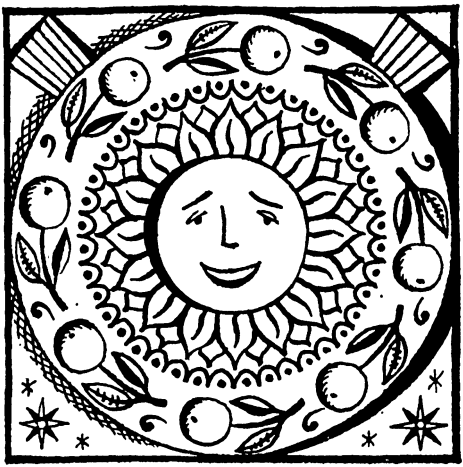
With a deep excitement I think of my books of tomorrow, in which I shall try to show our realities more fully, more vividly, with a variety of characters and human destinies.

Literature is an important factor in international life. Studying the works of foreign writers we not only discover a new, unknown life with all its distinctive colouring, we also find many common features close to ourselves and easily understood—in everyday life, in mentality, in hopes for the future. And of course, the really important thing is not what separates, but that which unites.

For after all, we all live for the future, think of it, work for it.

Yevgen Gutsalo

Kiev, 1973



A VISION OF AUTUMN

August, a Flaming Burst of Love

Where does it take its beginning, that love for our own native parts?

Buckwheat stands pallidly gleaming, with blue flickers of cornflowers and patches of yellow rocket, with the occasional hum of a bee passing over it or through it. The buckwheat is gently pale, it is still young, autumn has not yet laid a skilled brush on its green leaves to paint them golden. But around the buckwheat all else is reaped, and low whitish-yellow ricks lie like two giant blocks of ice on the bright stubble.

Bad weather has not yet touched that stubble so it still has its flowers and gives forth a good smell—of ripe wheat, of bread.

A herd of cattle moves over the stubble along a slope, each cow as clear as though painted by a painstaking artist—its colour, its white or black patches, its straight or twisted horns. A number of lads are occupied with the cows, herd-boys accompanied by a dog that jumps and wags his tail, plainly begging for something.

On a farther rise a cluster of green trees is half hidden, but the top is bare, probably something was sown there; now it is reaped and the stubble stands fresh and pale, looking even cleaner for the blueness of the sky that leans its broad breast down to it.

You gaze at it all, drink it in and know that you cannot but love this little piece of the world which is your own, your love is like a lump in your throat which you are unable to swallow.

When and whence comes this love for your own black soil?

Sunflowers, like balls of petalled golden fire hang on their stalks over kitchen gardens; the sunflowers draw your eye and thoughts. They blaze behind fences in the yards, they come right out to the road, and as you look at them you want to smile, you find yourself for no particular reason feeling kind and gentle. The sunflowers have risen over the earth and with their light flame seem to lift you too, to give you wings.

You love each blossom, each sunflower smile, it is all close, your own, infinitely dear—when

and whence came that love and left within you the sunflower flame?

Mallow blazes on its stalks. Those velvety flowers of your childhood and youth, your mature years—throughout your life they have stood before you, looking at you with their good eyes; their furry stalks, their furry leaves give out an inimitable fragrance, and how sweet to draw in that faint scent; they seem to promise immortality, an infinity of life. You feel that if now you or some other tried to pluck even a single one of these stalks with their dark crimson bells, it would be torn not from the earth but from your own heart. The very thought of it brings a tremor, a foreboding of something bad, something evil.

Whence comes this love, this tenderness, this intensity today, on a warm day in August? You feel that to tear a marigold from the soil would be plucking not a flower, but your own heart from your breast, to hold it bleeding in your hand.

Falling Stars

At night, going somewhere or returning, you suddenly think of the sky; you raise your head, and seeing the countless golden swarm above you feel for a moment that your eyes, your very spirit soars up to the honey-glow of a multitude of golden bees and remains there. You feel suddenly light, as though you had left below on earth the heavy penitential chain which your body has for you become, the accustomed hand-

cuffs, and now shine down onto earth with the best, kindliest rays which have been ripening within you through your whole life.

The longer you gaze at the stars, the more you muse upon them; they are distant, yet for you they have come close, so close that you could almost reach out and grasp them. And when you drop your eyes again, everything round about suddenly seems to disclose a new meaning which formerly you never saw—either because you had no wish for it, or because it concealed itself from you. You look with new eyes at the road on which you stand, you catch the smell of dust impregnated with the dampness of night. With new ears you hear the crowing of a cock in a nearby shed. You fix an intent, inspired gaze on the man moving towards you through the evening dusk.

Possibly it all gains new meaning from the stars, it was they that filled you with this sense of lightness you absorbed there amidst them in the height and have not yet had time to expend.

When you are in this mood of bliss it hurts to see a star fall. You can almost mark the place from which it tore away and the place where it should fall for no cause, you gaze into the darkness of the sky where the long track was drawn an instant ago and burned out—you gaze as though hoping that the star is not dead, it will flash up again somewhere else. But no, it does not reappear.

Suddenly you imagine you saw it flicker over there, a greenish-white light, that it flew again as though it had leaped for a whirlpool, wishing

to drown, but the water in its deadly darkness kept retreating before it until in one final second the falling star overtook its surface, plunged into its depths and vanished, leaving only a track to glow for a little while on the cold cheek of the nocturnal sky.

Then you have no time to note which star, or where, tears away and leaps down. What draws them here? What drives them away from their own swarm? What is this irresistible, implacable strength of the old earth? Is it not the strength which stirs in me that love which firmly holds everything in this world?

Look back—the days you have lived fly after you, leaving in the darkness of the past a track that is momentarily extinguished yet inextinguishable.

The Orchard Flames and Dies

The quiet, comfortable glow of a great orchard is dear and domestic. Because a house is not bounded for you by walls and ceiling, it extends to embrace the whole yard and garden. You love it in the winter when it is black-and-white with snow piled in cushions under the tree-trunks and then stretching in sheets. You love it in the spring when, so recently frowning and even dry, it suddenly blossoms, rejuvenated with flowers, when it laughs, rejoices and is glad—then you feel its joy as your own. But it is probably dearest of all when the heat of summer softens and the air is filled with the melancholy mood of

approaching autumn. It is not yet here, but it can be felt in the first early mists, the first day of heavy chill. The day is quiet and weary, and there is a kind of desperation in the crowing of cockerels that stabs the dense air—crowing that is still cracked, raucous, uncertain.

You had noticed that the leaves were scorched by the heat, that there were some red ones among the green, that some were prematurely yellow, and you thought nothing of it because it was still high summer. But now, on this grey, heavily cool day, these leaves are no longer merely scorched by a superfluity of sun, they are the first sign of autumn, they suddenly have their own smell, that sharp, bitter tang. They make you feel melancholy, and that melancholy gives birth to new moods in your psyche, new thoughts, and causes your heart to beat faster.

In the spring the orchard is bright with flowers. Now it begins to glow with fruit. Raspberry-tinted apples are like dying embers. The rosy-cheeked ones blaze more brightly because of their underglow of gold, but it is the really golden apples that stand out. And the more they fill, the faster their leaves fade and the more brightly they glow on the tree. Then when they fall they lie amidst the crushed, trampled grass like small wax toys come here by some miracle—shut your eyes and they'll vanish!

The orchard is filled with the dark blue mist of ripe plums—so many that the branches cannot support their weight and lean to the ground, and their thick mist drops one ripe oval, then another. It is like a very slow elegiac rain when

drop after drop breaks away from a branch and, falling into the blue pool round the tree-trunk, adds to its depth and colour.

So many are the plums that it is impossible to pick them all. Those with the strongest stems dry up on the branches, wrinkle and blacken.

The orchard is still alive but it is gradually dying, and you with your whole being are sensitive to its fading and drooping, you are filled with sympathy for it, for its wild fruitful strength now in decline; the thud of a falling apple, the slow descent of a bronze leaf draws a melancholy response from you.

Your thoughts turn of themselves to the time when the orchard was still young, when nightingales trilled in flowers heavy with the morning dew. Your thoughts go back to the time when one warm evening you came across an ancient stump by a hedge, dug into its soft rotting centre and among the rot found fragments that glowed. They were not bright, they smouldered but did not burn away, the glow outlined them but could not burn palm or fingers.

This rotten wood could have been slipped inside your shirt and would have felt cool. Place it on your forehead, your lips, they will not be burned. In childhood this is an amazing thing—and incidentally, I continued to find it amazing with childhood long behind. They lighted up your childhood days, those fragments, and their reflection shines on your memories today, giving you delight as though you really had once held the Fire-Bird in your hand.

Now again you walk through the orchard, and among the grass aud leaves you find the familiar pear stump—it has sunk right into the ground, its sides lean weakly, and when you thrust your hand into its damp centre you feel the strange softness of rotten wood. It is still day and there is no glow, the fragments lie in your palm, yellowish-white dust smelling faintly of moss and mould. Carefully you tip it back into its old place and cover it all with leaves. But in the evening you come again, drawn by the warmth of hope, and this hope gives you a pleasant glow as though already you were actually holding in your hand that small, weak light, the light of your childhood. But the rot has no more glow, there is only yellow dust, dead, no matter how much you toss it from hand to hand and blow on it. The magic is gone, that magic so recent and still palpable, and it seems amazingly strange, you simply cannot reconcile yourself to the fact that this is how it is, not otherwise. You are ready again as in childhood to tuck that dust inside your shirt, knowing it will not burn you yet still hoping—what if it does?!

Regretfully you place the rotten fragments back in the hole, all that is left of the stump, and cover it with leaves—just in case. Let it lie there, because it must surely start to glow again some time, if such a short time ago—in the summer—it had its pale glimmer.

You listen, and the orchard, its voice hushed, tells you in an unhurried whisper about the autumn which is creeping up so carefully and caressingly, and in the gathering dusk you see

fallen pears gathered into a pile on the dark earth tremble with a faint light, and under a spreading apple-tree great golden apples glow like miniature suns.

Stay, Swift Moment!

You lie out in the field in the sultry heat amidst the grey wormwood, amidst the white and yellow flutter of daisies, at the very bottom of a wave of thyme that rolls over you intoxicatingly, and your head goes round. You are dizzied by that wild onset of field scents, its eternal aroma, or perhaps by an old childhood fear—that all these grasses and weeds on which you lie, which you have crushed, will grow up through you, through your whole being. Shut your eyes, let imagination run free and you feel you are part of the earth, that all this green growth is rising through you, fed by your juices, your blood.

Or perhaps your head goes round because here in the field the grasshoppers whir so loudly, because a kite hovers in the sky and you feel the concealed savagery in its smooth flight, and the sky itself seems not to be standing still, but circling the earth? No, your dizziness is surely because here, in the field, you feel how softly time drifts past.

It seems to wrap you in its waves, those waves roll over your eyes, glide down your chest, along your outstretched legs, and when you move a hand you feel Time, you touch it—it flows silkily through your fingers like a rippling brook,

it flows between them as the wind flows. Time is neither warm nor cold, it simply flows and vanishes, passes and is gone.

Time is like a resilient wind blowing through your fingers, it is like a rare gift of nature, the materialisation of hope, the embodiment of sadness. No, this is no flock of pigeons flying over you and settling on the stubble, walking leisurely about, pecking at grains. It is no pigeons that sit back on their tails, raising small heads on gleaming necks. It is not their gutteral voices like alien speech that comes to your ear, it is Time that has flown here, that pecks the scattered grains, sitting back clumsily on its tail, neck gleaming iridescently. It steps over the ground, once, twice and with a heavy beat of wings flies low, shooting up just over your head as though afraid, and you see its sharp, piercing eyes.

The kite appears once more, against a soft white cloud it hovers motionless or flies with it—what is it following from this height, what can it see? Has it marked down a hare, a partridge, a gopher? And will I be able to see when it drops like a stone, or not? That kite up there, too, you think, it is not just a kite, it is like Fate, like the inevitability of Time, and in the dreadful whistle of its wings when it falls stonelike that inevitability emerges instantaneously, transformed into the desperate shriek of a wounded bird or the last groan of a small field beast numbed in its claws.

The pigeon, and the kite—both are Time in its differing manifestations, Time, which here on

the free expanse of the steppe flies past on their wings.

You fall asleep, lulled by musings about Time, and when your eyes open you suddenly see the sun hanging low before its setting. It seems broader and paler, now you may look at it, across its white face a greenish-black strip of cloud hangs motionless. It is as though somebody had drawn the top of a distant denticulated forest, and the denticles send sun-sparks flowing upwards and sideways. You feel that sun and cloud lie immobile for all eternity, that this momentary drawing will remain for ever as a sign that time has halted. This black-and-white drawing made by sun and cloud glows, shoots out shafts as though breathing primordial inspiration, and might this mood but remain for ever so light.... But time has not stopped, the sun has not stopped, it glides down; the denticulated forest is no longer a forest, it disintegrates, becomes a dying fire, at the bottom something emits a few last sparks—and it is finished.

Autumn Frosts

The first frosts. Each blade of grass has been dipped in silver, the paint has dried and now the blade stands in its silver chain-mail, with its green soul, its valour all enclosed within it. A whole regiment stands ready, especially many in the shadows by the house and under the fence. The backs of leaves too are covered with rime, and hang motionless under its shaggy

gleam, but the sides turned to the sun have either not accepted this granular brightness, or it has thawed. A little later, when the sun rises higher, when the air is warmer, the blades of grass will slip out of their cold chain-mail, heavy and beautiful, and each will carry a dewdrop, large or small.

With each hour, each minute the day enters with greater confidence into its inheritance and fills with sunshine. Over the earth a great blue vessel seems to hang, brimming with light, its fuller, deepening glow giving the impression of a medley of juices—dark blue, golden, white and violet. Oh, that ringing vessel of day, that loud, thousand-voiced vessel! It seems filled with the triumph of light, a rich sparkle that gives greater significance to the green on earth. But whence comes the feeling that on the green leaf of your soul the frost has left its silver trace on the back, and now in your heart you clearly feel that unexpected tingling shiver? You have thought of something good, something which must come to you in the future—and feel that on the fine tender growth of your dream, on its shaded side the faint grey of frost has spread; a bird flies over, the upper sides of its wings carry the sunshine, but below there is white down—or would it be a trace of rime? And then there falls upon you that mood when you are so sensitive to everything that you need but say a word and as it still flies, not yet alive in sound, it too becomes silvered on its dark, unlighted side.

The next morning too there is a ground frost—not even a real frost, just its light passage, its

tracks. But now within a few days (just as though the days were not bright and cloudless) the leaves on the trees begin to shudder and twist, as though they had fallen suddenly ill and could not catch their breath. There has been no rain, no cold, but already the maple has become bright in a night or two, it stands almost transparent among the dark limes, so light in its pale gold, as though each individual leaf held a quiet, unfading glow like a smile that holds both pain and joy. And that bright maple no longer smells of dry summer warmth as it did so recently, but of a damp that heralds fading, a smell that flows from all around, making your head spin and lending an edge to all your sensations.

Ground frosts are like the grey on the loosened hempen plaits of day, the grey which visits the morning and then vanishes, apparently without a trace. A quiet, fine September, its quietness broken only by the weak chilly rustle of poppy heads rising on long brown stems from the weeds, or the sudden crack of a bean-pod lost amidst the potato leaves, dried up and bursting to free its speckled seeds. September warms its sides on the hills, finds shelter in the forest glades; September wearily narrows its eyes against the bright sunshine.

Wherever you may be, wherever you may look you see the traces of recent frosts. Light and silent as their tread may have been, the grass is flattened where they have passed, and shows dark watery spots. The aster petals are scorched, here and there the leaves on cherry trees hang lifeless, and the head of the marigold has darkened and

fallen onto the breast of other flowers which are still blossoming, gay and rejoicing. And you feel as though your own spirit on its farther side is likewise scorched by the frosts, darkened, and your words have faded and withered....

A Prevision of Happiness

In some way or other I found out that even before we knew one another she too loved to linger in the park, especially in spring when the lilacs blossom; many sorts grow there and the clusters have not only various forms and colours, but various shadings of those colours; and she also loved to be there at the end of summer when the breath of autumn is merely guessed, and up to the time when the latest flowers faded and everything stood naked, its clothes dropped beneath the chilly, blue feet of frost.

I was drawn there most strongly in the autumn, because at that time these rolling banks of the river, planted with trees from all latitudes, blazed with the multifold colours of dying autumn fire.

When I learned that she too, even before we met, went there almost every day, my own wanderings in this park, partly left to run wild, partly tended, took on another light, and everything I had seen and felt I likewise saw differently. I suddenly felt as though my love for her had been born earlier, before we ever met, it had been born there among the autumn leaves, and even then I could not but be conscious of her

presence. I was drawn there because it was the place where she was, I was drawn by a feeling of love which, of course, belonged to her, but which I transferred to the autumnal beauty of nature, so that nature itself seemed to have a soul, as though it were in love with me.

I began to delve into memory: how had I seen everything then, what had stirred in my soul? I do not know if it was really so, but in my memory all my paths were bathed in sunshine, the trees stood golden and I myself seemed to sparkle, dressed in autumn gold. I might have stood amidst the maples and hardly any could have seen a difference. In my memory I was already in love, and now I am convinced that it was with her, none other, although at that time we had not met. Or perhaps it only seems we did not know one another, for she was often there, and even then I could have felt her power over me. Perhaps I already knew, although in a different form, the feeling which I later linked with her name? For my precognition had found her there, my sub-conscious knew of her, felt her power—and it mattered nothing that my eyes rested on her considerably later.

I have asked her whether she did not have, even before we met, the same kind of feeling, did she not have a premonition that we would surely meet. She gave no answer, only smiled; either she could not remember, or she simply did not want to disappoint me.

Now, turning everything over in my memory, I do not believe, I reject the idea that we knew one another only from one definite day, one defi-

nite moment—the one when our eyes met. No, we knew one another earlier, a long, long time ago. Perhaps not always, but certainly from the time when autumn entered the green world. Even then my prevision was of *her*, even then it was inevitable that we should meet. It matters nothing that our eyes met later.

The Bitter Light of the Moon

In spring the moon has a buoyant, youthful light. It is like spring itself which awakens and gives birth to all. The moon too is as it were new-born, and the dark blue of the sky is its font. The summer moon is like a silver carp, with its sheen, its living, cold beauty. The summer moon smells of summer, with all its scents—kitchen gardens, fields, orchards and rivers, and when you walk along a country road raising the dust and looking at it, then the moon smells of dust too.

Autumn has come bringing her own moon, and this moon is not like others, for Autumn has chosen the one she wants, according to her taste, and the taste of the autumn fields and the autumn forests. Each night the sky leads it out and forgets it up there; it is large and round, golden like the pumpkins, dominating up there in its magnificence. When you stand alone by an ash, not yet bare but already thin-leaved, the moon too smells of ash, their bark and twigs. Stand by a bush covered with flowers like hoar frost—these flowers called frost flowers, and the moon,

its light, seem to have taken their tint from them. Stand by a viburnum and its pink reflection lies across the moon, adding to it an unquiet, saturated tint.

The trees have carpeted the ground with their crimson leaves, which now snatch desperately at the moonbeams, and in each damp leaf the light quivers as on a river, one wave lies on the shoulders of another, and that one farther, and the reflections sway, roll from side to side, their fire dying and blazing up again.... In the field a fox leaves his den and looks up—in his quick eyes too a sharp sparkle appears; he himself, red and fluffy, seems to be gilded by the moon, by its autumn brightness. Everything in the field is filled with the light of the moon—faintly dull, bitter, and the fox seems to be breathing in that light, with its slightly tart flavour, dense, filled with the chilly scents of sleeping wormwood and dead grass.

So long as the earth is still green the moon does not seem so lonely, but gradually the earth sheds its attire; the trees cast off their light garments, shivering forlornly, trembling in the wind, and the moon seems to be disrobing with them, releasing golden veils which pour down like a waterfall, lying on roads, rivers and ravines; and still the moon drops its veils but cannot shed all its shine and sparkle.

Look how much of its golden robes hang on birch branches, on maples, on viburnum, how many of its precious rags lie on shrubs and in the grass. The moon has cast a layer of grey astrakhan over the meadows, laid out velvet strips along

the roads, with a generous hand thrown black silk over the ploughlands, and from sky to earth hung its embroidery, its chasuble, the delicate work of transparent breadths, and enwrapped you too, your hands, your face, in transparent mist, a filmy quilt from which you cannot break free.

The autumn moon smells of fallen leaves, the scent they give out when swept into piles, or lying in ditches and along fences; and it gleams, too, in a quiet melancholy, like the shimmer of love in your past, which destiny once gave to you.

The Hedgehog

The children brought him in from the woods and played with him for a long time. The hedgehog refused to unroll, he set out his needles; the children tried tickling him with a stick—no good. They even set the dog on him; the dog snorted, smelled the prickly ball, tried to turn him over with a paw but got pricked and retreated, tail tucked in between his legs. Finally the children decided they had plagued him to death and ran off home as it was already evening, leaving the hedgehog on a pile of leaves.

I saw the little hedgehog when I left the train and took the path through the park and the big garden. A fire was burning somewhere, and although I could see no flame, thin smoke lay low over the ground in a blue cloud. There was a strong smell of antonovka apples and something else that held memories of childhood, when we

had raked up leaves and burned them in the kitchen garden where the potatoes had already been dug.

And there lay the hedgehog, rolled into a tight ball.

I stopped, waiting for him to move, to run. But the hedgehog might have been dead. I bent over him and touched the needles—they were hard, they almost pierced my hand. Then I pulled my right arm back into the sleeve so that it covered my hand, stooped lower, pushed the hedgehog into the skirt of my coat and carried him away.

The hedgehog did not unroll; he lay there, heavy, and pricked my hand; when I held him closer the needles went into my side. Finding the hedgehog, bringing him home in the skirt of my coat gave me a pleasant feeling, and I smiled as I walked.

In the room I switched on the light and only after that laid him down in a corner by the stove. He lay there as though dead, except that he seemed to have rolled up a little more tightly and his needles stood out more menacingly. Well, all right, it's up to you what you do, how you behave, I thought, maybe you're frightened, cautious. Perhaps you can feel that I've no bad intentions, but after all you're a wild creature from the woods, you're always frightened and suspicious—perhaps that's why you're still alive. All right, here's an apple for you, and another. What else shall I give you?

I went out, collected a few fallen pears from under the trees and tipped them out in front of

the hedgehog who apparently had not moved at all.... A-ah, I suppose you want some milk, I've heard you like it.... But there was no milk in the house, I had to go to the neighbours. They gave me some in a purple plastic cup—oh yes, they knew it was for a hedgehog, probably the one the children had been playing with that day. So they hadn't killed it? See what a tough little creature it was!

Light filled the room; the hedgehog lay motionless in the corner. Of course, he had heard me go out twice, but he was still frightened about something, alert and anxious. I poured the milk into a saucer and set it by the apples and pears. What could be bothering him? The electric light? Probably. He was used to moonlight in the woods, this would be something strange.

I switched off the light and holding my breath, sat down by the window. If only I could hear a movement, a rustle! Of course the hedgehog could feel I was in the room. Through the open window came the cool night air with its autumn scents. Sitting there I gradually dozed off and when I wakened heard a rustle on the floor. I felt for the switch and turned on the light; my hedgehog was motionless in the corner, he had not moved. Could the children really have killed him with their play? If he would drink that milk, now, he would come to himself and feel better at once. Probably he didn't touch it because in the woods he wasn't used to it. Little silly, you ought to try it—you'd like it once you did.

I slapped my forehead—of course! Out I went into the yard, tore up some dry grass by the house, then collected withered leaves on a piece of birch bark, broke off a few twigs, and took it all into the room. I spread the grass and leaves on the floor and from the twigs made a kind of small tent—there, hedgehog, your woods and a bed for you smelling of autumn, what you're used to. I was pleased with my effort; now the hedgehog would feel untrammeled, he would respond to my kind heart and understanding.

I switched the light out again—here's your night, just like the woods, you can have your supper and go to bed. I lay open-eyed, listening, but heard nothing. The hedgehog was probably listening for my movements, too, and alert to danger, did not stir.

When the grey light of dawn filled the room I saw the hedgehog where I had left him the night before. Had he been there like that all the time? Didn't he want the pears and the milk, had I spread out the grass for nothing? Or perhaps he was one of those hedgehogs that cannot stand confinement, and die? That idea alarmed me; I dressed quickly, and busied myself in the room without ever taking my eye off him. Was he pretending? No, hardly—and I felt more and more upset.

I put him in a basket, sprinkled grass on him and carried him back to the place where I had found him the previous day. I did not leave him on the path, however, but on the turf nearer to the park, so that nobody would see him. As I went home I kept thinking about him, scolding

and abusing myself. Why had I taken him? Imprisonment would always be imprisonment for him, no matter how soft and kind. The children had not tormented him quite to death—and then I had come along and lovingly finished him off!

In the end I could not stand it and went to have a look. I parted the grass, looked to one side, the other—no hedgehog. A weight rolled off me. I was not angry because he had tricked me—a good thing he had! If only nothing happened to him now, if only he got back safely to the forest. Of course, autumn there was not like autumn in the room, it was the real autumn and even the pears would be better because they were his own, not given to him.

Yes, the hedgehog had really made me a gift of happiness because he had tricked me, he was alive, he had run away to the woods.

For some days the apples and windfall pears lay in the corner by the stove, the saucer stood there with milk, and there was a smell of fading twigs and grass.

A Banquet of Colour

The late plums still hung in the orchards, late apples weighed down the branches, when all of a sudden snow fell. Down it came on the plums, the apples, the greenish-brown pears, falling thick, soft and fluffy over all. People came to their doors and looked about in amazement—who had ever seen snow so early? Sometimes it

fell in May, on the spring green, but the green did not fade from its chill, it only seemed the fresher. But now—so early, when you couldn't yet throw a stick at winter, as the saying goes, when not everyone had even dug their potatoes and the sugar beets were not yet taken in from the fields—snow!

But human bewilderment did not halt the snow, it descended softly on trees which had not yet doffed their colourful autumn dress and made them even lovelier, because the fluffy snow lay in mounds on the branches and beside its whiteness the gold of the leaves was more rich and magical than it could have been alone. And the maple leaves, trimmed with snow, looked a little darker, their colour was no longer on the surface alone, it seemed to have gained depth, as though it came from the innermost part of a wet gleaming leaf. The crimson of the autumn fading blazed with new shades, it was a brilliant bouquet.

The snow fell but there was no feeling of winter. The air had no sting, it held its autumn softness and even grew warmer. And the snow itself did not cool or chill your soul or the soul of plants, it was like newly ground flour, soft and fragrant, spilled in the mill out of a torn sack.

In a little while that flour covered orchards and houses with its white softness, it rejuvenated the trees, stripped away their apathy, their melancholy and stirred them to living cheer, so that they looked strong and energetic, revitalised. And everything round about seemed really pur-

poseful, as though it had all acquired a definite objective which Autumn had previously taken.

The snow-clouds sailed away, the sun shot gay arrows at them from his golden bow—and how rich, how unaccustomed Autumn now seemed! Dressed in rich robes, she had recently borne a faint look of patient suffering, but now—all the pain had gone from her face, she stood there happy, sparks melting in her narrowed eyes, breathing out health. And she had indeed adorned herself well, with wreaths of onions and bundles of maize heads hanging under the cottage eaves, and the full, still unthreshed heads of sunflower; she had adorned herself with clusters of blue-black plums, and winter apples, she had spread a quilt of grass over the meadows where snow-silver had been cast down in strips on the velvet carpet; and she had made herself collars of the fur of foxes, the sparkling fur of fairy-tale animals....

The sun sent down warmth and gradually a change came in Autumn's look and posture. The snow thawed, it grew less and less, only a few rags remained on the branches, and the strips on the ground were shrinking. Autumn was still full of cheer, she displayed all her Gipsy ornaments, displayed brilliant rags; but look a little more closely and you could see the recent melancholy returning to her face, rising from the depths of her wounded being. She caught at every handful of snow, each fluffy flake because they had given her youth, given her beauty, but the sun was stealing away the snow before her eyes, it

was pitilessly cruel, and Autumn, it seemed, was ready to submit to all.

Soon she really had submitted ... and aged more than before, because for that sudden snow which in the beginning made her glad, gave her vitalising coolness, for that brief burst of joy she now had to pay in gold, it fell thickly and more thickly onto the ground, wet and clinging, and nobody wanted to gather it up because probably nobody knew how precious it was.

GALATYN

Forest, forest, forest....

A black sea of trees with white islands of snow-covered fields and slender threads of roads from village to village, lakes frozen and wind-swept into tumbled rags, the winding foxtails of forest streams—they too armoured in ice. The villages are hidden in woods, barely visible among them, for the trees march right up to the houses—firs, pines, birches and alders growing along the country roads, beside the sheds and cottages, and encircling the orchards as though trying to expel them, because for centuries past this has been their sandy soil, fertilised by their needles,

leaves and twigs. And possibly the forest might have won in this silent, stubborn fight against the orchards had the apple and cherry trees not had the help of man.

A furrow runs through the great dark sea, as though driven by a giant plough—this is the river. Its right bank is high and here the villages stand, a long way apart; trees come to the edge of the bank and wait as though debating whether to take the last step down into the whirling river water. But on the left the bank is low and level, overlaid with the whiteness of bleached linen right to the horizon; this left bank is almost bare, with a few clumps of bushes, but as one goes farther from the river more trees appear, and right on the horizon they gather into the tall frowning forest.

In the spring the left bank is flooded, the water is still standing when alders and willows, submerged almost to their tops, put out a fluff of small leaves. The left bank is then blue and green, swathed in mist or basking in the sunshine. Suddenly—the water is gone, and almost in a day the grass has risen, tall, soft, silky and fragrant. In the hollows there are still large pools, and a few trapped fish which later spawn; and later still, in the summer, shoals of small fry dart about, and even an occasional big fish. Gradually the pools dry up and the fish crowd together, suffocating. If the shepherd lads do not catch them with bare hands or simple gear, they finally perish on the dried-up ground.

Hares abound, wild goats appear, and at night wolves sometimes howl at the village of Moravs-

koye which stands on the rolling right bank. They howl at the smells carried by the wind, the smells of human dwellings, they howl at the weak-eyed lights with which the village peers out at them, they howl into the night, and they just howl. They flash their green eyes, raise their muzzles as though looking for some place, and finding it beyond the clouds they leap up and run, run, driven by the eternal fear of pursuit.

The ice has already gone from the right bank, but it still holds out by the left, and looks as though it would stay for some time; the rapid current will break it off in chunks, wash it away, drag it, carry small floes along the river, but nevertheless along the left bank the snow will cling, almost up to the warm days.

Semyon Galatyn may have been asleep, or perhaps only dozing, rousing now and then to sink back into the clinging waves of drowsiness. Somewhere by the stove a mouse was rustling; apparently it had found a piece of old rusk and kept gnawing at it all night. At first Galatyn thought of getting up and driving it away, but then he became used to the rustling and crackling and squeaking, and when the mouse was quiet for some time he even worried—why was it quiet, let it go on gnawing the rusk, because when it did, you didn't feel so alone in the cottage, there was someone with you.

He had heated the stove in the evening, but by morning it was cold, and he could feel the chill of its bricks in his bones. He had closed it, both stove-door and damper, but see how quickly

the warmth was gone! What wonder, when the wind raged and wouldn't rest. If there hadn't been the wind the cottage too would probably have been quiet, but just as in bad weather Galatyn felt every aching bone, so now he felt every supporting post, every cross-beam, every door-jamb in his cottage. What creaked and where, where the draught came in, where something shook—he felt it as though it were his own body. Perhaps it was because he had so grown into his cottage, become part of it, as it were, so that he could have carried it with him everywhere as a snail carries its shell.

A long, high-pitched whine came from the chimney, it grew into a howl, broke off suddenly, then something clattered as though it were falling—and silence fell, broken only by an occasional sob as though somebody wanted to complain but had not the courage. Was it a witch who had come up against other witches and had a scuffle? Heaven forbid, they could knock the chimney about so that it wouldn't draw, and all the smoke would come down into the house. But Galatyn thought even of the witch without anger, musingly, because he had known that witch a long time, ever since he felt and realised his own being in the cottage. And now he was glad that she was there too, she hadn't gone away but fidgeted about in the chimney as she had always done. Let her play her games.

E-eh, it wasn't just one mouse behind the stove now, but two, hark to them squeaking! Probably fighting for the dry rusk.... Galatyn

smiled and sighed in the darkness. He seemed to doze with that happy feeling brought by the sobbing of the witch and the squeaking of the mice. And he dreamed of himself, but in his youth, when he went to Bessarabia to earn wages. The steppe stretched vastly round him, free and happy, and a lone kite hung high in the sky. Suddenly a flame seemed to pierce Semyon's head, something roared and flashed in the sky, and from the roaring and fire a woman's youthful face was born. In his dream Galatyn thought that she was like the Virgin because a nimbus shone round her head and she held her hands as they are painted on icons, but if so, then why was the Virgin's face like that of his dead wife?

For some reason the light was slow to come; Galatyn pulled on his chilled felt boots, shrugged into a heavy leather coat and went outside, as though he wanted to see where morning was hiding. The night gazed at him with blind eyes, and just as unseeingly he looked into the night. But as he trotted to the big gate his sight cleared and the night looked at him with eyes less dark.

There was a breath of spring brought by the wind; it carried a spring fragrance, barely perceptible, then a little more, then suddenly swept it all right away to the side, and only tough air with no scent at all surged past Galatyn. The old man's feet slipped on the snow softened during the night, and he held onto the fence as he walked towards the river. The fence broke off short—this was the bank, because the cottage was almost over the drop. When it was built it had stood a long way off, but it had lived in this world for

many decades and in this time it had advanced almost to the river.

Galatyn stopped on the brink. One more step and he would be down there. That was how part of the fence had gone, together with the washed-out bank—there it was, below, the remains of the fence. The wind whipped tufts of foam from the gleaming white caps of seething waves and carried them right up here, onto the rise. The snow was spattered with porous slime, with wet foam, and very soon Galatyn's face, hands, coat and felt boots were wet too. The waves beat against the bank, grunting and gurgling, and the old man listened surprised to the noise, unable to make himself step back where no foam would reach him.

The wind rushed over his head, as tough as sacking blown taut and roaring. Sometimes the sacking was quieter as though slackening. But what was happening below, if you looked down from the top, was incredible; ice still clung to the left bank, and the wind from the meadows now and then drove over clouds of snow; they were carried to the river and hung over it, lending fantastic mystery to its black current. Great waves rode down the river, they pushed away from the left bank and reaching the curve where Galatyn stood above, grew and reared up still higher, then hurled themselves with all their force at the sheer rise. They charged the bank, wave after wave, and there was no end to them. From that whirlpool heavy groans rose and sometimes he seemed to hear the gasps of the dying and savage battle-cries. And although the bank

refused to surrender, pieces kept breaking off, clod after clod, and Galatyn heard them tearing away and splashing into the water.

It was not the first time he had come out onto the bank in wild weather to stand, watching and listening to the river. At first he had had to go farther, to the very end of the vegetable plot. But life had slipped past unnoticed, and gradually the river had come closer, so that his vegetable plot melted away where it met the bank and shrank with every year. Some years ago it had become so small that the old man could plant only onions and tobacco, there was no longer any room for potatoes. So he had asked the kolkhoz for a strip of land the other side of the village, by the forest—the river was hardly likely ever to get that far. But perhaps you shouldn't be too sure, perhaps some day it would eat its way there too.

Had Semyon's father ever imagined when he built the house here on the bank that the water could advance nearly to the door? He had not thought about it, others too had not thought, for why look too far into the future when today the river is conveniently close, with plenty of fish, and meadows where you can get in hay for the winter, and all the withies you want to plait baskets? What better place could you ask for? People somehow forgot (or simply didn't want to think of it) that for centuries Moravskoye had never stayed quietly in one place, for centuries the river, washing away the bank, had driven the village from one place to another. People had had to seek new settlements, transporting their

cottages or building new ones. Another generation and it would be the same thing. There were some who had moved into the farther villages, tucked away in the forest, far from the river. But of these there were few, because people were used to the place, to the homes of their fathers and grandfathers, it was their land, it did not want to let them go, it held them firmly. So they usually moved from the river end of the village to the forest end, never thinking that some day the river would roll up there, too.

Galatyn was wet through with the spray and foam, he was chilled to the bone but still did not want to go. Whitish snow-clouds now flew densely at the river, now vanished. Taut breadths of wind sometimes sank, sobbing weakly, but after a little while again bellied out, howled, muttered, and seemed to crack from enormous tension.

Galatyn glanced at his cottage which stood almost on the brink and seemed to hesitate—whether to make that final step or not....

"Good morning, grandad." This was little Mikhlik. He stood in the doorway, school books in one hand, a jug of milk in the other. He said nothing for a moment, looking at Galatyn with a hint of mischief, then added, "Greetings and congratulations, as they say".

Galatyn made no answer, and the boy asked, "You're up already?"

"Yes", said Galatyn.

"What are you doing?" he rattled on—in talk he took after his mother.

"Sitting at the table," the old man mumbled.

Mikhlik shifted from foot to foot and announced, "Mum's sent you some fresh milk. She's just milked, it's still warm, you can drink it right off."

"Put it on the bench."

Mikhlik obeyed.

"Have you got bread, grandad?"

"I'm not without", said Galatyn placidly.

For a moment the boy stood there, as though wondering what else he could find to say.

"We didn't have any school yesterday," he confided. "The teacher was ill. If only she's still away today!"

Galatyn said nothing. Small Mikhlik frowned, trying to remember something, failed and blurted out, "Well, good health!"

"To you, too," Galatyn answered.

He drank the milk. It warmed his throat, and flowed in a warm stream down his gullet. The milk made him feel better, his eyes brightened cheerfully, and he thought affectionately of little Mikhlik's mother who never forgot him—one day she sent milk with the boy, another day she would run in to bring him something or give the house a good cleaning and make dinner. And she was no relative of his, not even distant, but there, she never forgot an old man was a living soul and needed a little attention.

After breakfast Galatyn went out into the yard. The wind had died down and there was a smell of thaw. Cocks were crowing and Galatyn wondered why his was silent. His cock and two hens were by the big gate, now and then drop-

ping a beak as though they wanted to peck something from the snow. Grandad took a handful of grain from the entry and scattered it; they came running heavily, unwillingly, and began to peck.

"Hi there!" came from the street.

Galatyn turned. His neighbour Mikhailo Nesvyatipaskha, the kolkhoz electrician, was outside the gate. He was short and fat, like a cottage loaf, with a round, good-natured face. His jacket was flung over his shoulders, his shirt unfastened and his chest thrust forward like a pouter pigeon's.

Galatyn went to the gate.

"A roaring wind last night, eh?"

"Aye, it roared all right, like the devil riding," the old man agreed.

"The water'll soon be getting up to you, now. You'd do best to sell out and be done with it."

"Who'd buy this tumbledown place?"

"Well, that's true, too," Mikhailo sighed. "If only it stood better, if there was a good plot like other folks have, then you could sell it for the site, but this one.... You can't talk of a vegetable plot when the river's stealing a bit here and a bit there every year.... Well, I suppose you'll be getting out of here come spring, you can't keep on this kind of way."

"Get out? Where? When I've lived here all my life?"

Mikhailo stared at the old man, surprised.

"What, d'you think to stop here? The river'll swallow up that shanty of yours any day, before

you've time to turn round. You could go live with your children and naught to worry about."

"E-e-eh," Galatyn creaked, "that's easy said. I've been here my whole life long."

"End it with your children. They'll look after you, you'll be warm and cared for. Look at me, now—my house is further from the river, it could stand another year or two. But I'm not a fool to wait till the water washes it away under me. I'm going to build me a place, and not in Moravskoye, in Berezovaya Rudka. I'll be moving over right soon now."

"Good luck to you", said Galatyn. "But I'm in no haste. If it's God's will my house won't fall now or any other day."

Mikhailo laughed until his cheeks shook.

"Just listen to him! Everyone else'll be washed away but Grandad Galatyn won't be touched! D'you know a spell, words of power that'll make the water do your bidding?"

"Mebbe I do, mebbe I don't," the old man grunted.

"Aye, that's it, you don't. And maybe you'll say just what keeps you here? If you caught fish I'd understand it, but this way? The wind'll blow down that shanty of yours if it doesn't fall by itself! What holds you here?"

"What holds me?" Galatyn repeated. "Likely it's just what's slackened off on you long back."

"Me? What's it got to do with me?"

"Not only you but others like you. There's naught can hold any these days," the old man said angrily. "Likely because it didn't hold them before. All hither-thither, seeking some-

thing better—that's all they think of. And what's wrong with it here?" Under shaggy brows his eyes stabbed angrily and his thin dark lips trembled. "If this isn't to your liking then another place won't keep you either, you'll make off soon's it gets a bit difficult."

"But why stop if there's nothing?" Mikhailo's face was mocking. "It isn't everyone's like you, grandad, water splashing under your doorway and you can't get your backside up to shift."

"'Backside'," Galatyn mimicked and his eyes flashed. "That's all you think of, feared to get it wet or chilled—mebbe a boil'll come up on it!"

"The devil himself wouldn't look at yours, naught but sitting-bones," Mikhailo teased.

"Devil, eh?" Galatyn was getting really angry. "Ye run from the devil into his arms. I know naught of him because I don't think of him."

"Well, have it your own way," Mikhailo laughed placatingly. "It's good advice I'm giving you, with a good heart, and you—"

"You mind your business and I'll mind mine. Mebbe all I want is to die here where I was born and lived my life."

"Well then—" was all Mikhailo could find to mumble. His shining face held an acid expression as he turned to go. Under his breath he tossed back, "But one thing—it isn't the cranks that hold the world up."

"And who does hold it up?" Galatyn enquired. "The likes of you, mebbe?"

"Not you, anyway, grandad, not you," and Mikhailo made off for his own yard, without waiting for an answer.

The old man seethed with rage, he wanted to say something more biting. Galatyn rarely wrangled with anyone, but he was sick of this Mikhailo and his wordy advice—it was not the first time the man had pestered him. Let him build himself a house in Berezovaya Rudka if he wanted, but how could he, Galatyn, leave this place when his roots were sunk deep in it, when all his family were buried here? You couldn't move graves from one place to another, so why should he move himself?

The river—what of it? It wasn't the first year it had beaten and raged, gnawing at the bank, but it only broke its teeth, the hard ground didn't want to crumble.

A girl's gay, cheerful voice overtook him as he was going in. It was the village nurse Larissa Dzivot, a plump likable girl with a pale downy face and firm folds by her mouth. She was bursting with health and stood so firmly that she could probably have wrestled any of the lads in Moravskoye.

"Look here, grandad, why don't you come to the hospital?" she asked, walking briskly up to the house, her round mother-of-pearl eyes sparkling.

"Because I want to go on living."

She laughed—laughter poured out of her not in a smooth ripple, but in a cooing waterfall.

"You always say the same thing."

"Because you always ask the same thing."

Larissa turned serious.

"I've been asked this time to tell you your son's wife has a daughter, she's been discharged and gone home. It was a woman from Yamishchi asked me to tell you, I don't know her. They want you to go over because they haven't seen you a long time."

The last was spoken almost angrily; the nurse turned and went, while the old man gradually digested what he had heard. It was true, it really was a long time since he had been to see his son Dmitri, who lived some distance away. Galatyn had known that Froska was expecting, but was she already back from the maternity hospital? And another girl. They had one, they'd wanted a boy. Though maybe a girl was better these days, with a lad you never knew....

Galatyn started fussing about—he had to get ready for the trip. He ought to take a present for the baby, too, but what was there? He dug down into the battered old trunk. The materials and clothes in it smelt of incense and the life Galatyn had lived with his old woman. He turned over what she had left—maybe he'd take this blouse, she'd never had it on, it was new, with flowers embroidered on it. Yes, he'd take the blouse and a kerchief, that had been granny's, too. When the child grew older, even if she didn't wear them it would be something in memory of her Grandmother.

The best way to Yamishchi, the shortest, was along the old road by the river. Here and there it had long ago collapsed together with the river bank, but where it curved away it was still good. Moravskoye village stretched along the

bank in a long line of cottages and as Galatyn passed them, he recalled involuntarily that this was where Mikola Kibets lived, and here Ivan Bratitsa. There was Grigor Olyapko's house, and beside it Panas Poikhalo. But he simply couldn't remember who lived the other side of Panas—he had certainly built himself a solid house and a good big barn, with a brick keeping cellar, and a well.

He kept puzzling about who lived the other side of Panas until he was out of the village and had to turn away from the river into the forest. The narrow trail that led directly to Yamishchi began just after the last houses. It was a sledge track. Trucks avoided it, probably for fear of getting stuck. Memory suddenly seized Galatyn—it seemed only yesterday his son Dmitro was born, he almost halted with the sharpness of the impression. As though the boy had been born only yesterday, and now here he was with a second child of his own, you just couldn't believe it.

A shout came from behind, then the hiss of runners; a sledge halted and a boy's voice invited him to get on. The thin pleasant-faced driver looked at the old man as though he were an old friend. Sitting on the rustling yellow straw Galatyn tried to remember who he might be, but it was no good. In the end he gave it up and asked.

"Where might you be from?"

The boy turned and said carelessly, "Moravskoye, where else?"

"Whose lad are you?"

"Maxim Stupak's, whose else would I be?"

The old man knew Stupak who had been in charge of the kolkhoz stores for many years. During the war he had joined the partisans in the forest. He came back with a beard and still kept it, but for the rest, you'd never notice anything special about him.

"You'll likely be going to Yamishchi?" the boy asked.

"And how do you know?"

"What I know, I know," said the lad with dignity.

Galatyn waited as though digesting what he had heard, then spoke again.

"If you're all that clever, why are ye driving horses?"

"D'you know, them horses have got just as much sense as a lot of folks?"

Galatyn wondered whether he should take offence, but since he regarded himself as clever and sagacious, decided against it.

"Would ye be comparing your own brains with a horse's, then?" he asked slyly.

"Eh, grandad, how'll I say?" A smile touched his lips for an instant. "You don't live for brains, you need brains so's to live."

"Aye," said Galatyn slowly. "Maybe you're right at that. But if ye think it out, eh? If ye think it out, then you have to worrit about your brains all your life long to live the way ye want, not just the way it happens."

Young Stupak made no answer—perhaps he was pondering over what the old man had said. The trees ran to them and then swiftly hid behind

their backs, and when the sledge slowed down the wood flowed past more slowly. A small field slipped by and they were in the forest again. Soon afterwards Yamishchi glimmered before them with its pale tree-trunks and its smell of domestic smoke.

When the driver said goodbye to Galatyn he was more serious, which made him seem more mature.

Dmitro's house was warm—hot, in fact. The inside of the door was steamed into tiny drops, the windows were running so that you could not see out into the yard, and every now and then long urgent tongues of flame shot out of the stove. When grandad stopped in the doorway those flames warmed and softened his face, and his body, chilled from the drive, drew in new vitality.

Froska was washing nappies in a wooden trough. A strand of flaxen hair had fallen from under her head-scarf and lay, damp and clinging, across her cheek. She went to meet the old man and kissed him on both cheeks, her soapy hands held away and back from her.

"We waited and waited and you didn't come," she said in her light voice that seemed to come not from her chest, but straight from her lips. "We sent messages to you with one and another and a third, and waited and waited...."

The baby was in a blue carriage; it was new, all the metal parts sparkled. "Naught else would suit Dmitro, he drove about everywhere, all over the region, to get this beauty." Galatyn

bent over the carriage; the baby was asleep, the tiny face, browless and colourless, bore an intensely offended expression.

"Oho, a fine lass," said Galatyn but he was neither impressed nor delighted, there was no smile on his face.

Froska, jealously watching him, broke in quickly.

"She's a fine lively lass, full of life."

"Oh aye." Galatyn pulled the bundle out from under his coat and started to unroll it. He had brought her a present. A blouse and kerchief in memory of her grandma.

Froska took the things; she did not just toss them into a corner somewhere, but examined and praised them, so as not to hurt the old man's feelings. And the greater her admiration and praise, the better pleased he was. He had now thawed completely, either from the steamy heat, or the affectionate words which his daughter-in-law gave without stint.

Soon there was a rumble in the yard, and Dmitro burst in. A couple of heads taller than his father, with heavy cheekbones and slightly bowed legs, he looked a man of mighty strength. Seeing his father he was as pleased as a child, grinned, winked.

"Well, well, well, you see our family isn't dying out, new forces added! Eh, dad—!" He hugged his father. His cheeks were cold, his lips too, and he brought in a sharp smell of petrol and exhaust.

"The way I see it," he rattled on, "never give up a position you've won, hang on and then

go forward!" He pointed at the baby-carriage, where the child had wakened and begun to whimper. "There, dad, a new human unit!"

"Hu-man u-nit." The old man shook his head.

Froska set the table briskly, drew a half-litre bottle from a corner behind the bed, and the two men drank to the baby's health and well-being.

"A pity it isn't a boy, though," Dmitro sighed. "We both wanted a lad, and here's a female again!"

"The way things are, mebbe it's better," put in Galatyn. "Womenfolk don't leave their family and home and go running off blind ye never know where."

"That's a true word," Dmitro answered. "But it's the menfolk as holds everything up. If there's a man then there's a bit of land or something, there's a house and a family and enough and to spare. And then the woman's safe and sure and has no fears. But without a man she's all of a turmoil."

"O-ho-ho!" Froska put in. "The way you're blowing your trumpet, I just don't know you!"

"Froska!" Dmitro shouted. "It's a true word I'm saying, and you keep it in mind."

"I don't like that talk," the woman said sharply.

"You don't like it because you've got me here by you. If I wasn't here, God help you, then you'd like it right enough, when you'd have to trust to your own wits for each thing and all of 'em. Then you'd remember. A-ah, neighbour, come in, come on in!" He beckoned a man just

putting foot over the threshold. "I was just thinking to send for you!"

The neighbour was young but evidently no stranger to a glass. He tossed it off, caught the first word he heard and at once plunged into the talk as though he had been there from the start.

"Now you tell me this," he said to Galatyn, banging the empty glass down on the table and trying to draw his sparse whitish brows together in a lowering frown, "why it is there's so few children in a family nowadays? One, or maybe two—and no more. Why's that, when you'd find a good dozen or maybe more earlier on, wherever you looked? What's changed? You tell me, you've lived a-many years, you ought to know."

"It's because nowadays if there's aught doesn't please 'em, they kill the child before it's born, and that used to be called mortal sin," Galatyn answered morosely. "In those days they feared God, and they saw God's soul in man, but nowadays there's only the man and naught else, and men—they've got used to killing them."

"So that's it," said the neighbour; his eyes narrowed to sly slits and sparkled greenly. "Now, I think different, I'm of another mind. In them old days folks was more heartless than they are now, they didn't care what they bore children for and turned them into the world—for sorrow, then let it be sorrow, none cared, for death, then death be it. But nowadays each one's feared for his child, quakes over it lest some ill thing happen, doesn't know what best to put

in its mouth and how best to keep it from sickness. And because of that love, as is more like fear, they're feared to have many children."

Galatyn listened, and what he heard appeared to anger him.

"Where did ye learn the like o' that? Thought it up yourself? How d'you make it all out? When my old woman and I had Dmitro, you think we didn't care what was coming to him? No matter to us if we brought him into the world for happiness or sorrow? And the same with the others as have scattered all over?"

"But Dad," said Dmitro soothingly, "he wasn't talking about you, he meant in general, folks today."

"Don't ye try to twist things round! Don't I live in the world wi' all others? And weren't there little 'uns enough in my house? Aye, plenty, and God give all the same!"

The neighbour caught a look of reproach from Froska, and although his mouth was open to say more, he shut it silently. The host filled the glasses and they drank again. Galatyn kept pace with the other two—he drank because he was irritated.

"And the maids—look at them," he said angrily. "Let her love him or not love him, but soon's she bellies out, off she goes for an abortion, and there's seldom one as bears a child wi' no father."

"Seldom, you say," Dmitro demurred. "There's plenty of those these days!"

"And in the old days," his father continued, ignoring the interruption, "a young wife bore

children until her strength for it was clean gone and she could do no more."

"And what of it?" the young neighbour put in. "Half of them just got sick and died!"

"Half may have died," Galatyn agreed, "but that's as God willed—live or die, it was written on their brow. But they didn't kill them before they was born. You say folks are kinder now, and love them more, but where's your kindness and your love that comes with what's ill? Love has to be love, always, in all things, with no guile, but these—full o' guile and call it love."

"It isn't a human being when it's only six or eight weeks in the womb," said the young neighbour, but without his former heat. "My wife bore me one partisan and had five abortions. And nothing dreadful in that, we live all right. But how'd we have been living if we'd six kids? That way you don't live at all, you do naught but think of them."

"Aye, that's it." Galatyn's bony finger stabbed at him. "There's a-many of you's got callous because you only think of yourselves and take no pity on your unborn children!"

Froska was again making signs to the neighbour to keep quiet and not pour oil on the flame, why get an old man all worked up, stubborn as he was? Dmitro spoke with the same purpose of soothing his father.

"You had pity for us, and I for my child," with a jerk of the head towards the baby carriage. "So we'll care for each other all our lives. And it isn't that you were better or we're worse, it's just that human kindness always was part of

human beings and always will be. In each of us the father wakened long ago, but the son didn't die, either."

Silence fell. They ate with careful deliberation, to avoid any return to the recent dispute in which each kept to his own opinion. At last the daughter-in-law chose a good moment.

"Tell us how you're getting along, Dad, what it's like at your place."

Galatyn complied with alacrity.

"I get along like others, and thank ye kindly. When I've got something I'm glad, when I haven't that's all right, too. I never was one o' those as always whines and complains and says life's all wrong. I don't complain of any, or of myself either. Because if you can't find accord with yourself, you'll never find it outside."

The neighbour and Dmitro made no answer, probably they had no wish for another argument. After a short pause Froska spoke again.

"Cherekhi's a bit down river from Moravskoye, but what's going on there—!"

"Aye, it's a real to-do," Dmitro joined in, glad that the subject was changed.

"They say the river there's come right close to the graveyard," Froska went on. "They thought it was still a good way off, but then they saw it's got close up. And they're real bothered."

"Yes, what'll they do now?" Dmitro backed up his wife. "What'll they do about the graveyard? Live folks can move over to some other place, but a graveyard—you can't move that the way you do a house."

"Why not?" asked the neighbour animatedly. "They move soldiers' graves when they need."

"To move graves and graveyards is a sin," said Galatyn. "The old village lies there buried, let it rest in peace. A man should sleep where he lived his life out."

"That's right, of course, Dad," said Froska. "But it's the river! If you could tell it not to wash the bank away and it would heed you! Nobody's ever moved a graveyard, there's none ever heard of such a thing. But is it any better if the water washes it all away and empties it? Something has to be done."

"That's right," Dmitro agreed. "Our grandfathers' land isn't only where they're buried, it's everywhere, and they'll rest quieter and safer in another place."

His father cast a sharp look round. He seemed to be weighing his words. But when he spoke it was quietly, without raising his voice.

"You're the same in all—things get hard and you go running off yourselves, they get real hard and you're ready to move graves too. Nay, nay," he moved his hands, waving away possible objections, "I say naught about the cemetery, if it has to be then it has to be."

Galatyn broke off and frowned. He wanted neither to eat nor to drink.

"But about God you—" the neighbour began, but catching warning looks from Dmitro and Froska stopped short, emptied his glass, made a face and then hid it in a bowl of pickled mushrooms.

At that moment Dmitro's elder daughter came flying in, hot and rosy. Tossing her schoolbooks on a corner of the bed as she passed she made straight for the carriage, bent over the baby, smiling and cooing, talking, showing her fingers, and tickling her forehead with a long strand of flaxen hair like her mother's. It was only after some moments that she tore herself away from the baby, saw her grandfather at the table and with the same gladness flung herself at him, pressing her rosy cheek against his wrinkled one.

"Father, we wanted to talk to you," Dmitro began unhurriedly when the door shut behind the neighbour. "We've something to settle."

"Talk isn't a battle, start right off."

This was something Dmitro and his wife had evidently discussed, because she quickly seized the initiative.

"Dad, when are you going to come and live with us? You sit there all alone with your cock and hen as if you'd nowhere else you could lay your head. You don't think we'd grudge you your bread, or couldn't find a place for you at the table here?"

"It isn't much o' that bread I'm needing—"

"That's true, you don't need so much and you wouldn't wear out a chair or bed."

"And never mind if you did," Dmitro caught it up. "Are we your children or not?"

"There's children of all kinds, nowadays," Galatyn mumbled, following some thought of his own.

"That's true," said Froska, "but those all kinds are others' children, not your own."

"I'm shamed in front of folks," said Dmitro hotly. "Looks as if we don't want you. I can't go about explaining to everyone how we keep asking you and begging you and you won't come, you don't want to!"

"I'm in my own home there, but here—" Galatyn defended himself wearily.

"And you'll be at home here too!" cried the granddaughter who had been listening.

"At home, but not my own."

"Listen, Dad." Dmitro was getting exasperated. "Why d'you have to be so stubborn? All the same, the river'll take your house, if not this year, before autumn, then next spring for sure."

For a long time they urged the old man, insistently proving what he ought to do, where he would be better off. Galatyn no longer argued, he sat silently listening. His frown was so deep that his forehead resembled a ploughed field. His eyes narrowed until they were almost concealed, only the pupils gleamed under lowered lids. Everyone was sure he had been finally convinced by their insistent urgings.

Although Galatyn slept badly, hardly closing an eye all night, Dmitro was already gone when he rose in the morning. Froska was busy about the house, her daughter helping, with occasional glances at her lesson books. The baby was still asleep. The house was very hot, like the previous day, only by the frozen windows was there a breath of coolness. The glass, covered by a thick layer of frost, looked dark blue in the weak light of dawn.

Galatyn rose in bed and sat silently, a vague figure in the dim light of the room. Fire was crackling in the stove and something was boiling over, hissing as though the fire was trying to burn a trickle of water and couldn't. When Froska crossed the room the big glowing mouth of the stove threw her crooked shadow on wall and floor.

Galatyn dozed off, sitting, and when he opened his eyes the room was quite light and hot food steamed on the table. At breakfast Froska told him about the district hospital, and the birth, and what each of the women there had talked about. It was probably not the first time she had told it because the elder girl did not listen. The hot food burned the old man's mouth and stuck in his throat—and whether because of that, or because of the vodka he had drunk the previous evening, his head seemed full of buzzing bees, then he felt dizzy and clutched in alarm at his heart.

"I'll go and take a look at this village of yours," he said, listening uneasily to the noise in his ears.

"That's right, go along, take a walk."

The frosty air stung his face, the dry snow squeaked resiliently under his feet, then muttered, an irritable sound, as though voicing discontent, complaining of aches and pains. Galatyn halted by the keeping cellar and the snow was quiet for a moment, then again resumed its groaning, its sobbing, its complaints and noisy muttering.

A great grey quilt was drawn over the sky and the blind-eyed day crawled over the village,

slowly, as though feeling its way. Yamishchi smelt of smoke—the chimney of Dmitro's cottage breathed pine wood, but the neighbour's chimney smelt of straw and leaves—his wife must only just have lighted a stove.

Galatyn crossed the kitchen garden to the home pasture sprinkled with untouched snow, withies standing in big fluffy clusters; he crossed the pasture, passed the kitchen gardens and went on and on.

Something seemed to be missing. At first he could not understand—what was this lack? He stood in a wide space that felt weightless because the few scattered houses were not enough to give it solidity, but that wide space lacked what Galatyn felt a need of, something he had had all his life, something he could not do without. The river! That was it. There was no river here.

Galatyn came out on the road, broad, little used, and walked along it, looking at each house, at the people, as though hoping to find something, someone familiar. But everything here was strange—both houses and people. Even the air was not the same as in Moravskoye. It was forest air, heavier. And the smoke smelt different, and the cocks shut up in sheds against the frost crowed differently from behind their closed doors, not with the voices Galatyn knew.

A horse snorted behind him, and runners hissed.

"Why, grandad, on your way home already? And I'm on my way back to Moravskoye too, got through all my jobs."

The sledge was driven by the Stupak lad who had brought him to Yamishchi the previous day. His eyebrows were white with rime, his lashes too, and it clung to the down on his upper lip.

"You'll be glad to meet me even if you don't say so! Well, all right, get on and we'll be off."

The lad spoke with loud gaiety and seemed really pleased to meet Galatyn. But the old man stood in the middle of the road and could not make out what this pleasant-faced slender lad wanted of him.

"Or maybe you want to walk it? If you do, then I'll be getting on." He touched the horse with his whip.

Something seemed to nudge the old man's back, he went up to the sledge, and rolled onto his side in the straw because the horses started off quickly and the runners took up their long whine broken now and then by such a penetrating screech that it chilled your spine.

"Listen to that!" cried young Stupak. "It smells of spring, soon spring'll be here!"

Yamishchi slid away behind, and the farther it retreated the easier the old man's heart felt—as though someone had been clutching and constricting it, and now gradually relaxed so that it expanded and felt free. Fields stretched away along the road, dazzling in their pure white, then they raced into the woods and the dark trees, sprinkled with snow, seemed to welcome him with almost human concern—or did they seem like that to him because he was on his way home, to his own place?

Two nights before the cottage had trembled from the buffeting of the wind that forecast spring, it had shuddered and groaned loudly, but this night it creaked softly, something rustled as though rolling from place to place, and a stealthy crack came from the attic—the frost was very hard. Galatyn lighted the stove in the evening, but the old house quickly let the heat escape, it leaked out as though it had never been, and the damp chill reached the old man from all sides, it lay on his cheeks, it penetrated his chest covered by the sheepskin coat, and chilled his feet the worst of all. He moved them one way and another, heaped up rags of all kinds on them, tried rubbing them—but still they were cold. Again a mouse was somewhere by the stove with an annoying scrabbling, and a piece of old newspaper which lay there rustled in a way that made Galatyn feel colder. In the chimney everything was quiet—the witch too was probably shivering somewhere in the frost.

The old man could stand it no longer. He rose, put on his warmest things, and again lighted the stove. First he moved the ashes aside, then laid two thick hornbeam logs and across them some thin pine logs. He got straw from under the hearth and pushed it in—the next moment it was bright with golden flame which quickly set light to the wood. Gradually the old man's face thawed, he stretched out his hands to the warmth; soon they were hot and the heat seemed to spread from them to his whole body.

Galatyn pulled off his felt boots and set them close to the fire; then he sat down near the stove

and thrust his feet almost into the flames. He drew them back only when they were really warm.

He went outside. The night was very dark and coming from the warm house the frosty air at first seemed hot, but as his face cooled the air cooled likewise. The distant stars scattered over the whole sky had a dead, icy sheen. Unhurriedly Galatyn went to the edge of the drop; below, the river lay quiet and tamed, the water was a smooth black surface, but by the left bank its ice was pallid, transparent, sleepy, with no wind to ruffle it and no snowflakes to mist it. The darkness of night hid the boundless expanse of water meadow, reaching to the forest on the horizon, from whence came the loud, mighty and implacable wind of spring.

ONE NIGHT

The light from the window quivered on the knotted harness pole and trembled, a pale patch, on the dry mint. These last year's flowers, hardened by frost, lashed by wet snow and rain, had their own fragrance. His mother blew out the lamp and the light patches vanished. A horse struck a hoof and snorted. Semyon turned up his collar and the wind ceased to play round his neck. The stars were clear, they looked cheerful but unquiet, they seemed to have been swollen by the March winds. Semyon jerked the reins and the horses started off. Wheels rattled over hard ruts, frozen boot-tracks and iron-hard dung.

Patches of snow gleamed in the hollows. Orchards stood ashen-pale in the cold—not all of them, however, those on the foothills loomed grimly black, the trunks and branches only hinted at in the darkness.

It was about eight kilometres to the railway. The road crossed the river, then followed the old willows and plunged into the forest. In the thickets the horses went faster. Car-ice over the pools crackled crisply, and when they crossed a considerable amount it sounded like breaking twigs under hoofs and wheels. Behind every tree and bush night lurked, and only up above its veil was pierced by the twinkling stars. In the woods the wind could not be felt, but on the broad glades it came rushing in from the right, lashing the horses and Semyon with a hard wing.

They entered a steep-sided gully. Here it was quiet; snow stretched in a grey ridge along the bottom, and pines murmured monotonously on the steep sides.

Semyon had everything planned. After the level crossing he would drive on past the halt and stop by the end house. There he would wait for the train from Kiev. It would come to a halt, then rumble off again on its way, but Semyon would not hurry. He would wait a little longer. After some time he would start off back, over the level crossing again and then warm the horses with the whip. The teacher would not have had time to go far, he walked slowly, limping, leaning on his stick. Hearing the rattle of wheels he would turn. Semyon would shoot a little ahead just for the look of it, then he

would stop the horses and say, "Get in, Artem Stepanovich, I'll take you along. Turned late getting back from town, and all of a sudden I saw you there." Then when the teacher asked how he was getting along Semyon would say, "I'm with the horses morning till night. No lack of work in the kolkhoz. One workday added to another. And then someone wants wood bringing, or straw for a new roof. And that's a bit more in my pocket.". "Have you thought about continuing your studies?" Artem Stepanovich would ask. Semyon would let it ride a moment, for dignity's sake, and then answer, "My mother's feeling better, I can study now".

The horses shied nervously and ran, throwing up their heads and looking back. The forest gradually thinned, they were coming to the fields. Now the wind blew gustily in Semyon's eyes but it was a mild wind, with no bitter edge. A small red light marked the railway halt in front. It kept blinking on and off as it was blocked by trees or houses. Finally it came and stayed.

The tired horses walked slowly, tossing their cropped manes and snorting with the cold. The flickering light had gone, but another one came in its place, dull, as though smouldering. It was close to the road and did not increase in size, although every moment brought it closer. The horses stopped, after a couple of minutes a lumbering watchman emerged from the pointed hut, the red light swung up and stopped, and Semyon moved forward again asking as he passed whether the Kiev train had gone by.

"From Kiev?" the watchman repeated slowly, and when Semyon had already passed called after him, "Seems it hasn't. But the Kishinyev's been through. Is that the one you'd be wanting?"

"No," Semyon mumbled.

He went on a little way as he had planned and stopped by the road on a clover field beyond the orchards. It was level, covered with a film of ice that crackled dully. Grey tufts of snow lay in the tracks of hoofs big and small. Dawn had not yet come, the night was still blindingly dark.

A feeling of unease crept over Semyon; he felt suddenly agitated and strange, his bones were soft, his body alien. The blood throbbed in his temples. Semyon swung the whip. At first the horses pricked their ears at its whistle, then dropped their heads and touched the prickly clover underfoot with their lips.

Semyon continued his imaginary conversation with the teacher. "My mother's well, I can study now." "Yes, but it wasn't because of your mother you left school, you were expelled for bad behaviour," Artem Stepanovich would say. Semyon would pretend not to hear, and go on talking. "I work with the horses on the kolkhoz. I go wherever they send me and make it quick. It would be all right, but I still want to get into Marine School, just as I did. And they won't take me if I haven't graduated school." "Yes, I remember you were always quite good at algebra," Artem Stepanovich would say. "And I haven't forgotten it. When I get home from work I take a look at the rules. And Kolya helps me with the problems, that's Aunt Motrya's son."

"I don't deny you're a good worker," Artem Stepanovich would admit. And the praise would send a glow through Semyon.

A light flashed up somewhere in the distance, on the horizon. It approached rapidly. Soon the train could be heard. The light grew till it blinded him. The horses whinneyed uneasily. Semyon was still swinging his whip and accidentally flicked the wheeler on the leg. The horses shied, Semyon snatched up the reins and quieted them. The train slowed and loomed up vastly on the halt, puffing steam. Then it started off again. The darkness seemed denser with its going.

When Semyon came to the crossing again the red light on the barrier took a long time to move. But at last the watchman came out of the hut, stopped and looked, and recognised the recent driver.

"Going back already?" he asked monotonously.

"Yes, already."

There was nobody to be seen in front. The road lay empty and silent between the dark, barely visible trees. The barrier creaked, the red light slowly rose, dim, dry and motionless. The wheels rattled over the rails, Semyon jerked the reins, called quietly to the horses and the cart rolled away faster, jolting over humps and hollows. Semyon peered narrow-eyed along the road. It was empty. He urged on the horses, the wind pressing hard against his chest. Feeling his body chilling after the recent excitement, he stopped the horses, stood waiting a few moments, then turned left and went back across the winter grain. Again he stopped. The world was asleep,

only a dry stalk caught in the front of the cart pole scraped tautly, sometimes rustling softly, then again grievously grating. There was a sharp frost, but it had a kind of youthfulness, it was not wearisome.

"H'm," said Semyon, feeling that his cheeks were chilled, that he no longer breathed out warmth, and his eyes too were cold slits. "H'm."

All his confidence was gone. What should he do now? The teacher could never have got as far as this, and there was no direct road this way, too. So he hadn't come. He had put it off until tomorrow, although at school they expected him by this night train. Semyon's whole plan had collapsed and now he saw it as foolish. And I'll get hell from the foreman about the horses, he thought. Wouldn't matter if it had been any good, but this way.... Without the faintest hope he decided: I'll just look in at the station, all the same.

He left the cart under the limes. Tapping his boot-shaft with the whip, he went into the corridor, his heels loud on the cement floor. He pulled one handle—the door was locked. Another door opened easily; straight in front Semyon saw a table behind an unpainted barrier, and a shaded lamp on it. A railway official in a black cap with crossed metal hammers was writing something in a thin ledger. Semyon was just going to shut the door when he suddenly saw Artem Stepanovich sitting on a bench, his chin resting on his chest, dozing. The creak of the door awakened him and he looked up enquiringly, evidently without recognising Semyon.

"Good evening," said Semyon. Again he felt the uncertainty which had bothered him in the forest, and on the field, and on the edge of the village behind the orchards when he had been waiting for the train. "I'm on my way back from town and thought I'd look in—see if there was anyone from the village wanting a lift."

THE COW WITH ONE HORN

The name in her birth certificate was Gorpina, but nobody ever called her by it, not even her father and mother, because somehow the name seemed too clumsy for her. It really was very unlike her—first as an infant with chubby arms and legs, and later as a slender shy girl who hardly ever spoke and blushed if anyone addressed her.

When Grunya married Savva Turik, good people said, "A fine lad to choose! You know their family? It's only boys ever born there! Dmitro Turik's got two, and Anton Turik one, and the eldest of the brothers, Mikola—he's got

five. And it'll be the same with Savva. It's the same root and blood, you never see a girl among them, it's just soldiers they have, one after the other."

"E-e-eh, why look ahead," was all Grunya could say, and her eyes, wide and grey as the autumn sky, shone with something bright and kind.

"You'll mind our words when it's too late. Don't hope for good from the Turiks, there'll be naught but lads, that's the Turik way."

Grunya's first they called Stepanko. They were so wrapped up in the boy, they feared for him even in their sleep. He cut his teeth early, he began to walk early, and the same with his talking, so both father and mother decided he was very clever. "He takes after my grandad," said Savva. That grandfather had not been famed for garrulity; you wouldn't hear a sound from him all day, but when he did say something, it was as if carved in stone.

Stepanko died of scarlet fever, and a few weeks later Savva was called up for the front. Grunya sat forlorn in the house, arms crossed over her breast, wondering whether to live or die. Indeed, she might not have survived her grief if the war had not come to their village, if all had not had troubles as bad as hers. There was no news from Savva—perhaps he had been killed, or perhaps he was angry with her for losing the child. She went frequently to the cemetery, to her son's grave—that mound was very dear to her.

Savva did return, however, alive and well, unscathed, although he had been at the front

from the start to the finish of the war. Bombs had fallen round him many a time, twice he had been buried so deeply that if his comrades had not dug him out, he could never have got out by himself; he had been in bayonet attacks and various other tough spots. It would take a long time to tell it all! Grunya listened in smiling silence. Her strength returned, and her faith in life.

In forty-six, a difficult year, another boy was born and again they called him Stepanko. This one too walked and talked early, but for some reason he didn't seem the same as the first. They loved him and cared for him, but still there was something lacking. They themselves didn't know what. After Stepanko, they had two more sons, Lenya and Tolya. So what people had told Grunya before her marriage came true—only Turiks and not a single Turikovna!

Life was hard. Had it not been for the children they might have managed better—like Savva's brother Yakov, for instance. He too had been at the front and come back safe and sound, he already had a second wife but no children from either of them. Yakov often came to visit Savva, played with the children and brought them treats. When the eldest grew bigger and ran about Yakov would shyly invite him home, and Stepanko would stay there for days and even a week at a time. When he came home he always had something new to show his mother—a new shirt on him, or a cap, or a toy.

"Do you like it better at your uncle's since there's no keeping you at home?" Grunya asked him.

"Yes, it's better," Stepanko confessed frankly.

"So you're ready to forget your own mother?"

"But I don't forget you."

"And your father?"

Stepanko shook his head.

"Why've you brought that mess tin? Don't you know your Uncle Yakov had it with him all through the war? He ate from it, and sheltered under it from the rain, and protected his head with it against shells—don't you know?"

"E-eh, that's just a tale!" laughed Stepanko, displaying gap-teeth.

"Yes, but tell me—why did you take it?"

"Uncle Yakov gave it me!"

"You pestered him for it, didn't you?"

"I didn't pester him at all! I was just looking at it, and Uncle Yakov said: take it!"

One day Uncle Yakov arrived with a glassful or two in him; he stood in the middle of the yard, heavy, long-armed, swaying, looking about him with merry though rather bleary eyes.

Savva was chopping wood. White birch logs lay about him and stood in piles. He gave his brother a quick glance, the axe went up, he took a breath, then the log cracked with a sigh but did not fall apart. Yakov marched up to his brother and took the axe from him.

"Is that the way to chop? You have to do it with skill and understanding, not any kind of way."

In an instant he had split the log easily.

"Now let's go indoors," he said. "I've something to say." He slapped his pocket from which the neck of a bottle protruded.

"Maybe you can say it out here?"

"And why not?" Yakov agreed jovially. He brought his face with its high cheekbones close to his brother's ear and breathing out spirituously, whispered, "Would you let your son go—eh? Stepanko—eh?"

"What d'you mean, let him go?" Savva didn't get it at first. "To you? Or who?"

"Me, of course! Let me have him. You've got three and I haven't one, he'll be a son for me. I'll care for him better than my own. He isn't a stranger lad, he's yours and we're relatives."

"But how—let him go?" Savva still could not take it in. "Who lends children? A boy isn't a bucket or trough."

"Not a loan. For always."

Savva shrugged—he couldn't make sense of it. In their hamlet nobody had ever given children away. Oh, in a neighbouring village children had gone to relatives, but that was different, the parents had died and there had been no other way out, someone had to bring them up. It was true, though, that he and Yakov were relatives—brothers. And Froska hadn't a single one. And Yakov's first wife had had none, either. Refuse him, and he'd bear a grudge.

"You'd better ask my Grunya. What she says—"

But Grunya, it appeared, had heard it all, because as soon as the brothers mentioned it she cut them off pretty sharply.

"You think I found them in the cabbage patch? If I'd picked them up there I might give you one, but as it is—"

Yakov lowered his head like a bull ready to gore someone. He realised, however, that understanding and guile were needed here, so he assumed a smile although it was not something to which his face was very much accustomed.

"Let's have a drink and sit a bit, then we can talk better."

"You can talk till you're hoarse, it'll make no difference," Grunya muttered, but she set out cucumbers and pork fat on the table.

"It all depends on your luck," Yakov hinted enigmatically. Savva drank—he didn't refuse—but he sat in silence. In the first place he was no great talker at any time, and secondly, the question was delicate. But Grunya did not stand on ceremony. She suddenly lost her temper and spoke up angrily.

"Who's ever seen a father and mother giving away a child, eh? Why, if folks heard I'd given up my child they'd jeer at me. If there's naught to eat I'll take the last from my own mouth and give it them."

"If there was aught to take," Yakov put in.

"I'll go without myself—"

"If there was aught to go without," said Yakov, more loudly.

The two brothers resembled one another. Both were short, with high cheekbones and harsh black hair, tanned faces and a golden spark in their eyes. Only in Savva's eyes it lay deep, while in Yakov's it was on the surface, with a greenish tinge.

"Whatever else, one thing we've plenty of is going without," said Grunya.

"Now, that's just it. You bring your children up hungry because with the war and all it's hard. But if you'd give us one, we'd look after him well, he'd be better off and you'd have it easier. I've got none of my own, we'd grudge him naught."

"If we've only potatoes, they're from our own field."

"E-eh, Grunya, am I saying it wouldn't be hard for you! Yes, it would, because you're a mother. But Stepan's got used to being with us. He's at home with us. And isn't it the same to you where the boy is?"

"Of course not!"

"Will he stop being your son when he's living with us?"

"If he's ours let him live with us! A pretty thing if a child doesn't know his own father and mother! He'd curse us when he grew up!"

"Not he! We've got a cow. Milk or grits, he doesn't have to ask."

"You can stop crowing over us with your cow!"

Yakov did stop. Loweringly he looked at host and hostess, filled his glass but did not drink.

"You know one thing," he said after a pause. "If I asked others for a child, they'd give me one and glad to."

"Try it," said Grunya curtly.

"Anyone! And say thank-you, sure's I live. But I want to help you, that's what it is! You'd still have two on your hands, hard enough with them."

"Thanks for your kindness, but we'll manage somehow ourselves."

"You've a hard heart, Grunya. Who'd ever have thought you'd be like that."

"I'm the way I am."

Again silence fell, with something ominous in it. Hastily, as though fearful of ill, Savva spoke with deliberate loudness and gaiety.

"Come on, drink up, brother. Eh? You'll have them yet, those noisy kids. If you take one of ours, you'll be wanting to bring him back because your own'll be handful enough".

Yakov drank without a word, and stood up. They went to the gate with him, making rather a fuss of him, as though in parting they wanted to ask his pardon, but Yakov avoided their eyes. He left in a sombre mood. Grunya looked guiltily at her husband and he responded with a look equally uncomfortable. Then they called Stepanko, who was playing by the shed.

"Don't you go running off to your uncle's again. Isn't your own home good enough for you, that you want to go to others?"

"But why? Uncle Yakov makes me whistles, and Auntie gives me honey".

"Can't you make your own whistles? And if you want honey, go to the clay-pit where the wild bees are and get yourself a comb," said Grunya, anger fighting pity.

"Call that honey, in those", the boy muttered under his breath.

"Ask your father to catch a swarm and set it in a hive, then we'll have our own".

"Tell him yourself, he won't listen to me...."

"I'm not going to bandy words with you!" Now she really was getting angry. "You think

you're older than your mother? Or do we have to tie you to a tree to keep you home?"

They did not tie him to a tree, but they kept a sharp eye on him to see he did not go running off to other houses, or to Uncle Yakov. His mother kept him busy with small jobs—looking after his little brothers, driving the chickens out of the kitchen garden, pulling greens for the pig. Stepan submitted, because he really was fond of his mother.

One day Savva was delayed at work and came home when the moon had presented its sickle to the darkness. The shed had been empty for a long time, except for the hens. But suddenly Savva seemed to hear something—a yawn, it sounded like, or someone moving heavily about. Savva was not timid or superstitious, but when he looked into the shed he jumped back involuntarily. Somebody's cow was staring at him with sombre indifference from a dark corner. When he realised what it was, he shut the door and hurried into the house.

"Where did you get that cow?" he asked Grunya, with difficulty repressing a smile.

Grunya, busy at the stove, did not answer at once—either she hadn't heard, or she thought he was joking. Savva turned to go back to the shed—perhaps it had been his imagination!—but stopped by the door and after a moment's hesitation, asked again, "Are you going to tell me or not?"

"Tell you what?" She looked at him, annoyed.

"Whose cow's that in the shed?" He raised his voice.

Grunya straightened and set the tongs down in the corner.

"What shed?"

He spat angrily. "Ours, of course—come and look!"

For some reason Grunya took an oil lamp with her, but when she opened the shed door she did not light it. Sure enough, somebody's black cow was standing in the corner tied to the manger, where their own used to stand. She swished her tail and reached out her head as though asking to be stroked. But Savva and Grunya did not move.

"But that's our Yakov's cow!" Savva cried, as though glad. "Look, she's got one horn!" He went quickly up to the cow, felt and smiled in relief.

"My brother's cow, all right! Someone must have brought her for a joke. Maybe she broke something or got into a garden and they brought her here to plague Yakov."

"That's it," Grunya agreed. "Somebody played a trick—there's plenty of that kind, these days."

"I'd better take her back, or he'll be running over all the fields looking for her."

"Maybe someone's told him where she is."

"Wouldn't he be here if they had? Oho!"

Savva unfastened the cow, wound the rope round his arm and went out of the yard. The cow gave no trouble, she might have been following Savva all her life.

Grunya forgot about the cow in all her household work. But when her husband returned

an hour later she at once noticed something different about him.

"What's the matter? You haven't stumbled over a glass on the way, maybe?"

"Likely, isn't it? And that's not what I've got in mind. Seems like folks have started giving us alms, wife."

"That's when we'll get rich!"

"...Our Yakov, not just anybody. It was he brought the cow. And got right angry with me. 'I want to do you a good turn,' says he, 'and you can't understand it. All you've got's hungry mouths, let her help you out. You didn't want to let me have a boy,' he says, 'because you're grasping and grudging, but I'm no kulak.'"

"How'd he be a kulak? All he's got he's earned with his own hands."

"Don't you know Yakov? He just likes to rattle his tongue".

"Did you take her back?"

"What d'you think I am—a thief or robber? What do I want with what's not mine? If I haven't got my own, others' won't help. I tied her to the elm and went. If we take a cow from him, he'll throw it up at us all our lives."

"Or he'll come and say: 'I 've given you a cow, give me a child.'"

"We don't want that kind of exchange."

Late that night Grunya wakened as though she had not been asleep at all. The children, thank God, were breathing quietly. Something drew her out into the yard, and to the shed. She opened the door and stood on the threshold, looking and listening. A hen squawked softly,

the cock replied, and then a heavy sigh came from the corner. She started back. There in the corner stood the cow. Grunya knew without looking that she had only one horn. So he'd brought her back, she thought with sudden warmth. He really is fond of our children, of Stepanko.

She did not waken Savva—let him have his sleep, he couldn't take the cow back a second time, and in the middle of the night. But she herself never closed an eye until dawn. When grey tinged the sky she rose softly. I ought to see to the cow, she thought. Even if she isn't ours, we can't let her starve. So she pulled grass on the boundary ridge behind the kitchen garden, a basketful, and spread it before the cow. She could have led her out on a rope to graze, but then the neighbours would start cackling, "Look at her, grazing the cow like as if it was her own!"

She stood and watched the cow eating the grass. Stepanko was still little but he'd grow and then they'd have their own herdboy. The others would catch up, too—the usual way. She touched the udder, the teats were swollen. Oughtn't she to milk the cow? It was high time.

Savva appeared in the doorway when the bucket was half full of milk. He passed his hand over his eyes as though to clear away a dream.

"He must have brought her back at night," said Grunya gaily. "Well, I've fed her and now I'm milking her a bit, it was oozing from the teats."

"What now? Take her back again?" Savva asked glumly.

"Why should you keep taking her back?" his wife objected, dropping her eyes. "Let him come for the cow himself."

"But will he?"

"Oh yes, what else? He'll surely come today, maybe he's on his way now."

But Yakov did not come to fetch the cow either that day or the next. When Savva met him in the street he reminded him to come and fetch his Blackie, because she had to be fed and tended, but Yakov not only did not come, he did not even promise to come. In this way a week passed, and a second. One day the brothers met again.

"You seem to be making use of the cow, eh? — And no thought of giving her back."

"I'd give her back all right, but then you'd just bring her again in the night."

"You could set out a glass for her, at least."

They went to Vuliika who made moonshine and had a good drink. Half-blind Vuliika did not grudge the vodka, although she did not give them much to go with it—a half-bowl of potatoes boiled in their jackets and a crust so hard you couldn't get your teeth through it. The brothers soon got tipsy and hugged and kissed each other before starting to sing. Actually, it could hardly be called singing, but they bawled until the veins stood out on their foreheads like ropes. Vuliika listened and only sighed.

"Oh, Lord in heaven! Who roars like that?"

"Join in with us, granny," Yakov ordered. "You used to sing hearty in your young days!"

"Where'm I with the two of you?" the old woman said, but so softly nobody else heard her.

So Yakov drank away his cow. Even if Savva had wanted to take her back, it would have been out of order. He had set out a bottle for her, and not just one. And since he had, that meant she was his!

ON VACATION

Roman Storozhuk had come home to the village to spend his winter university vacation with his parents.

The first and second days he visited his various relatives, ate and drank, heard the village news and told them about his own life at the university. By the third day he had had enough of it, so early in the morning he set off for a walk. He made his way leisurely to the pond, frozen and snow-covered, which merged with the river bank. It was crossed by a sledge track littered with fragments of yellow straw, and for a time he followed this, then turned off to a hole chopped

in the ice where two boys were fishing. A few perch lay by the boys, with eyes like red glass, completely frozen.

"Fish biting?" asked the student.

"Not much chance."

He stood there a little, looking at the dark water, then crossed to a clump of willows on the opposite bank. It was pleasant there, he breathed lightly. His eyes were rested by the rural scene about him which he had known since childhood, and which had sometimes risen before his mental eye with a sharp nostalgic pang in the university town. The bank stretched out in clean lines; before him stood a row of sturdy black poplars, with the rolling fields beyond them. He looked back at his village, as dear and homelike as his father, mother and all the family had been in the moment of homecoming.

Over deep snow and trodden path he came onto the field; it stretched out before him so pure and white that a sudden rush of feeling actually brought tears to his eyes. He wiped them away quickly, shamefaced, thinking as he did so that earlier on, as a child, he had never noticed how beautiful his own parts were in winter, or that even the snow had its own special scent, and the frost pinched his cheeks quite differently from the frost of other places.

He strolled aimlessly through the fields. He had gone quite a distance when suddenly the next village appeared behind a rise, the one where he had gone to school in his last three years because there was no ten-year school at home. He stopped and gazed, eyes wide—there was the

sugar refinery with its tall cigar chimney, and beyond it the two-storey school—it seemed to be the break because the children were all chasing about in the yard. A lump rose in his throat, a wave of warmth flowed through him and he decided to go and see a girl who had been in his form and who lived at the nearer edge of the village. Twice she had gone to take the entrance exams for the university and each time returned home disappointed, and now, if he remembered rightly, she was working in the refinery office.

As Roman walked towards the village, he was calling back to mind the details of her face—it had faded and lost expression, he found—remembering how she had walked, and laughed, and the things she had said to him, but it was all very foggy in his mind.

He came to the beginning of the street that opened into the fields—and there she was. She too, seeing him, froze for a moment, then quickened her pace, looking at him, her head bent forward and a little to one side. Her mouth twitched with a laugh trying to break through; finally it could not be restrained and bubbled out softly and happily. Her gladness infected Roman, he too felt livelier, glad to have met Lina again.

"Where on earth have you come from?" she asked and her round face smelling of cold was pressed against his chest.

"Over there!" Roman pointed vaguely backward, towards where his own village stood.

"Have you been home long?" Lina asked, her face still pressed against his chilly coat.

"My third day."

"And you couldn't come before?" Her blue eyes looked at him with a vibrant joy that held a tinge of reproach. Roman wanted to say he had not been to any of his old schoolmates, and in any case, why should he go running off to her in particular the very first day; but he thought better of it.

"There were all my family and relatives, and by the time I'd caught up on sleep—"

"Well, all right, all right." She had brightened, her blue eyes were clear and shining. "Come along home, our house is right here."

Lina for some reason decided to show him her photograph albums. Her elder brother, now serving extra time in the army, had been a keen amateur photographer, and from the album Lina as a little girl looked out at him. In one she was crying, bitterly offended by something. One he did not have time to see, Lina snatched it out of his hand. After long persuasion she let him see it; she and a handsome slender boy had their arms round each other.

"It was just fooling," she said in some embarrassment. "We used to live in another village, he was a neighbour there."

One album was filled with school photographs and Roman found to his surprise that he himself figured in a number of them.

"Where did you get that?" he asked, pointing to one where he was staring fixedly and in something like alarm.

—"Shall I tell you?" Lina's eyes narrowed mischievously. "That was when your picture was placed

on the board of honour among the best pupils. After the finishing-school party I pulled the picture out from under the glass."

"What for?"

"Oh, just—nothing special."

When Lina's parents came home from work they made him join them at supper. Roman was hungry and nothing loth. A glass of wine quickly loosened his tongue, not as a rule particularly active, and he talked about his university life, giving amusing details of his friends, and the eccentric traits of the lecturers—in fact, the sort of things a student will always have to tell. Host and Hostess listened attentively, now and then casting what seemed like a reproachful look at their daughter—listen to that, what have you to talk about that's interesting, what ever happens at the refinery office?

It was night when they went out—a quiet night, starless, but lightened by the gleam of the clean soft snow. The air did not cool their excitement, on the contrary, and for some reason they decided not to go to the pictures or dancing, but into the forest, which came up quite close to the village. The idea seemed an excellent one, and they walked past the kitchen gardens into the fields, found the path and went towards the trees, invisible in the darkness.

They strolled slowly, recalling this and that from their school days.

"Do you remember how we came home together from school when we were in the tenth form?" Lina asked suddenly. "We went past the farm orchards along a path through the maples, there

was another girl from your village with us, Maria, we always used to call her 'Baba'.* When we were going down the hill, Baba suddenly started running, and I went after her, and you set off to catch us. Remember?" Lina looked at him as though demanding that he remember this very incident. But Roman could only smile feebly because not a thing of it could he recall. "You caught Baba and put your arms round her and hugged her. I went on running and then you took off after me. You caught up and then just ran on in front, and I did so want you to hug me too!"

"But Baba was such a plain girl—she's at a mining college now," Roman mumbled.

"You ran past me and never even stopped. I almost cried because you hugged Baba and didn't hug me."

"What should you cry for?" Roman asked, already beginning to guess what she would say.

"I was in love with you," Lina confessed simply. "You never knew, did you?"

He smiled foolishly—what could he say? It was a fact that he had never guessed, but even if he had, he would have felt nothing. He could not even imagine how he could have been attracted by Lina as she had been then—more like a boy than a girl, with angular movements, quick-tempered and never giving way in anything. No, not by a girl like that. He shook his head.

* An old rural word for a woman. In more modern usage—narrow, limited woman.

"When you were at school you never thought of anything but science, you never looked at the girls, not a bit like the other boys. Remember Igor Pompa? He was always round me, showing off, he kept on after me and at the last party he told me he loved me."

"No—really?" Roman frankly marvelled, and memory brought a picture of short stumpy Pompa with his plump pink cheeks—Pompa, whom they all laughed at for his clumsiness. "What on earth did you say?"

"Oh, nothing," said Lina sadly.

They came to the forest and passed in among the firs—but not going in very far, because they floundered in the deep snow, and the branches tipped great clumps on their heads at a touch. The air was fragrant with fir needles, frost and chilled timber. Among the trees they suddenly felt a strange thrill of fear and stopped, listening to the silence. They felt it as you feel a bottomless drop when only half a step separates you from its edge. Lina leaned her back against an old pine and Roman moved closer to her and his lips felt the warmth of her cheek.

Listening to the forest, to its silence, he leaned his head down on her shoulder as though drawn by her warmth and when he saw the expectation in her shining eyes he brought his lips close and almost touched the chilled skin.

A twig cracked close by and a high-pitched, coarse voice seemed to crackle with it.

"Stop, you—" A string of foul words followed which to Roman were worse than the sudden shout and encounter in the nocturnal winter forest.

He started and looked round; two thick-set young fellows stood a little way off. One held a gun atilt—apparently the one who was shouting.

"Can't you find any better place? And then next thing you'll be stealing wood—eh?"

Roman recovered himself and took a step towards the two, but was halted by another warning shout.

"Stop where you are or I'll shoot!"

He stopped, fists clenched, glaring with hate-filled eyes at the two standing by a fir.

"Just make one move and you're a gonner!" rasped through the woods, raising echoes from the trees.

Then Lina spoke.

"Oh, you brutes!" she cried indignantly, with tears in her voice. "I know you, you're the forester's sons. You've no right to threaten and curse like that! I'll have you called to the village Soviet tomorrow, you'll talk differently then!"

The one with the gun had his answer.

"Off with you, quick march out of the state forest!" He raised his gun as though taking aim.

The student turned on wooden legs, with a cold feeling in his spine as though a handful of snow had slipped down behind his collar.

"You're just bandits, that's what!" cried Lina in helpless fury. "I'll never forgive you this, never!"

Humiliated, ashamed to look at each other, they slowly left the forest; the two fellows stood there, one still pointing his gun.

From the field they looked back. The forest stood close, an ominous black wall in which

every tree might give off a shot, spit flame. Roman's fists were still clenched, he was disturbed and angry, but with it there was a faint throb of relief that it had all ended well and the unpleasant adventure was behind them.

"They saw us when we were in the field," said Lina, still angry, "they watched us and then they hid."

"To hell with the fools," said the student, feverishly casting back his mind to the kind of figure he had cut back there in the woods. In the first place he had lost his head a bit—but who wouldn't in his place? Secondly, he had obeyed when he was told to stand still and not move; what he ought to have done was rush them, snatch away the gun and give those ruffians a lesson. But the way it had worked out, Lina had defended not only herself but him, too.

His spirits dropped, he was disgusted with himself. And the additional thought that Lina was probably disgusted with him, too, did not make him feel better. He did not try to talk, only sighed and coughed and looked at the village—how far had they still to go. He kept walking faster, because there seemed no end to the path.

They stopped in the familiar street and said goodnight. Lina apparently wanted to detain him, she made an abrupt movement towards him and her lips trembled as though words were ready to burst out—the words she had been keeping back all the time. But Roman turned abruptly and walked firmly away from the village, proud that he had found the strength

to break out of an unpleasant situation. And why should he suddenly feel himself to blame before Lina? He was not in the least to blame, and there was nothing to kick himself about. It was this rotten mood which had to be kicked out. He had just happened to visit her, happened to learn of her old "crush" on him, and then—that wretched business in the forest. Perhaps he was to blame for trying to kiss her there, under the pine? Well, all right, he had never guessed her feelings before, he had been indifferent to them even when he learned of them, but there, in the forest, among the snow-burdened firs, he had felt an impulse of love for her, an impulse of tenderness—otherwise he would never have allowed himself—allowed himself what, after all? He's had no time even to kiss her.... Ah, that's enough, snap out of it, it's absurd! Just plain idiotic!

Absorbed in such thoughts, Roman returned home quite late.

The next morning he wakened firmly determined to go to the forester's, grab those two bastards at home and talk to them properly. They'd been tough enough at night when they'd a gun. But how would they feel eye to eye with him, and no gun? In his thoughts he told them exactly what they were, and in this imagined encounter he came off the victor.

Gradually, however, his fiery mood cooled. He felt no more desire to go anywhere. Well, all right, so he'd get there. Good morning. Say what he wanted. And so what? Would that change anything? What was past, was past, it

wouldn't return. His role was played ... and anyhow, nothing dreadful had happened. Enough of all that, cut it out.

A few more days, and his vacation ended. He packed his books and other belongings in the big suitcase he always brought home. There was room in it, too, for a roast chicken, and spiced pork fat, and apples. His mother walked with him to the end of the village, he kissed her goodbye and went on alone to the next village, where he would take the bus. The closer he came to that village, the more conscious he was of an inner tension, an apprehension that he might meet Lina. But soon her lane was left behind, somewhat aside, and beyond the poplars he saw a snow-covered roof.

He stood at the stop waiting for the bus—and then his heart plummeted down: Lina was coming along the road, probably on her way home for dinner. She must have seen him from a distance because she was smiling, as she had the first time they met. And she held her head the same way, bent a little to the side.

Roman knew as he looked at her that he ought to smile too, but no real smile would come.

"Well, so I'm off again," he said, feeling like a thief caught red-handed and cursing himself for it.

"Why didn't you come to us again?" Lina asked, dropping her eyes and looking attentively at her red knitted mittens.

"Every day I meant to," Roman lied, "but there were always relatives coming in, there's no getting away from them."

As he spoke, Roman was convinced that Lina had dropped her eyes because she was thinking of that scene in the forest. A good thing, at least, that he hadn't kissed her then, or he'd have been in a fine tangle now. She had probably never guessed he was going to kiss her.

Where on earth was that bus, according to the timetable it ought to be there.

"Write to me," Lina asked, and her cheeks flushed such a tender pink that he was ashamed to look at them.

"Sure I will," Roman promised, knowing full well that he wouldn't.

She said something more, but Roman hardly knew what he answered. The words slipped over his lips like the wind over the smooth blue ice, and he was heartily glad when at last the bus drew up. He grabbed up his suitcase and made for the door as though someone had him by the collar. As he jumped in he called over his shoulder, "I'll write, I'll write to you!"

She looked at him, her eyes filled with sadness and pain, and her lips trembled.

Roman, his forehead pressed against the glass, saw the pain in her eyes, her quivering lips; he saw her take a step after the bus, and another, gazing fixedly before her; he tried to understand the meaning of that step and that look and then thought with a happy warmth: but she must really love him, yes, she loved him, she hadn't stopped! And that realisation brought him inner ease, assurance, made everything plain and simple. Because now he needed her love. And he was not ashamed to admit to himself why he

felt like that: Lina would not blame him for what had happened in the forest, she wouldn't be able to think badly of him.

But after all, it was such a small thing, an accident, not worth all that thought, why make so much of it? He hadn't harmed anybody, hurt anybody. And if he had perhaps sinned against his own conscience, his own convictions, if he had somewhere, somehow been untrue to himself—what did that matter to anybody? It would all be forgotten.

As the bus put on speed it all did seem to be fading away, left behind; but somewhere in the back of his mind lay a nasty, insistent little thought that—no, he would not be able to forget it, all the same. It would always be there in his memory, and as time passed he and no other would give this incident increasing importance and would mercilessly blame and flog himself.

A NOCTURNAL COCK

With its yellow leaves beginning to fall and weak rays of light, the autumn forest seemed pale and transparent. The boys cut straight through it, avoiding the roads; sometimes they both felt as though they were the only two left in this autumn day of dull gold, with the plaintive voices of birds sounding less like song than a complaint, and the berries of the viburnum in the hollows bursting out like crimson pain. But after seeing on the edge of the forest a tree blasted down by a shell, the sense of loneliness was augmented by a sense of alarm, of danger which lay in wait at every step but which somehow

retreated, drew away, fled, avoiding an encounter. In the trunk of the fallen tree they noticed a hollow once occupied by wild bees. They looked and felt in the hollow but it was empty. After that they walked silently, although each was thinking the same thing—that the bees had all been killed, they must have been caught in the thick of the fighting which had raged here yesterday and the day before.

"Did you ever see the bees dancing?" asked the younger boy, who could not remain quiet for long. Every time he saw something interesting—a lost flask with a bent neck, a whole newspaper rolled into a tube or cartridge cases—he would throw a cautiously friendly look at the other, but the elder boy, deep in his own thoughts, was unresponsive.

"How do they dance?" the elder asked at last—calmly, as though it held not a jot of interest for him.

"O-oo-ooh—how they dance!" cried the thin, long-necked boy happily. "You've seen all the hives Uncle Savva's got?"

"All right, I've seen them."

"He always used to give me honey.... And the orchard he's got! And the fish nets! You know the trap he's got for polecats?"

"Sure I know," the other cut him short. "Tell me how the bees dance."

"Oo-oo-ooh!" The little fellow was delighted. "When a bee gets some real good nectar somewhere, then when it comes back to the hive it always shows the others the place. It makes all sorts of twists and turns on the platform by the entrance.

Why, I've seen it myself! It dances in one place, and then it goes on to another so as a lot of bees see it. And then they all go off flying to the place the first one found, and gather the nectar."

As he talked the boy's cheeks flushed and his face was alive. The elder listened attentively, but the set of his mouth showed the condescension of greater age and experience.

"And once I saw a whole swarm of bees go to attack another hive. A good thing those others were strong ones, they gave the attackers a real pasting! But what if they'd been weaker? Uncle Savva said it's often that way. And then they rob the hive, take away the honey and the other bees all die."

"All die—likely, that!" said the elder who appeared to be listening with growing interest.

"But they do!" the younger insisted, offended. "If you talk that way, you've never seen how they drive out the drones."

"How?" the elder asked grudgingly.

Talking, they had crossed the thicket, avoiding swampy hollows where sweetflag stood on its leafy stems. In the forest they came to a patch of rye, unreaped and trampled; they were going to cross it, but thought better of it and went round. When they touched an ear with elbow or knee, grain fell with a dry rustle. They both listened with inexplicable sadness to that grain-fall and later, in a cluster of oaks, they looked back at the pallid, parched strip. Again they walked silently and the low sun at their backs hung a dense, dark quilt of shadow before them; only among the treetops above there was still

a light mist and the gradually paling sky. They no longer thought about the fallen tree with the empty hollow, no longer talked about bees, they saw that it was getting dark and they were still in a forest they did not know; they had to think of where to sleep, they had to find shelter of some kind. Of course, they could always get down into a hollow and make a fire, and stay by it till morning—but was it safe to make a fire these times?

The elder boy stopped, brought up short by something he saw, and clapped his hand over the other's eyes.

"Like me to show you some magic?" he said.

"What magic?" the smaller one asked, trying to push away the hand.

"Make a hut appear."

"On chickens' legs? And with Baba-Yaga looking out of the window?" the little one laughed.

"Shut up and say whether you want it or not, or I may change my mind!"

"Of course I do!"

"Hut, rise up!" said the elder and took away his hand.

The younger—for the present we'll call him Hopping Pipit, his village nickname—blinked dazedly, not seeing the hut. His mouth was open to exclaim in disappointment when he looked again through the trees and saw a small cottage among the hornbeams. It loomed vaguely in the dusk—squat, with low eaves. It was a forester's cottage, of course, but Hopping Pipit gazed fascinated, as though it really were created by his friend's magic words.

The boys approached cautiously. At first they expected a dog to dash out from behind the pile of dry branches, or from the shed. Then they waited for the forester himself to appear, give them a sour look and ask what they wanted. But there was neither dog nor forester. The boys climbed through the stake-and-rider fence into the yard and waited a few moments. Hopping Pipit's eyes were screwed up till they looked like two curved mouse-tails and the elder looked about with cautious mistrust. Then he went to the window, tapped at the glass and flattened himself against the wall, as though in sudden panic. But his fear passed, he brought his face close to the glass and peered in, his eyes shaded by his hands.

"Seems like nobody's home," he said.

The smaller boy went to the door and pulled at the latch. Then he pressed his ear against the wood and listened.

"What'll we do?" he asked. "Eh—Ivan?"

They were both tired and hungry, darkness was falling and their decision was quickly taken. Ivan found a ladder, evidently for the hens to climb up into their hole, stood it against the wall, clambered onto the edge of the roof and tore off a few trusses. He wriggled into the attic, felt his way to the ladder down to the entry, found it and descended carefully into the dark pit below. When he pulled back the bolt and appeared before Hopping Pipit, the cautious apprehension did not leave his face for some time.

"Won't someone catch us?" asked Hopping Pipit, afraid to go into this strange house.

"We'll put the trusses back," said Ivan.

The cottage smelt damp and musty. The benches, table and open trunk by the walls had a dead look. Hopping Pipit looked into the trunk but saw only a roll of material and a bunch of ears. The stove-lid lay on the ground and raked-out ash was piled up on the hearth. Everything showed that the man who lived there was unmarried, and he had left suddenly. The boys stood a while, but the low ceiling and a vague feeling of despondency sent them out again into the yard, where they sat down on the earth bank round the house. The forest advanced on them in a silent black wall. The first stars had appeared and looked at the earth with child-like eyes. Suddenly Hopping Pipit pricked up his ears.

"The shed—" he said and listened again. "I think there's a dog—"

"Where'd a dog come from," Ivan growled.

But Hopping Pipit was so glad about the chance of finding a dog, and here, that he jumped up and ran to the shed. He opened the door, called, "Come on, come on," and listened, but heard nothing. With wary glances at the open door he returned.

"You fancied it," Ivan decided.

Hopping Pipit said nothing, his face was still expectant and he never took his eyes off the shed.

"There is something inside," he whispered.

Without a word Ivan went to see. The shed was half filled with dry branches, the other half

with hay. It smelt of dry rot and was very dark. His valour was ebbing away, but hearing his friend's quickened breathing behind him, he asked roughly, "Who's in here?"

No answer. He called again, "Come on—who's here?"

"Over in that corner—something—" Hopping Pipit whispered.

Ivan resolutely climbed up to the corner the other boy indicated. Never had hay rustled so loudly as this did. Before he reached the top of the pile he stopped, frozen, staring. A chill shuddered down his back—human eyes were looking at him out of the darkness. They seemed to glow, they were like two live, threatening rifle barrels. Then he heard a voice.

"Boys?!"

Ivan was about to shrink back, but the sound of his own language reassured him. Still he could not force out an answer however much he tried—the pressure of fear had tightened his throat.

"Boys?!" the voice said again, and an electric torch flashed on, directed forward.

Ivan saw a man with a bandaged head. He was in a Red Army tunic without shoulder-boards. His eyes burned with a dry, feverish glitter and his face was red. Shaggy brows like black twigs, crushed and sprinkled with hay, flew up in surprise to a lined forehead and stopped.

"Are you alone?" the man asked. The lamp went out for a moment and everything turned black. Ivan heard Hopping Pipit shifting from foot to foot. Then again the taut beam of light

shot out and the eyes appeared, with their unhealthy dry glitter.

"What are you doing here?" the man asked.

"We're walking," Ivan answered, relieved at the sound of his own voice. The man seemed to be wondering where they could be walking.

"Are there two of you?"

"Uhuh, Gritsunya and me," Ivan answered, his courage returning—answered casually, as though he were talking to somebody who knew Gritsunya.

"Are the Germans near?"

"We came through the woods, we didn't see."

"The road's close by...."

"We kept off it."

The man directed his torch to the side and tried to see behind Ivan's back.

"Hey, Gritsunya, come along here!"

No answer. But after a few moments there was a rustling, and Hopping Pipit began climbing up. He looked so helplessly amazed that the man actually smiled and his brows twitched like twigs in a wind. Ivan already felt more sure of himself, but Gritsunya stared with solemn unwinking eyes.

"Sit down here beside me and we'll talk," said the soldier.

He switched off the light and the black darkness closed in. Neither moved. Gritsunya found Ivan's hand and gripped it tightly.

"What are you doing here? Where are you going?"

"We wanted to find our cows," Ivan answered. "They were driving them away from the Germans

but didn't have time, the herd was bombed the other side of Radovka."

"Did you find the cows? Your own?"

"What chance...." Ivan sighed.

"I was wounded," the man said. "I'm hiding here the second day. I might have got away somewhere but my legs won't hold me. Where are ours—far away?"

"Looks like it."

"You haven't anything to eat, have you?"

Hopping Pipit pulled a piece of bread out from inside his shirt. When his fingers found the hard, hot hand in the darkness he felt as though he had been set on fire himself and scorched from head to foot.

"Thanks," said the soldier. "Why are there just the two of you? Did your mothers send you, or what?"

"No, they don't know where we are," said Ivan. "We came ourselves."

"Not afraid of anything—eh?"

"What'll we have to eat if there isn't any milk?" said Hopping Pipit, apparently repeating something he had heard.

"Look," said Ivan, "there might be food in the forester's hut just by, we'll go and see."

"Go along, then," said the soldier and his voice was faint as though he breathed with difficulty.

Silently the boys clambered down, silently they went out into the yard. Not a leaf murmured in the forest and the hut seemed anxious to avoid notice. It crouched lower on the ground, merging with the darkness. The autumn air

held a penetrating dryness. Gritsunya began to shiver. He wanted to clutch at Ivan's hand again but refrained.

For a long time they fumbled in all possible places—behind the stove, in the larder, under the trestle bed, under the material in the trunk, but found only some dried pears and a few rusks. When they left the cottage Ivan heard something in the henroost. He found the ladder, climbed to the crossbeam and found a cock. It squawked in fright, but Ivan grabbed it by the beak and then the wings.

This time the soldier did not light the flashlamp. He ate the pears, his teeth crunching them loudly.

"We found a cock," Gritsunya blurted out.

"What?" The soldier did not understand.

Quickly, with frank delight, Ivan explained.

"He was roosting on the perch. The hens must have got away, or maybe someone killed them but he escaped."

"Look at that, now," said the soldier.

Ivan took his hand off the cock's head to let it breathe. The cock turned its head, tensed its neck and gurgled as though just about to crow or scream something angry and threatening. Ivan grabbed its beak again and felt the soldier's investigating hand on the bird. Fingers slid over the neck and rested on the wings.

"He may have gone wild," Hopping Pipit suggested.

The light flashed on and again everything stood out clearly—the soldier looking at the

cock which Ivan hugged to his chest, and Hopping Pipit with his legs tucked under him, sunk right into the hay, his eyes alertly probing like those of a frightened bird. As soon as the light went out the cock made a tremendous effort, his strong wings beat against Ivan's face and down he flapped to the ground. Ivan made a leap but the cock was out of the door. He raced to the fence wildly, as though blind or with eyes bandaged. But when Ivan crept to the fence the cock flew up onto the crossbeam, then further up and vanished among the branches of a large tree; all that remained of him were the damp leaves drifting down onto the boy's shoulders.

The soldier was talking to Hopping Pipit.

"...We stuck it, hung on till our strength gave out. They'd small tanks and motor-cycles and they kept on coming, there was only a handful of us left and our ammunition was all gone. We began to withdraw, so's we could fight them again another day. When I was wounded I never even noticed it, but now I'm so weak I can't move. My leg's numb, I'm burning and dizzy.... Well, did the cock get away?"

"Yes," said Ivan, and settled on the hay so that she would not strike his head on the crosbeam.

"Good for him," said the soldier and the boys caught something—faint laughter or gladness—in his voice. "He's like a soldier, sees a chance to escape and takes it."

Ivan said nothing, he was still kicking himself mentally for losing the cock. But Hopping Pipit's mind had gone back for some reason

to the hollow tree—such a pity there had been neither bees nor honey.

"Where's your village?" the soldier asked.

"Half a day's walking and we're there," Ivan said. "We'll take you. It doesn't matter there's no cow, we'll feed you somehow. And our women'll cure you, they know how."

"You'll have honey to eat," said Hopping Pipit. "Uncle Savva's got an awful lot of hives."

"I can't walk far, boys."

"We'll get one of the kolkhoz horses, one of them that's left," said Ivan cheerfully.

"I rode a horse—not long ago. There was a dun-coloured one in our unit. They were training him to do the parade step but he couldn't get it."

"You know what an apple harvest we had this year?" That was Hopping Pipit again. "The branches were all weighted down, and when the apples fell you couldn't see the ground for 'em."

"I like the doneshti kind, boys. Do you have that kind?"

"You bet we do!" cried Hopping Pipit happily. "They're everywhere!"

"Yes, that's right," the soldier agreed. And fell silent. There was a sound of his teeth grinding the dry pears. Or perhaps just grinding, with pain. Suddenly the boys felt chilly and uncomfortable. Then the voice came again out of the darkness. "Look, you go off to the cottage to sleep, and I'll just lie here."

Ivan took Hopping Pipit to the tree where the cock had flown up. They peered into the darkness,

trying to see him, but the cock was well hidden. They threw sticks, but only cold leaves fell onto their faces and hands. The forest listened disapprovingly, the stars eyed them keenly—and the boys dropped their vain attempts.

They lay down on the trestle bed and covered themselves with the material from the trunk. Tired as they were after their long day, they still found it hard to get to sleep in this strange cottage. First one, then the other seemed to hear groans coming out of the darkness, and somebody's teeth grinding as though gnawing dried pears. Ivan listened intently and realised it was his imagination, but Hopping Pipit clenched his fists and longed to run to the shed. To keep up their courage they reminded each other of all they had seen that day, especially the dirty-green army trucks moving across the fields, and the mutilated horse that lay by a spring but couldn't reach the water, so they watered it from their caps; and the horseless cart with one wheel off hidden among the sunflowers, there were sacks of flour on it, they could see the whiteness of the flour through the holes in the sacks.

A frosty pink dawn was spreading over the horizon when they went out. Magnificent, festively clad oaks marched almost up to the forester's hut. Two birches which had advanced a little way out of the cluster of firs stood in amusing, femininely cheerful silence. And a tuft of red and golden flame, their nocturnal cock, was strutting importantly in the outer yard. His comb glowed like over-ripe waxen viburnum berries and his wattles glowed in the sunshine. He gave the boys

a perky look as they came out and spread his tail. Ivan was delighted, as though he saw one of the family, and Hopping Pipit, with an air of the greatest indifference, gradually edged closer to the bird. To the boys' surprise the cock was not frightened, he watched Hopping Pipit quietly, with fine dignity, and when the boy reached out he did not run away, only tensed, and his glowing red wattles trembled angrily. Hopping Pipit hugged the cock to him as though he had caught a real Fire-Bird, and his snub nose seemed to tilt a little higher.

"He roosted on the pear tree," said Ivan, and looked up at the green and black leaves which had descended damply onto him the previous night.

"And he isn't wild a bit," cried Gritsunya, loudly and gaily. "He let me take him!"

The cock's round eyes looked at them, at the cottage, the forest, the sky.

"Come on, let's show the soldier we've got it back," said Ivan. He stroked the cock's neck and felt a fine quivering under his hand.

The shed smelt cold. As they stepped across the threshold a small grey bird flew noisily to meet them; after that the silence inside was intense. The earthen floor was silent, the walls had no voice, and the hay was seemingly still asleep.

"Hallo!" cried Hopping Pipit very gaily. "We've caught the cock!"

When nobody answered he shouted still more loudly and gaily.

"Can't you hear me? Hey! We've caught the cock!"

Meanwhile, Ivan was clambering up. The hay rustled so loudly that at last the whole shed seemed to awaken and talk. The soldier was lying on his back. In one hand he held the flash-lamp, the other lay on his breast as though feeling for his heart. Ivan smiled, thinking he was asleep, and shook his shoulder lightly. Then the head in the forage cap rolled to the side and the boy saw the right eye open. It opened slowly, first showing the dead dry shine of the pupil, then gradually the dull darkness of the eye. Ivan froze, something turned over inside him, something weighed him down oppressively—and still he stared at that coldly peering, unseeing eye, without the strength to move or look away. Somehow he began slowly to descend, but his hands and feet fumbled, his whole body was stiff and wooden, as clumsy and uncontrollable as the tongue in his mouth....

They walked through the trampled rye. The ears drooped to the ground, only a few still stood upright on slender unbroken stalks. The overripe grain trickled down. With one hand Hopping Pipit hugged the cock, and tried to feed him with the other. The cock pecked the offered grains and they rolled away from his beak. Hopping Pipit laughed. They had walked away silently from the forester's cottage, and only when they were out in the field Ivan said there had been nobody in the shed. He must have gone away quietly in the night, when they were both asleep. But as he said it Ivan turned his head away and his lips were grey, as though smeared with ash. Hopping Pipit for his part was not particularly troubled. For

some reason he was quite sure that wherever that soldier might have gone, he would certainly come to their village. And there he would try Uncle Savva's honey, and eat their apples. And there he would get well again, his wounds would heal, their women knew all about that—take that Wise Woman who lived over the hollow and gathered all kinds of herbs in the summer and autumn and then dried them and crushed them and mixed them and made brews of them.... Eh, it was sure, he'd be all right with them, he'd soon get well again. And then go back to join his comrades.

"Of course," Ivan agreed and turned his head away.

"And if he drank that water they all get from the Kolomiichuks' well?!" Hopping Pipit rattled on.

"Uhuh...."

"And you know the mud Aunt Lebedikha puts on her legs when they hurt?"

"I've heard of it," Ivan answered and turned away again. Something hampered his speech, closed his throat. Now, beside Gritsunya, he felt very adult, almost old, and he walked heavily as though long years with all their trials lay upon his shoulders. The farther they went, the more he wanted to believe his own story, to believe that the man had gone from the shed, that he had felt better and slipped away somewhere. With each step he took he wanted to believe it as Hopping Pipit did. He wanted to look out with unclouded eyes, he wanted to look at every bush as though each one hid the waiting soldier who had such

a short time ago been telling them about his horse and how he had fought the enemy.

"And the tartar-green root helps too, and wormwood, and lime blossom," Hopping Pipit continued.

The cock pecked at his palm and Gritsunya closed it into a narrow-throated pot to prevent the grains from rolling out.

A MEMORY OF A BLUE SPRING

It was good to be alive and walking this earth that spring, to see the black upturned soil in the fields, and the winter grain, and the meadows with their rainwater mirrors, and the fluffy misty green of the willows, and the cottages in the villages—somehow strange-looking, naively preening themselves after the past winter with the bright tints of moss on their thatched roofs. I remembered the milky-white quietness of fields in the sunshine and the feeling that you are the only man walking the earth. It was a pleasant loneliness, it held such a promise of happiness that I could not hold back a smile, and looked at the

blue sky, and let my eyes range along the horizon. The sense of freedom was so keen that my heart choked sweetly, soared, stopped—soared and could not rest.

I walked and walked over the dry ground. I looked into the sky and wanted to see nothing beyond its blueness. It was hard to believe that it could exist like that—immaculately clear, shimmering, alive like the breathing of a child. I could not believe that such a gentle, caressing wind could flow over the fields. I could not believe that the free expanse could be so moving, like a song.

What did I do then? I remember I walked and walked. And the fields flowed round me. I came to myself in a small wood, by a brook. Here and there the water flashed a shimmer of dark blue, as though there were no shallow bottom close to the surface. I looked up and saw a girl walking from the fields into the wood. It was startling, her appearance was so sudden. I wanted to rise and ask her the way, how to get back, but changed my mind. There was something light and happy in her walk—as though she herself felt she was flying, not walking. The closer she came, the more I wondered, but that wonder was mingled with joy, as though I were looking at something precious, something nobody was intended to see, something which belonged to the fields of late afternoon or the darkening woods.

Where was she going? Or returning, perhaps? From whom, or to whom? And what was she bearing within her? The bliss of love? Probably. She drew up level with me, now she should see me—

but she saw nothing. She looked straight before her and saw nothing of the woods which a few days before had been empty and transparent (the green had begun to appear yesterday and today), she saw nothing of the brook which murmured so softly that its voice could be heard only by itself—not even me, sitting right over it.

She shone with such a quiet glow that everything round about me seemed to catch its reflection and stood out more clearly, and the birch twigs were no longer so indifferently calm but light and smiling.

So she passed, and I felt a regret that she had not seen me, but everything round about was still bright and the regret was light and sweet.

What was the brightness she bore within her, what reflection fell upon my face, my hands, what spark lighted in my heart?

She vanished round a turning and everything seemed to darken, the spring evening lowered its wings over the woods and fields, and in the distance a tiny light stood out clearly, quivering like a tear. I walked towards that bright tear, but stopped now and then, remembering how she had passed me. Every step brought greater regret that I should never see her again, never again feel her glow.

Perhaps it was my happiness that had passed me by, the happiness a man waits for all his life? Perhaps it was just that which I should not have let slip—I should have caught it, and found out? Perhaps it had been the secret of my life that had passed, its living secret with which one could speak, which one met once, and once only?

What was it, I asked myself, asked the fields, asked the rustling path under my feet. What was it? And I stopped as though through the darkness, the black pensiveness of the woods that lay behind I could see something. I walked towards that bright tear, and an incomprehensible joy was in me, I wanted to see myself from outside, for it seemed that the reflection of her light had not left me, it still lay upon me and warmed me.

What was it that had passed me when I sat over the brook in the falling dusk?

LIFE SO TERRIBLE AND SO SWEET

The cold came late that year, but when the sky became dark and unfriendly, when the carefree yellow of the trees' attire turned to something dry and rustling, and the water in the ponds showed an alarmed leaden quiver, then everything spoke of winter at hand, everything wore a frown. The field, breathing out a grey shaggy mist in the morning, decided it was time to prepare for the frost, because the grain was long ago reaped and threshed, and the birds, which throughout the summer had never let it sleep day or night with their sunshine songs, had long ago flown away to distant climes.

The hollows thought the same, because the blackberries had all fallen from the bushes on their slopes and the viburnum which had so recently shone with stars now stood stripped of their red berries, and the troughs of gullies were swept by such solid, wild winds that one wanted to hide from them under high snow-drifts. The meadow, nakedly empty, missed its tall young grass, and the cattle that grazed on it, and the voices of playing children. The bird-cherry bushes over the river, that lay slender as a spindle, wished they had been born with wings so that, like the birds that perched on their branches, they could have taken off and flown to warm parts, gliding through the air with trailing roots and outstretched branches, seeing groves, gullies and villages gliding past beneath them.

The grey hare, too, started thinking of winter. Not that he did not like spring, summer and autumn. By no means. The grey hare liked spring because with the warm days, the whole world became his home. There were places to hide, things to eat, and although his constant fear for his life did not vanish, it became less, and even the fox, his eternal enemy, and the kite hovering sleepless in the clear sky, seemed less dangerous. And summer was good because the foxes could find birds' nests and were always full fed, and although they did not allow the grey hare to become careless, he could easily escape them. In the autumn his free, happy life continued, there were sweet carrots on the kolkhoz fields, and fat crisp cabbages in the irrigated vegetable patches—although that was the time when a faint hint of

anxiety crept in, because the grey hare saw that the great migration south, to the sea and the sun was beginning, he heard the clamour of migrating birds day and night.

So the hare loved the spring, summer and autumn, but when the chilly winds blew he had to start thinking of winter. His well-nourished body began to grow thicker fur, he shed his grey coat and in its place grew a lighter one. This was the time, with the grey not yet gone and the white not yet grown, when the hare looked pitiful and absurd. Any enemy could see him, so he had to stay in one place practically all the time, cowering among the clods in the field or under the tall weeds in a hollow. He had to keep his ears constantly pricked and his paws constantly tense, he was alarmed even by the hoarse call of a crow flying alone across the chilly hostile sky, and jumped up, racing wildly until he found a new refuge. That was the time when he envied even the mice—they carried grain into their holes, hid under the ground and stayed there. He envied even the gophers, wise and zealous, which had no need to hide from anyone. Even the insects that crept under bark and into cracks—even those he envied!

That was the time when he liked to visit the nearest village. It was quiet and safe. He would settle down on a vegetable bed and sleep till morning. He had no fear of dogs—when a dog saw a hare he barked loudly, started to chase it and ran so wildly he saw nothing before him. The hare need only make a quick swerve and hide in a shed, and the pursuing Ryabko or Sirko would

go on running and barking until he stopped, surprised, and wagged his tail in merry bewilderment. The hare was not afraid of children, either—they too would run after him for a little while, but then stop and wave and call "guttyu-ga, guttyu-ga" as though he were a wolf, probably wishing they could put salt on his tail so as to catch him!

The first snow fell and on the white field the grey hare, who had not yet shed all his summer coat, looked like a bunch of dirty rags, a helpless bunch afraid of everything in the world. But gradually he turned whiter and fluffier, as though he were putting on weight. He seemed more cheerful, calmer; he recovered—if not equilibrium, for what equilibrium can a hare ever know?—at least a semblance of calm and equilibrium. Just as before, as always, he slept with ears pricked and eyes open, but he no longer envied the mice, and the insects, and the gophers, because he was beginning to recover his self-respect as a hare.

Once the grey hare had shed his summer coat and grown his new one which kept him warm and inconspicuous, he began to be pleased with himself again. Pleased with himself in the way an oak is pleased with itself, or a birch, or a kite—and a hare. But then it turned warmer again, the snow thawed beneath a gentle wind, the sun sent its rays even into the deep hollows, the brooks ran and sparkled and gurgled, and for several days the weather had all the warmth of spring.

The grey hare, deeply hurt by this inconsistency of nature, this caprice of the youthful winter, huddled under a small wheat sheaf forgotten in the

field, looking out on all sides with frightened eyes; he began to think winter never would come. He wanted to crawl into the ground, and again he envied the gophers. Soon clouds drew over, nature frowned and rain started coming down. It either fell, or threatened to begin again the next moment, and the field became very cheerless; the ploughed earth swelled, the paths were muddied over, a damp fog filled the forest, wilted grass began to rot, wood gave out a thick, heavy smell. Everything alive sought shelter and did not find it, everything alive began to have a heavy smell, as though rotting. But other living things were calm, while the hare even in weather like that could never forget his own danger, and this made life even drearier.

It turned colder and drier, but not a single snowflake floated down. The hare, gleaming white against the black fields, could find no place for himself, he cowered most of the time under bushes, on the browned meadows. One day he almost stumbled over a fox pacing along slowly, sniffing, turning a sharp-nosed muzzle to this side and that, as though tasting something very good. The hare leaped aside, the fox heard and the chase began. He followed the hare through the alders like a swift, silent shadow, belly to earth, eyes bloodhungry, sparkling redly. But a mighty fear filled every cell of the hare's body, that fear drove and impelled, a slight ache was in his chest and paws, the air whistled sweetly and terribly past his ears summoning his will to live, and the hare ran with steady speed. He leaped across bushes, made a great sudden swerve, slipped through the

branches so fast they did not even stir—and got away.

He knew he had escaped, he could stop and rest, but now instead of fear he was thrilled with enjoyment, he raced on and on, drunk with his own speed, and the world raced to meet him—the black hummocks, the black forest on the horizon, the smoke rising from the clay pit by the village. He stopped a moment, then ran again, in another direction. Again he stopped, ears pricked, and again flung himself forward in stormy flight.

After this he waited for a new encounter with the fox; he knew that the fox would not forget him, would be looking for him whenever he was that way. If only the snow would come—then he would be able to hide, but now his white coat always betrayed him, he was afraid to go out even at night, he felt he gleamed in the darkness. So he lay motionless all night long. But it was no better in the daytime. Then his white coat would certainly be visible anywhere. The hare was depressed. Might as well go to the river and drown yourself, put an end to the torment. Because fate is unjust to animals. Why, for instance, had one been given strength and courage and a warm lair, and paws that taste so good you can suck them the whole winter long and never stop, they are so sweet, while another was given constant fear, constant apprehension? You have to seek your own food because food does not come running to you, and you must always be thinking of your life and taking care of it until it becomes quite unbearable. So the hare was sad and despondent.

The fox, however, gave him little time for sorrow or despondency. When the hare, crouching behind every tree-stump, slipped over the clover field, the fox, hidden in a hollow, was watching. And when Long-Ears got to the willows by the swamp to make a meal of the bark, the fox dashed out of ambush and charged forward at top speed—a streak of red flame flattened over the weeds that one almost expected to take fire from him.

It was nearly too late when the hare saw him—but not quite, he had just time to make a sideways leap, a terrific leap that tore him almost out of the fox's jaws. The fox lost balance for a moment, and that moment was enough for the hare to reach a safe distance. He ran fast, his hind legs crossing with his forepaws at such speed that he even turned a somersault once or twice, but hardly slackening speed, found his feet and raced forward still faster, his fur darkened with mud. At first the fox continued the chase, his predatory instinct a powerful urge, filled with the unquenchable thirst for victory in the eternal duel between pursuer and pursued; but he was a wily fox, he knew this was a strong, experienced hare, he knew that without cunning he would never have a chance. Meanwhile, the hare had vanished among the hummocks, but still he did not stop running, he confused his tracks, winding in and out of lonely sunflower stalks and potato clamps, again filled with the joy of running, of escaping pursuit, the joy of living, a keen pleasure in the feel of the earth under his paws and the resilient air filling his nostrils. His life no longer seemed so burdensome and unneeded.

This flight aroused his valour, his self-respect, and now he thought that even if all the world with all its terrors pursued him, it would never catch him because he would be able to get away, and that meant to win—since other victories were not for him.

At last the snow came. It started in the daytime, and the hare watched the white flakes steadily floating down, with gentle persistence, covering his own fur, covering the beet field with its holes, and the nearby furrows, he watched the distance being closed off by a pale curtain, watched the earth being renewed and taking on a festive brightness, and the sense of distance gradually vanishing. His ears twitched, his sharp whiskers stood out excitedly as they did when he sensed danger. But he was only fooling. All night the snow continued to fall and the hare, glad that now he was not so noticeable, raced over the fields and then into the village.

He slipped silently through the willows, ran into the kolkhoz cabbage field where he found some heads not yet frozen, and finally came to an old orchard. There he enjoyed cherry bark, topped it off with the bark of saplings in a neighbouring orchard, ran hither and thither as though making sure of his complete freedom and safety, and returned to the field just before dawn. He ran unhurriedly, well fed, glad because he had found a good meal, and the snow was falling to cover his tracks, and life wasn't so bad after all if you'd a sagacious head and strong legs. He even tried to sing but the tits who understood his songs were asleep, so nobody knew what he sang about.

Perhaps he sang about how gay and bold he was? Or how he had no fear of fox or wolf, even if they came in packs? Or—but there is no point in guessing, especially as the hare himself will never confirm our guesses.

But happy as our hare was, fate was preparing another encounter with the fox. With the increasing cold and frost, the fox became increasingly hungry, and began to think about that brisk hare who had got away so easily right under his nose. He even dreamed of the hare at night, and licked his lips. Just then he caught some small half-grown hares—he enjoyed them, but he was still waiting to square accounts with that big impudent fellow. He wouldn't escape so easily this time, the fox would follow him with stubbornness and guile and pay him out for his impudence.

They did meet again. The fox at once recognised Long-Ears, and he the fox. They ran across the field, where the top of the snow was frozen into a crust that sparkled in the sunshine.

This crust kept breaking under the greater weight of the fox, while the hare ran strongly and steadily; but whenever he tried a sudden leap the crust broke under him, too. In addition, the hare had had little to eat recently because everything was covered with snow, and the frost on the wet trees had given them a film of ice, so he had not his full strength. The fox, realising that the hare was far from what he had been, felt a rush of confidence and ran faster; now they kept an even distance which neither increased nor lessened. They ran into a hollow, then came out on its lip and ran a little farther, until suddenly both slackened

pace and forgot one another, just as though the fox had never thought of catching the hare, or the hare of escaping. Because they found themselves encircled by men, in a narrowing ring. Within it two harried hares rushed about frantically.

The chain of hunters gradually closed in. Their attention was centred on the two hares they had flushed out of the thicket and at first nobody noticed either pursuer or pursued. When they did, they could not believe their eyes. That morning they had come on the electric train from town, twenty-eight of them, and all day the twenty-eight had wandered about fields and gullies, hoping for at least some sort of game, but without any luck—they had seen nothing but crows. They had been empty-handed until the last moment, when they had driven out of a hollow those two hares which they now surrounded with the utmost alertness, watching them circle round the deadly ring in growing hopelessness. But when the hunters saw the fox chasing another hare their attention was distracted, they began to move at differing speeds, the taut ring broke and the two hares slipped out so quietly into the hollow that they were not even seen and escaped without a shot being fired.

Now it was pursuer and pursued who were in the ring. For both it was so unexpected that at first they understood nothing and continued to run in a narrowing circle, closer and closer to danger. Suddenly the hunters dashed forward as though afraid of losing their prey, and there was a ragged volley of shots. The fox fell at once and never

moved. The hare still ran another frantic half-circle, then in mid-leap his body shuddered, hit by an accurate shot, lost speed and collapsed on the snow. When they ran to him, blood was spreading round his head in a delicate crimson flower.

It was time to return to town and the hunters, carrying fox and hare, set off in a noisy crowd. They argued about who had hit the fox and who the hare, and since they could not decide, continued their argument with increasing loudness. Some said the fox had been killed by a lanky tram conductor with limply hanging mustaches, others that it had been the teacher of English—a short, heavy man, while a third, fourth and fifth claimed that it was they—and no other who had killed the fox. There was no argument about who had shot the hare, they felt rather sorry that he had been escaping from the fox only to fall victim to their guns, and when he shuddered in the air he had cried so piteously—like a child crying.

They were already on the road when the man carrying the hare stopped short; Long-Ears with a clever wriggle had torn free, fallen on the road, leaped to his feet and before anyone could catch his breath was away across the field, flinging out his hind legs and leaving a scarf of snow-dust floating behind him. He ran gaily, as though nothing had happened to him. The hunters were struck dumb, one raised his gun—but what was the sense of that? No chance of hitting him now. They shouted after him, somebody began to laugh and the next moment they were all holding their sides. They felt good, easy in mind, their recent vague feeling of guilt was gone.

"Guttyu-tyu!"
"Hold him! Grab him!"
"Put salt on his tail!"
"Don't get caught again, brother!"

The cheerful voices vibrated through the air with their sparks of laughter, they rang high and clear, effulgent, and the frosty snow crunched, and breath came easily, and they all wanted to tell each other how the hare had broken away, and how he had run, and most of all they wanted to tell it to the man who had let him escape. Look what a clever beast, crafty, you don't kill one like that easily, he'll fool anyone, not only a fox but them too, the hunters! And they were heartily glad the hare had got free, that he would run for a long time over these fields where every hummock was his home, that he would enjoy his wild running over the white expanse for a long time yet, that for a long time he would love his life, so terrible and so sweet.

BY THE LANTERN

I

When dusk fell, Gavrila lighted the river lantern. First he trimmed the wick with a knife till it was even, leaving traces of lamp oil and soot on his fingers, blew out the dust and soot that had collected in the middle and struck a match. The flickering flame was reflected in the old man's eyes, deeply sunk under a yellow forehead and hedged in above by shaggy brows. When he blinked the spark was extinguished in his eyes, but continued to burn on the end of the match until it leaped over to the damp strip of wick.

There was a thick smell of smoke. Gavrila shut the glass door and climbed down the creaking ladder, each rung of which had its own voice.

The lantern stood on a high bank that dropped sheerly to the Desna. In the evening it shone with a gentle, not very bright flame, distinguishable from the stars by its size and density. At night its light was firmer, a lonely red patch, eloquently silent amidst the stars which seemed to draw farther off in indifference. When it rained the drops beat against the lantern in fine spray, forming a yellowish halo. In fog the light smouldered sickly and from Bare Spit could hardly be seen. In both rain and fog the old man, lying on a hard trestle bed in his wooden hut, listened carefully to the night noises, going out now and then to make sure the lantern had not gone out. It very seldom did, but this knowledge did not banish sleeplessness, because the lantern was the old man's job.

Wherever he might be, he always thought of the lantern. Sometimes when he was going home to the village for breakfast, climbing the rise or crossing the meadow, that lantern on its tall post would flash before his eyes and he would rub them to drive away the mirage. The thought of the lantern did not leave him when his old woman told him to hoe the potatoes. He would be going round the plants with his hoe, and in the midst of the work he would suddenly remember the lantern and would be irresistibly drawn to the river—he wanted to get there quickly, to be by his lantern, to see it, to breathe the dampness of the river wind. The same feeling sometimes came when he was visiting his daughter; he might be drinking vodka

to the health of his grandchildren, singing the old, melancholy, long-drawn-out songs with all his relatives—and suddenly he would break off. A kind of trouble would fill him, and rising, he would say it was time to go to work. He would hurry across the meadow and slow down only when he approached his hut. Then he would walk as one does when coming to serious business—with respect for the business and for oneself. He could never sleep peacefully. He tossed and turned on his trestle bed, grunted and cleared his throat, constantly wanting to go outside into the night that lurked round the hut.

II

Nikifor Bychok was the ferryman, rowing people across from bank to bank. He was squat and short-legged, with large, pricked ears; he breathed heavily as he worked his oars, trying to steer so that the current would not carry him far down. When he was waiting for passengers on the left bank and was called from the right, he cursed softly; as he came to the middle his curses became angrier, but when he tied up by the bank, he was silent.

He liked to tell people all about his affairs. In May his son and daughter-in-law came to visit him, and for a month afterwards he regaled all his passengers with the story of how his son had left home and gone to a strange town years ago, how he had never written for a long time, but now he had come himself and brought presents, too—

rubber boots and tweed to make a suit for his father, and a skirt and blouse for his mother. The son left, but then Nikifor's cow broke a horn fighting in the herd. This adventure was at once made known to people in the nearby riverside villages.

For a long time nothing new occurred in the ferryman's life, so without any embarrassment he kept recounting that fight in the herd, telling it to the same people who had already heard it several times—how the cow had come home at dusk with one horn missing, and how his old woman had carried on, afraid that she might give less milk, and how she had insisted that he, Nikifor, go to the village Soviet to complain. But Nikifor did not heed her, he had his own head on his shoulders and knew he would only be laughed at. If he stumbled in his tale, there was always somebody to prompt him, and the ferryman would stare in surprise, but continue to the end, adding new details which had probably never happened.

Recently he had been telling people about the two strange truck drivers who had wanted to sell him three cubic metres of wood. Nikifor was ready to clinch the bargain when he had second thoughts—it seemed suspicious that they were asking so little. What if the wood's stolen, flashed into his head. And then he would have to answer for it. So—not without a pang at seeing this fine fuel slipping through his hands—Nikifor refused it.

When night came Nikifor fastened up his weary boat at the landing stage. He listened to the waves slapping against its tarred sides, then threw

out his chest till his joints cracked and unhurriedly made his way from Bare Spit to the red spark of the lantern that glowed like blown-on charcoal on the high bank. Gavrila would either be sitting in the hazel thicket or on grass still warm from the day's heat, or turning from side to side on his trestle bed. He would meet Nikifor Bychok in silence, and the garrulous ferryman too would fall silent, smoking acrid home-grown tobacco, drawing lazily on his cigarette, his sunburned face now veiled in smoke, now standing out clear and still. After a period of silence Bychok would clear his throat, first quietly, then more loudly, and finally his voice would come, like the creaking of an unoiled wheel.

"Today I carried some men from Chernigov, they'd been fishing other side of the spit. They'd sweated over it all day and you think they got aught worth having? Half a bag of bream and trash. They just don't know how. Aye, and they don't know the place and they can't find it—haven't got the eye or the nose for it."

"You could have told 'em to go under the high bank."

"There's naught going to hang itself on their hooks under the bank. Fish can see 'em."

"By the steep bit the kids get them."

"Boys—aye, village lads, but not strangers. Our boys'll catch the devil's imps if you give 'em the chance."

"There's fish round the bend, too."

"Aye, round the bend—but those fellows haven't the wits to find 'em. If you don't take fish to town to sell to them, they'll never eat any."

"You could ha' told them where the fish are," Gavrila insisted angrily.

The ferryman puffed at his home-rolled cigarette. When he drew it to a glow, it lighted up his round, hard-featured face.

"They were out o' luck with the fish like me with that wood. You see it, you touch it, but as for taking it—like hell!... Haven't you and your old woman dug your peat yet?"

"We'll start after the reaping."

"So'll I. Have to burn peat this winter. I'll draw straw from the kolkhoz. But for baking—when you're burning birch logs it gives flavour to the bread, but with peat it's never the same, you can say what you like. No, it doesn't taste right. It's mixed right and baked right, but it smells different. What d'you think, were them two fellows rascals or honest men?"

"Which two?"

"Them two good-for-naughts as wanted to sell me that wood."

"They might have been honest, at that. They could ha' needed money in a hurry so they set the price cheap. Things happen."

"That's right. Got my lips to the honey but it slid past my mouth, as they say. Next time I'll have more sense. They sold it to someone, anyway, and I won't believe they didn't."

With a sharp pang of envy Bychok thought of that clever unknown who had been born with more wits and courage than he had. He spat disgustedly and scratched his head.

Gavrila was in no mood to console him. Rheumatism was bad in his legs, and his attention was

fixed on the pains which stabbed sharply, dulled to an ache and stabbed again.

"If I get another chance like that, you'll not see me letting it slip," Bychok vowed. He fell silent, mulling over plans for making the best possible use of any such chance that might crop up in the future. He felt slightly dizzy with delightful thoughts, the day's tiredness and smoking.

With a "good-night" to the old man, Bychok returned to the village. Grasshoppers and other insects gave life to the quiet meadow, and the rich scent of earth filled his nostrils. But Bychok kept thinking about that wood until his head ached, more certain every moment that those fellows had been honest, they really had needed money, they had bought something, and by his own suspicions and disbelief he had simply hurt himself.... Close to the village he looked back; there was the lantern beyond the meadow, sending its faint light after him.

III

The old woman always brought dinner wrapped up in a cloth, sometimes a pot of soup, sometimes borshch, sometimes fish stew, together with a hunk of bread and young onions. The old man was fond of onions. He would dip them in coarse salt and eat them with a fine appetite. When they stung tears to his eyes he did not wipe them away but sat there, blinded. Many a dinner the old woman had brought him in her long life. Brought them to the field, to the orchard, to the melon

plot. Sometimes she set the pot in a basket, but usually she tied it in a kerchief or a white cloth. She was not very tall, that old woman, but sturdy and strong like an earthenware pot. She had borne ten children; the two first had died early, but the rest had grown up and gone out into the world. Sometimes grandchildren would come on Sundays, and granny always tried to have something good to give them. If she had nothing special to eat she would mend their clothes, sew on a patch, or wipe the nose of the smallest with loving words. It would have been hard to guess just how old granny was. Sometimes she felt she had always been old.

The old man kept up with the other mowers to the end of the row, then wiped his scythe on a twist of rag and settled down under a willow. The pot held borshch with mushrooms, and there was a bowl of cherry dumplings sprinkled with sugar. The old man peeled an onion, dipped it in salt and chewed it with his bread. He had nothing to say, nor had the old woman. Their silence lasted long, probably because they had lived through so much. The sun scorched their hands and faces, burning them dark, it sent beams into their hearts trying to illumine them from within, but they sat there in quiet equilibrium, deep in the silence which had settled in them through the years. When he had finished eating the old man spoke.

"Nikifor came over the other day."

"He left the boat?"

"Maybe there wasn't anybody wanting over. He wants me to take his place from tomorrow."

"But the lantern?"

"That's night, the ferry's day."

"You're not strong, how'll you manage both? The kolkhoz gives us hay for the reaping, but you won't get it for the ferry, what'll there be for the cow come winter?"

"We'll mow our enclosed pasture and then there'll be something for her."

"Is it for long Bychok's going?"

"A fortnight, mebbe. He's got a married son in the Donbass, they want him to go."

"He'll see a mort o' things, a visit like that."

"Aye, that he will."

The old woman tied up the dishes in her cloth and went back to the village. The mowers rose and started work again. The old man took his place. The scythe sang in all keys, it rang and hissed. Green blood shone as it was wiped off with rags before honing. The sun sparkled on the bluish, smoky blade. The old man swung his scythe in wide sweeps and the grass fell in an almost noiseless shower. The blade bit greedily. The hot, sultry air shimmered mistily blue, resting heavily on the earth. The mowers, stretched out like a triangle of flying cranes, laid long swathes behind them that looked sadly prostrate.

Late at night when the old man had lighted the lantern and settled himself on the threshold of the tumbledown hut, looking out into the night which smelt of approaching thunder, Nikifor came again. He had evidently had a drink or two and waved his hands about aimlessly. He talked so loudly that he raised a faint echo from the dark entry.

"Well now, grandad, what I think is, it's worth while going", he cogitated aloud, sitting down on a battered upturned bucket. "If my lad and his wife invite me, no sense refusing."

"Then go, and God go with you," said the old man.

"You say 'go', and I say I ought to go. Because you never know what's going to happen, eh? And a man's only got one life—right? The village is the village. And the river's the same. What's ferrying? Over and back again, over and back. Like a cock, you set it on the ground and draw a chalk line and it stops there, the fool, thinking it's tied. But me—I'm not a cock! Nobody's tied me down. And my son writes me to come."

"Go, then," the old man advised.

"I'd take my goodwife too, but there's no moving her from the place. Like a rock that's sunk into the ground. So let her be.... But I'll take a look, sniff about, and maybe shift over and live there. Isn't that right?"

"Right enough," the old man agreed.

"E-e-egh!" Nikifor shouted hoarsely. "E-e-egh!"

Emotion seethed in him, his ears rang, he wanted to talk and talk about the trip ahead, but only waved his hands about and drew his breath in noisily. He wanted to go, but he wanted to talk to the old man too, so he wriggled uneasily on his bucket which flattened a little more.

"E-e-egh!" He banged his fists down on his knees. "Nay, I shan't come back. A Nikifor Bychok lived here—no more Nikifor Bychok. Maybe there's some as'll remember me. And if they don't—

I'll be none the worse off. E-e-egh! Is that right, grandad, or isn't it?"

"Right enough, right enough."

Nikifor rose with a jerk and set off; the rasp of his boots died away along the path. But soon the footsteps came close again—the ferryman was returning. He bent over the old man.

"But give an eye to the boat. Because though the kolkhoz bought it, all the same it still feels like mine. Take ten kopeks to go over and ten to come back."

The air was hard to breathe—it was like being in an oven. Forked lightning flickered now and then, but silently, with no thunder. The bow and stern lights of a barge moved smoothly along the Desna. A tug gave a short hoot and the echo wheezed in the distance.

Taking coal to Chernigov, likely, the old man thought. A wearisome melancholy stirred in him; he went into the hut and lay down on the bed, hoping to feel easier. He dozed off, but soon wakened. Rain was falling steadily on the wooden walls and trickling down from the shingled roof. The old man pulled on a raincoat and went out into the cool dampness. Its freshness was stimulating, he felt collected and happy. The lantern was burning by the drop in a halo of shining rain.

IV

Now Gavrila no longer went home to the village at dawn, but unfastened the boat by the bank. The chain slapped into the water but he hauled

it out, coiled it on the stern and covered it with sweetflag or dock leaves. Then he settled down in the boat on a heap of dry grass and dozed the time away while a round sun rose and the mists over the river evaporated, until the first passengers appeared. Fish jumped; the water flowed past almost inaudibly, bending the hornwort; faint rays of sunshine became stronger and warmer, scorching his cheeks; dampness rose from the water and sand below, while above him swift shaggy clouds bloomed like spring violets. A scraping grew in the distance—somebody coming; a jacket brushing against the bushes, boots brushing against the nettles, soles scraping along the path. The steps came closer, there was heavy breathing, a shadow lay by the boat, and the old man rose.

"Good morning," said a portly female and set her basket, its handles tied together with a towel, in the boat, following it herself. The boat rocked and the woman sat down quickly, to avoid overbalancing. "Drat the thing, I'll be over before I know it." When he wanted to wait and see if there was anyone else, she started to hurry him. "Can't we go, grandad, I'm in an awful hurry. I've got to help my brother-in-law. The whole family's there and I'll be coming when everyone's getting ready to go." Her lips alternately compressed into threads and pursed into a knot, and she looked holy and pious enough to heal a wound with a miraculous touch.

A man was already standing on the farther bank waving impatiently. Gavrila pushed off and rowed against the current. When an oar dip-

ped bubbles seethed round it. The current carried them down. The woman clutched alternately at her basket and the side. When they drove into the bank she pulled a couple of boiled eggs out of her basket and offered them in payment.

"Take them, take them," she urged, when she saw his frown. "They'll do for your breakfast."

"My old woman'll be bringing me my breakfast soon."

Then she took a small bundle out from under her blouse, unfastened it, counted out copper coins with much whispering and handed them over with a sigh. She looked offended, even angry.

"You aren't a wealthy man, grandad," she flung back at him.

Many people of all kinds crossed during the day. One was hurrying to a birth, another to a funeral. One was crossing to buy a barrel from a cooper he knew because the cucumbers were ripe and it was time to salt them down for the winter, another just wanted to visit his father-in-law and have a drink with him, because that week father-in-law had killed a pig and would have fresh meat. Yet another wanted to borrow an old bicycle from a tractor driver in Kolodnitsa, because the driver had got a new one so what did he want with the old. Two children were going to visit granny, and both were frightened of the journey, and of the old ferryman, and the lantern on the rise, and the broad water-meadows that spread out like a table-cloth with shocks of hay rising grey on them, and the thatched cottages beyond that looked like stacks, except that they

stood in orchards. The day gradually became sultry, the blue sky seemed swollen with heat and the air smelt as it does just before reaping—of moist waxen wheat and of rye still soft. Bees hummed past, white or yellow with pollen. The sun had reached the zenith and the day was sinking towards evening that with unhurried footsteps passed over the ground. The old woman brought dinner and Gavrila ate it quickly because passengers were waiting. Dusk shed its ash, it hovered on the water, and the floating clouds, lighted above by the rim of the setting sun, gathered darkness below. Somebody shouted beyond the quick current and the voice melted into a distance tinted with green music sinking into orange. The water gurgled wearily, but the current tugged more strongly and the boat struggled across slowly until it finally rested by the stake, locked on a rusty chain. Gavrila lighted his lantern and went into his hut to rest. He fell asleep, but lightly, and soon jumped up to go outside and listen. He had thought he heard somebody calling from the far bank to be rowed across. But all he could hear now were the frogs croaking in the swamp and the tireless grasshoppers on the meadow. The night sky was like a great dark sieve riddled with the pinpoints of stars. A passenger boat passing along the river bound for Kiev showed two long necklaces of lighted portholes that moved rapidly along and soon vanished behind Bare Spit. And such a longing seized him for something inexpressibly precious that a shiver ran over his skin; frightened, he laid his hand on his heart. The necklaces vanished, but the melancholy

remained. The old man thought of Nikifor Bychok, who had left on a ship like this one. And something urged him along the bank, to follow the ship—but he restrained himself. His breath came heavily, as though he had covered a long distance.

V

It was a day of tedious drizzle and there was little work on the ferry. In the morning a young woman crossed, with a cock held firmly under her arm. In the middle of the river the boat rocked, she relaxed her hold on her gorgeously handsome fellow and he took his chance: wings beat on the bottom and then he was away—over the side. The woman screamed, and when Gavrila caught the cock she held the fugitive to her belly and sat hunched over, immobile. On the far bank a boy carrying a shot-gun got on. He made a brave show of independence, looking keenly from side to side. His lips trembled now and then with suppressed excitement.

"The tub won't sink, will it?" he asked with casual loftiness.

"No, it won't go down," the old man answered soothingly.

"That's a pity," he said through his teeth.

When he got out, he did not shoulder the shot-gun but carried it in his hand; it was clear that he was terribly proud to be holding a gun that would really shoot. True, his father had not given him any cartridges when he sent him with the shot-gun to his brother, otherwise he would have

been shooting at the crows and the willow stumps and into the sky.

The old man sheltered from the rain in a shanty under an elm. Before he had time really to settle down a voice sounded close by.

"Hi-i-i there! Where's the ferryman?"

Other voices—men's, rough, harsh from smoking, hoarse from strain, laughed and shouted.

When Gavrila left his shanty he saw five tall men in green canvas capes with closely-fitting hoods. They churned up the beach with top-boots of rough leather, bringing up the dry white sand that lay under the wet yellow surface.

"Here's Noah," said one, and the rest laughed.

They wanted to cross together, but Gavrila said they might overturn, let two go first and then the other three. They laughed again.

"But why not three and then two?"

"Because there's waves on the river. If we swamp with three then I can't take the other two. So we'll just try it with two, first".

"A real Noah," remarked a teasing, lanky fellow with a constellation of freckles on his face.

In the boat the old man said, half questioningly, "Ye'll be strangers this way, I'm thinking...."

"We're looking for oil, grandad," said Freckles. "You know what that is? You get petrol from it, and without petrol a tractor won't go and an airplane won't fly."

"You're looking for it in these parts?" said the old man disbelievingly, and took a good look at them. They were both sturdy and broad-shouldered, the boat sat low in the water with their weight.

They grinned at the ferryman—a grin that held a hint of friendly teasing. They quite evidently felt themselves quite in control everywhere and arrived at a new place like coming home. They made the old man feel rather unsure of himself, although this was his own river, he had grown up by it and worked by it all his life.

"Yes, these parts," the lanky one answered willingly.

"Not come across it yet?" One might as well know.

"Come across it all right," said Freckles, laughing. "If Comrade Sapronov's prospecting, he'll find something for sure."

Evidently Comrade Sapronov was himself, because the other man said, "Don't brag too much."

"There's no liars in my family."

"You must have a big family," said the old man, wagging his head respectfully.

Sapronov's friend said, "A big family, but it ends with a liar."

"I've got a son already," Sapronov objected gaily.

"And where might you have found that oil?" the old man enquired cautiously.

"The other side of Kolodnitsa. One bore's drilled already." He jumped out, adding, "And there'll be enough for the tractors, and your motorcycle if you've got one. Soon there'll be a bridge built here and no more need for your boat."

Gavrila wanted to say the boat wasn't his, it was Nikifor Bychok's, but stopped himself in time. They'd have started asking who Bychok was and where he'd gone. And then they'd have

started laughing again. So all he said was, "Nay, I look after the lantern."

They probably did not hear, because they walked away to shelter under the willow from the rain.

The other three were stooping, lighting cigarettes from a lighter. They puffed, drew in smoke, and their cheeks sank into deep hollows. The first stepped into the boat, and the second, but the old man held off the third with an oar.

"First them two, then you. There's big waves."

When he was taking the last one, he remarked, "Safer this way. The boat's none too good."

"Does it ever overturn?"

"Mebbe it does, mebbe it doesn't, but this way's safer."

"Don't worry, I can swim ashore."

"I don't doubt it, but still an' all...."

He watched them walking away. They stretched out in single file as they started down into a hollow. First one vanished, then another. Then they were gone as though they'd never been. He felt a stir of something like wonder and even rose to see if they were still there. But there was nothing to see, the travellers had vanished into the hollow. Somebody was calling from the opposite bank but he could not force himself away.

That day he talked about the oil prospectors to two milkmaids on their way to Volchki for a conference of people with top output. The younger listened with exaggerated curiosity, but the elder was dubious.

"If only it doesn't spoil the milk yield—after all, oil..."

A carpenter with a bag of tools shook his head in surprise, his sly, faded little eyes narrowing.

"Well, now, you don't say!"

When dusk fell Gavrila tied up the boat and baled it out. With his knife he trimmed the lantern wick, leaving traces of oil and soot on his fingers. The tiny flame trembled between his rough cupped palms, quiet and trusting, until it leaped over to the wick and spread along its whole width. The old man shut the lantern door and descended the ladder. The reflection of warmth stayed awhile on his face, but soon died away. He felt uplifted, as though that day he had experienced something special. As he lay on his bed he kept asking himself: What's happened, why am I like this? He could find no answer, but he could not quieten the light gaiety that filled him. He turned from side to side, listened to the wind and to the drops driving with a hard splash against the glass. Then suddenly he remembered: Ah, it's those men looking for oil! He could see them again as they vanished one after another into the hollow by the bank. Without intending it, he rose. He was glad to have carried them over. And it was a good thing he had taken two at a time, a very good thing. A pleasant warmth filled him, and again he smiled happily.

On the high bank the lantern burned with a steady glow. From close by it was white, but seen from below, from Bare Spit, it had a soft reddish glow. And around it hung a small nocturnal rainbow.

BATHED WITH LOVAGE ROOT

The field camp was close to an oak plantation. From a little distance the plantation merged into a solid low-growing mass, the leaves hanging a thick tired green on the young trees, with no pale gaps standing out between their trunks where evening air could flow through and sunshine gather. The camp smelled of drying milkpails, clean smocks and cowdung dried during the day.

Old Uncle Oleksa came driving up on a cart. He sat on a heap of dark-green clover, holding the raw-hide reins absently, his head dropping

forwards, and his clear, faded eyes filled with peace, quietness and lethargy. He was drenched with the scent of clover, the tufty flowers had tangled in his old clothes baked by the July sun, and when he stood up on the cart the unsteady pile swayed with heavy resilience under his feet. Mown flowers had caught in his shirt by the belt. "E-egh", Oleksa wheezed, pulling a pitchfork out of the fragrant, damp grass and thrusting its teeth into the pile. "E-egh!" and tossed it down. The grass fell on the scorched ground and scattered, sending up a stronger fragrance, and a bee hummed over it. Then the bee's humming quietened as it flew away to the plantation. The old man spat on his hands and felt the dry horny skin sting, forked up another bundle of clover and tossed it down, the cart swaying under his feet. The bay snorted, bent down his head, sniffed the ground carefully and stretched out his neck with nostrils distended.

"Vustya!" Oleksa called to a girl sitting by a cow. "Do the lads come after ye or not—eh?"

Vustya turned a pretty, sunburned face to him and smiled shyly, displaying two white upper teeth, then with augmented zeal set to work pulling the dugs—first one, then another, one and another. White spurts of milk hit the bottom of the bucket noisily and foamed over it, slowly covering it, then the slender spurts merged into the pliant pool, the ringing sound softened and became more weighty and assured. Vustya saw nothing but those rapid streams, heard nothing but their wet stroke. The cow stood meekly,

hind legs set wide, listening attentively and now and then turning her head with a white star on the red forehead to look at Vustya with tender concern, as she might look at her calf.

Oleksa unloaded all his hay, got up onto the front seat, jerked the reins once, twice, and asked again, "So do the lads come after ye, Vustya, or not?"

She did not turn, as though she had heard nothing; she sat on her low milking stool, bent a little forward, a blue kerchief on her head—she had put it on during the day to keep off the sun—and made no reply.

"But it's high time, you're a grown maid now!" He chirruped and called to the horses and they set off, first at a slow walk, then when Oleksa chirruped again at a trot, the wheels with their iron rims rattling noisily over the hard road and raising a faint grey dust, while the thin, rickety old man jounced on the seat.

For a moment Vustya rested. She dropped her hands, fingers dangling almost to the ground, their tips touching the sharp, dried blades of grass. She sighed, raised her head and looked across the gleaming red back of her milker at the sky. She felt an inexplicable melancholy. Only a short time ago they had been riding in the truck, they had fooled about, sung and laughed, the pale road lay before them and at the side the warm sun was sinking towards the rye, and she, Vustya, had wanted to laugh and fool with all the others—just for no reason, in pure high spirits. They had beaten their fists on the roof of the cab and shouted to the elderly driver to

stop, although there was no need at all for a stop, they were just fooling. But now she forgot all the laughter, her movements were languid, she didn't want to work. Her ribcage felt large, all-encompassing, and within that great space a heart beat—so small, weak and lonely. What if it stopped? For a moment Vustya really thought it was no longer beating, involuntarily she brought her hand up to her breast and kept it there until she felt the hard, rhythmic thudding—and then her face lighted up.

A kite flew over. Its wings flapped lazily as though it were climbing some invisible staircase; it hung motionless, its small head with the savage beak searching, then moved its wings again so as not to plummet down. For an instant Vustya felt as though she too were flying like that soaring bird, flying slowly and sadly, and the cool air flowed past her head—she swayed and planted her feet more widely to keep her balance. She had no desire to draw the white streams from the full udder, she wanted to lie in the tall grass with the quiet stems rising round her, looking so tall from below, reaching to the sky, and the floating clouds catching in them. She wanted to think of nothing, but just lie and feel through her whole body the dusk falling softly round her, filled with the fragrance of grass and wild flowers, the sharp bitterness of wormwood.

The sound of talk came to her from the truck, where the milk cans were waiting and there was a small table for Auntie Gorpina, who had a crutch instead of one of her legs; she heard a familiar voice,

"And what might you have come for?" asked Gorpina, laughing. She always laughed, for anything and nothing. It was enough for her to see a person and speak the usual greetings—before that person had a chance to answer she was laughing. And since laughter is infectious, everybody else began laughing too. Some said it was an illness, but if that was said in her presence she turned serious for a moment to ask in surprise, "What sort of illness is that?" and again laughed loud and long.

"Necessary."

"And what's necessary?"

"This!" The young fellow's voice was calm and assured. "You can see, my bicycle's broken."

Gorpina laughed as though that were the funniest thing in the world.

"Why did it break?"

"It didn't tell me."

More laughter.

"Go to the plantation, Gritsko, the tractor drivers have their motor-cycles there. They'll help you somehow."

"That's right."

Bicycle wheels rustled through the grass. There was a smell of rubber, oil and metal. Gritsko stopped beside Vustya.

"Good evening!"

"Good evening," the girl answered without turning.

"What are you sitting there for, not milking?"

Gorpina called over from her table.

"Vustya isn't milking, she's just sitting dreaming!" More laughter.

Taut streams again sprang from under Vustya's fingers and thrust down into the foam, raising sudden bubbles.

"Seems like you don't know how to talk, your ma didn't teach you—eh?"

Silence.

"Well, that's your business. Isn't it?"

Silence.

"A queer girl. Doesn't even open her mouth."

He turned and went. Vustya sighed deeply. She felt warm and tender. She sought for answers to Gritsko's words. Because when he was standing behind her, rocking the bicycle with his hands—she could see the front wheel rocking restlessly from side to side close to the cow's red legs—she could not bring out a single word. She only felt a great inner disturbance. And she milked unconsciously, thrilled with warm gladness, and her hot hands worked easily. E-eh! But now she had mastered herself a bit. She could think of Gritsko more reasonably. Did she really not know how to talk? Of course she did. She was no longer little. It was then she had always been silent. She would stare at something, her eyes fixed, motionless—and she stared and stared. But now she could not even turn to look at Gritsko. Her head would not move. Her disturbance died away leaving only agitated embarrassment in her memory. But why did she keep seeing him as he had stood there rocking his bicycle? She cast a stealthy side-glance at the front legs of the cow Manka. Nothing there.

Only the cow mindlessly chewing her fodder, the pale stalks of foxtail grass tangled with dodder dangling to the ground.

She carried a full pail to the shanty. Dusk would soon be falling, a red-hot sun rested over the horizon among the clouds, like a hot smouldering ember that will soon turn into grey ash, and then the ash will blacken, hiding the heat. A notebook lay on the table, beside it a piece of bread. Gorpina always drank new milk with bread for her health.

"You've taken a long time with the milking today, Vustya," Gorpina scolded and her cheeks, burned almost black by the sun, quivered.

Vustya did not want to reply. But nevertheless, as she poured out the milk, she said, "I'll have time enough."

Gorpina laughed. Her eyes sparkled, hot and gay. Vustya was unpleasantly affected by her laughter and her coarse cheeks which became rounder than usual, and jerked. And why did she laugh? With reason or without—it was all the same. It really was an illness. A lot of people had advised her to get treatment—but catch her heeding them!

Now she felt cool and pleasant. She wanted to think about the village, her mother, about how she would come home, busy herself about the house and make her bed—it would smell of dried grasses, because she had laid them under the mattress some weeks before. But that thought of itself led on to another. She remembered how the bicycle had rustled through the low grass, and the smell of rubber and metal. And Gritsko

had stood behind her talking to her, and she had not been able even to turn so as to see him—dusty, sunburned, tired and smiling; her imagination clearly showed her even the expression on his face, although she had not seen it, and the dark, moist eyes shaded by shaggy but gentle brows.

She started up quickly. Somebody had sprinkled water on the back of her neck—unexpected, irritating. She expected to see one of the lads. No—Varka. She was always up to some trick. And now she stood there, pockmarked, laughing with her thick lips, hands on hips.

"Made you jump?"

A plaintive light trembled in Vustya's startled eyes, and faded. She did not say a word. Just went on with what she was doing. She heard Varka stump away, plump and heavy. What did Varka care? She kissed all the lads with equal ardour. One could almost see on her face and neck the burning traces left by their lips. And why did they all go after her, like moths round a fire?

Vustya washed her hands, splashed her face and dried herself on a turkish towel, rubbing herself till her skin was quite dry. After that she felt different. She felt more fully, through the whole of her, the pensive quietness of that evening on the steppe. She took off her shoes to wash her feet. Daft, she thought, I ought to have washed my feet first!

A quiet, windless evening.

She straightened up and looked about her. The sky was a deep, dark blue. The sun no longer

burned, it was hidden. Women in white headscarfs were walking far away, along the horizon. And there under the low grey clouds the village clung—the houses and trees looked very small, the streets narrow threads, and the smoke hanging motionless over the chimneys was almost invisible.

She had not the strength to continue standing. As though impelled, she walked slowly towards the plantation. Her shoes were still by the shanty, she trod barefoot over the cool grass of evening. Grasshoppers rasped, and sometimes leaped like swift green sticks, flew tensely and then sought a fresh shelter.... She entered the oak grove and stopped. There was a strong, fresh smell from the young trees, from their tangled leaves and tight barks, mingled with the smell of dust. They were still low, growing close to one another, flinging out angular branches.... In one place two of the trees had died, leaving only short, dry sticks; it left a kind of small glade. In this space lay motor-cycles—two black and one blue, against the fresh green background. Beside them a young fellow was stooping.

"Is that you, Vustya?" asked Gritsko, although he could see very well it was. "What have you got to say?"

She did not want to say anything. She had just come. If he didn't like that, she could turn round and go again. He needn't pester her with words and laugh at her!

"So you've nothing to say? Don't, then. But I know very well you don't know how to talk."

He laid out bicycle parts gleaming with oil on a sheet of dark brown paper.

"You haven't fixed it yet, still struggling with it?"

"No, it's struggling with me."

"Can't I even ask?"

"Why not?"

"Why are you cross, then?"

She felt very uncomfortable. But if she went—then what had she come for? And he might think.... But if she just kept on standing beside him he'd start laughing at her again.

"I'm not cross," said Gritsko. "It's just my way of talking."

"A-ah."

His thick arms were bare to the elbow, a sinewy neck rose from his open shirt collar, his shoulders were not very broad but evidently hard and angular. Vustya wanted to lay her hand on them, to feel what they were like—she could not understand where the wish came from.

"I've got trouble at home," said Gritsko suddenly, raising big kind eyes and dropping them again. "My dad's ill. He was hauling an electric line across the clay-pit to the farm and fell from the post. He lay a long time unconscious, then someone found him and got him right off to hospital. That's what's happened."

He stopped, despondent. Vustya felt sorry for Gritsko and his father, a frowning, unfriendly man, long and lean. But she could not put her sympathy into words, although inside she felt empty and unhappy, and Gritsko suddenly seemed closer and simpler.

"My mother cried and carried on, and then went off to the hospital to be with him." He let out a deep shuddering sigh, like a child's.

"He's strong, he'll get over it," said Vustya. And wondered how she could say so little, so meaninglessly. Here was a man in real trouble, was that the kind of sympathy he needed? And she really was terribly sorry about it, but she could not find words big and weighty, only these everyday, ordinary ones.

She looked at Gritsko and to her he seemed more handsome and dear than anyone else in the world. Even her parents had never meant so much to her, she felt, nobody—only him, and she herself could not understand what had made her go to the plantation where Gritsko was busy with his bicycle. And why had she not been able to look at him when she had been milking the red cow and he had come up—why had she lacked the courage?

At last Gritsko rose. He shook the machine, then rested his chest on the saddle, testing whether it was well pumped up.

"Seems all right now."

Then he turned an attentive look on Vustya. They stood eye to eye—his kind, affectionate, quiet and grey, hers alert, alarmed, expectant.

"You've a scent of lovage," he said.

Blushing, shy, she said quickly, "I washed my hair in it. And bathed."

"A-a-ah," he said and leaned across the saddle again. "Shall I give you a lift? You've finished work, haven't you?"

"Yes".

"Shall I take you, then?"

"No, never mind. I'll go in the truck with the girls."

"As you like."

He still hesitated to go. At last he said, "Well, good night, then. I go through the ravine."

"Good night," she answered, and a chill passed over her, like the wind from the river; she felt empty and forlorn. "Good night," she repeated softly.

He crossed the plantation, his shirt a glimmering patch of white, and vanished. For a while she could hear the sound of his movement, then that too died away.

Three motor-cycles lay in front of Vustya—two black and one blue. The hush of evening surrounded her. Suddenly she heard the lowing of a cow, close and warm. She went towards the sound. She felt lonely and abandoned. Now, she thought, he'll be going down into the ravine, riding fast. But then he'll have to walk because the other side is steep.

Vustya got back to the camp just at the right moment, everyone was there and some were already in the back of the truck.

"So you go running off to the plantation after a lad, eh?" said Varka. Gorpina laughed heartily, with real enjoyment, and her cheeks bumped up and down like jelly, uglily.

Why do they have to be like that, thought Vustya in chagrin. She found her shoes, put them on and climbed silently into the truck.

It was dark now.... Stars were appearing in the clear sky—first just a few scattered ones, then

thick and bright. The young women and girls jostled and talked noisily, glad to be on their way home. But Vustya felt very much alone. There was an ache in her breast, as though her heart had been wrenched out. When they drove through the darkness the freshness of the steppe caressed her cheeks, but she found no pleasure in it because it chilled her, and she was already chilled.

THE OLD TEACHER

Only one thresher was still in order, run by the locomobile. The locomobile had been brought from an almost undamaged factory and here, in the field, it was like something from another world. On small wheels that sank into the ground, with a long cylindrical body in which its wild heart rumbled and hummed, it seemed to be filled with inarticulate anger—against the broad expanse of sky, perhaps, or the boundless field. Yakov Nesterovich, sometimes forgetting he should be tossing up sheaves, listened to the hum of the locomobile and the clucking of the thresher, and their noise seemed so unnecessary, so out of

place and void of all meaning that he actually started. And the people busy by the grain, by the straw and sheaves, were like mechanically activated dummies, moved by a hostile alien power that they obeyed involuntarily because they could not do otherwise. He himself had no new thoughts and feelings, he too was a mechanical dummy, and that real Yakov Nesterovich whom he had been such a short time ago had vanished somewhere, although not very far, to escape seeing the imbecile locomobile, hearing its blind sound, seeing the actions of these human puppets.

It was not often, however, that these moments of oppressive numbness seized Yakov Nesterovich and when they passed he no longer felt so helpless, and the others looked as usual again. Those who formerly had said little were silent now too, and it would be hard to say whether they pursued any other meaning in their silence. Those who had never been averse to gossip or just talk with or without cause had not dropped their usual habit, and only a highly suspicious person could see anything reprehensible in that. The sun's behaviour was also like that of dwellers on the earth —it made no alteration in its course across the sky and if it began to rise a little later and sink a little earlier, this was no sign of sympathy or antipathy, but just because autumn was near and that had been the say of things for countless centuries.

Yakov Nesterovich rounded the corner of a a stack and stopped dead in surprise. On the spread straw two of his recent pupils, Makar and Ulyana, were pressed close together, their

arms round one another. Makar's face said that for him, nothing existed in all the world but this stack or himself under it, but hers—it held no expression, only tenderness that glowed on her pink quivering features. Yakov Nesterovich was amazed that his recent pupils, whom he still regarded as his pupils, should be embracing, and that they should embrace so naturally, at such a time. With every day he became increasingly irritable and unstable, any trifle could throw him into a rage. And especially anything like this. The teacher could not turn and go, his legs refused to move, so he stood looking at them. Makar and Ulyana too had been ordered to come for the threshing; they had come, moved here and there on the threshing floor—and now this was where they had hidden. Eyes closed, wishing to see nothing about them, they were conscious only of one another's nearness, and this feeling of friendly warmth was sufficient for them. What defencelessness there was in it, what tragedy! A human being is winged, yet so limited!

What he had thought about a winged humanity struck him as sacrilege. Yakov Nesterovich nevertheless found strength not to stand there any longer over the double-petalled flower of illusion, he turned and went away, to his place. To my place, he softly repeated to himself and felt a rising disgust for himself. He ordered himself to work and think of nothing, pay no attention to anybody. Because actually, this was all that was expected of him. He was required to make only certain movements in which the muscles of his arms, chest and back had their

part. Feelings were not required. They could be switched off as one switches off the light in a room. Emotion could be extinguished as one extinguishes a candle with a puff.

Darkness fell in nature and it fell in his soul. A wind from over the horizon, damp quicksilver, seemed to lick his very heart. The evening star rose, his eyes burned with its distant light.... Yakov Nesterovich returned to the village with the others—as though from bondage, from exile; and he came not to his home, but into new exile. It would have been better if he had walked and never arrived, but stayed eternally on the road, with the wind in his heart and the starlight in his eyes.

After some days he was ordered to report at the Kommandant's office. An erect, corpulent German rose to meet him, offered his hand and invited him to take a seat. The Kommandant had taken possession of the former factory office, with windows looking out on the old park; the cawing of crows came from there, gutteral as though cawing with a German accent. Yakov Nesterovich sat down in a soft armchair and at once recognised it—he had often sat in it at parties given by the chief engineer who had been a friend of his, and by some miracle had managed to evacuate with his big family. The teacher remembered his way of laughing—first his chest began to shake, then his shoulders, his cheeks, and finally out came a deep "ha-ha-ha!" The memory brought a smile. With that smile the German's face, round and protruding like a car headlight, expressed even greater, more courteous attention, and he asked if the Herr Teacher

(a glance at a paper on the table)—the Herr Teacher Yakov Nesterovich had been living long in this village. The German spoke quite good Russian, but it sounded as though he held a sweet in his mouth which he could not decide to swallow—the sounds were rounded and cold.

"A long time," Yakov Nesterovich answered, looking at the German's mouth as though hoping to see the ill-fated sweet.

"Consequently you are an old teacher who knows many people not only in this village, but in the district?"

"Yes."

"Would you care to become an interpreter for this office?"

Seeing the teacher's eyes tensely fixed, he added hastily, "Of course, we'll pay you."

Yakov Nesterovich refused, saying that in the past seven years he had not taught German in the local school and had consequently lost even the small knowledge he had once possessed. In addition he was very ill, his heart was bad, so was his liver, for one day on his feet he had to spend three in bed, so therefore he could be of no use. The German said that a spirit of goodwill could cure all sicknesses, but did not insist, and by his expression and his entire behaviour stressed that he was the guest here and the host was Yakov Nesterovich, that he, the German, would certainly not resort to compulsion because the only thing he would achieve would be hypocrisy and fear. He laughed, but even in his laughter he seemed to the old teacher to have that sweet in his mouth which got in his way

now too, giving his laughter a shade of cold calculation. At that moment Yakov Nesterovich again remembered the chief engineer, and how first his chest heaved, then his shoulders shook, and he felt a great loneliness, a sense of being cut off from everything.

A harsh autumn wind whispered in the hazels, and the teacher stopped and listened as though trying to understand what it said.... Nothing had changed in the park in the past month—the trees stood in their places, the shrubs had not run away, but the plump stone bear-cub whose mouth had poured out water on holidays stood dry, and with paws upraised as usual to splash himself was like a creature deceived and robbed, because not a single drop fell upon him. The teacher walked round the fountain; on the sand he saw a bright, untouched chocolate paper, picked it up, crumpled it and with sudden loathing flung it into the shrubs. He glanced round involuntarily—had anybody seen?—and later, as he passed through the gate with the sentry standing by it, he felt ashamed.

Some of his pupils were coming towards him. "My ex-pupils," he stressed mentally. Instead of huddling on the narrow pavement by the fence they stretched across the whole road. It was this which attracted the teacher's attention. He recognised Sashko Banduristy, a thin, pleasant-faced lad whose large eyes had a reddish tinge, like an angora rabbit's. Beside him was Genya Babanov, son of the elderly electrician at the state farm; Genya was tall and broad-shouldered, with naive, rather girlish eyes. Yakov Nesterovich

always felt a faint surprise that he should be a boy. In the middle walked Ilko Yalovoi, known for his sharp tongue, his nocturnal walks through the village with a guitar and the serenades he made up himself, a new one every time—nocturnal songs not addressed to anyone except, perhaps, his own youth and the distant, invisible sky. At one end were Makar and Ulyana—here too they were together, even among others they were able to be alone.

His pupils—"my ex-pupils," he reminded himself—greeted him and were about to continue when Yakov Nesterovich stopped suddenly, and they stopped, too.

"You—are you drunk?" he almost whispered, in something between question and accusation.

"Why, of course not!" said Ilko Yalovoi and winked at the others.

"Drunk?" Yakov Nesterovich insisted, unpleasantly struck by their free-and-easy gaiety.

"We only sat beside the ones who were drinking," Yalovoi again answered for all.

"You—" The teacher choked with anger.

Now they stood more erect, more formal, looking at him with the respect and seriousness to which he was accustomed.

Banduristy's reddish eyes held a quick glint of sadness, Genya Babanov flushed suddenly, Ulyana and Makar seemed to have forgotten one another for an instant, because the affectionate, almost sweet reflection on their faces no longer made them resemble each other. Yakov Nesterovich felt a general change in the attitude towards him, and cooled down a little.

"Times like these call for more dignified behaviour."

Nobody answered because the old teacher now turned to Makar and Ulyana.

"And you—mind what you're doing."

He did not continue because Ulyana blushed crimson, and her eyes had a shimmer—in another moment she would be crying. Everybody looked at her, and Yakov Nesterovich had the impression that now they all thought the less of him for causing her embarrassment.

"And you?" asked Ilko Yalovoi.

Sashko Banduristy threw him an imploring look as though begging him to be quiet. Genya Babanov cautiously dropped his head as though struck by an idea he had to settle with at once. Only Makar fixed on him an openly alert, suspicious look—he was silently retorting both for himself and for Ulyana's blush which still had not faded, but only acquired new shadings.

"And you?" Ilko repeated. "What are you doing?"

Yakov Nesterovich coughed and moved his head uneasily. But Ilko, having started, was not afraid to go on.

"You taught us—" He cast a glance over his friends—"taught us to be real people.... You taught history!" he cried, as though it were an accusation. "And the examples you gave us!" He had no need to cite them, Yakov Nesterovich knew them all himself. "What about you?" he asked again.

Now Yakov Nesterovich no longer wanted to reproach them, but to justify himself. He did know, however, that they would not accept his

self-justification, because now too, it seemed, they wanted to see him as a teacher. This discovery gladdened him later, when they had gone their several ways, but at that moment he knew only that he had no right to go without saying something.

"History did not end with the last lesson...."

He was afraid Ilko or one of the others would interrupt and again reproach him, but they stood looking at him as though they were not out on the road, but sitting at a lesson in the classroom. This gave Yakov Nesterovich confidence.

"Before, you were learning how to live, and now the time to live has come. Don't feel desperate, and remain what you were."

Now they really did feel embarrassed about drinking. When they parted, Yakov Nesterovich was glad that his pupils—he no longer thought of them as ex-pupils—wanted to see him as their teacher.

He fell ill and was looked after by his sister with whom he had lived for the past fifteen years, ever since their mother had died. She looked after the house, made him coffee in the morning, and for dinner always gave him something made with milk, because he had been fond of milk since childhood and as time passed began to take a pride in having an eccentricity, even if only a small one. He was so accustomed to seeing his sister about that he hardly noticed her, and that seemed to suit her very well. She was one of those people who as they get old come to find their purpose in life in helping others. In just the same way she would have looked after a hus-

band if she had had one, without being conscious of her own life or thinking about it.

Each day now she took a rope or piece of sacking and went off to the hollow or the swampy grove to gather firewood; she would find some willows, break off the dry branches from trees or try to dig up rotting stumps with her hands. Previously the house had smelled of the dry warmth of coals which burned silently in the stove, but now even in Yakov Nesterovich's study the smoke from damp wood penetrated, and acrid smell that brought back memories of childhood, and when his sister opened the kitchen door he would see the taut quiver of flames. He asked her not to heat his room, in a cold place his thoughts flowed more freely, and he had a clearer memory of the past to which he now turned more frequently, not wanting to think of what was happening in the village.

One day his sister told him that the *Polizei* had shot Aunt Tosya's cow with a carbine. She repeated the word "carbine" twice—evidently she was telling the story as she had heard it. He looked at her, bewildered, as though silently asking what Aunt Tosya this was.

"We get milk from her."

Now he felt really awkward—to forget Aunt Tosya, the old school cleaner!

"Why did they shoot it?"

His sister shrugged.

"They just wanted to, I suppose." She turned to another topic. "Last night somebody planted dynamite in the factory building, but they found it, it didn't go off. Folks are saying it was

the same ones who did it before."

"Did they catch them that time?"

"What chance...."

Now he had to do without his milk foods. This became for him a small emotional drama, which took in his disrupted habit, a blow to his self-respect and all the other troubles which sought an outlet. He looked with loathing at the clear watery soup with millet or barley grains floating in it; in those moments he suffered an onslaught of tasty memories which for some reason floated up from childhood. Now he thought of childhood as of the most precious things which life had once granted him. Under the window, over which he had hung heavy curtains, army trucks rumbled and soldiers went to the front or came from the front. Tanks roared, but he, like a somnambulist, lounged about the half-dark room and remembered a harebell plucked in the woods when he was five or six; a shaggy bee dusted yellow with pollen had hummed inside it. That spring harebell literally pursued him, it rose in its clear blue before his eyes and its open, rounded bell hummed with the golden bee inside.... Once or twice the courteous German at the Kommandant's office rose before him and vanished, as though understanding that the teacher did not want to remember him.

He was aroused from this condition by his pupils. My ex-pupils, he again called them sadly. One evening Genya Babanov, and Sashko Banduristy, and Makar, and Ilko Yalovoi came. They enquired politely about his health, and sat about on chairs, with politeness that was

almost stressed. He hardly recognised them—their faces no longer held the direct openness of children, their features had sharpened. Time, which should have made them adults without haste, gradually, had evidently thought better of it and completed the job in a brief period. He felt they knew things unknown to him, their old teacher, and the realisation gave him a feeling of helplessness. Several times he wanted to ask why Ulyana had not come, he looked at Makar as though he ought to divine the unspoken question, but they gave him no chance to say a word, telling him about everything which had happened recently in the village, about the leaflets found in the casino which had replaced the former club, and the grim news from the front. Sashko Banduristy looked at him with such sincere affection, Ilko was so polite that the teacher felt like an orphan, although that was what he actually was and had been for a long time, ever since his mother's death. When they suddenly exchanged looks and rose simultaneously to leave he felt a wave of warm, almost fatherly emotion. He regretted not having asked about Ulyana. He felt they had not told him everything, they had brought something special for him but had taken it away with them again.

A fine day came. Leaves rustled underfoot, harsh and dry as dead dreams. Yakov Nesterovich almost started—two sparkling eyes of different shades of blue were looking at him—two drops of dew on a spider-web stretched between the branches of an apple tree. Something strangely tender stirred in him, as though his childhood

were looking at him. He walked along the narrow, long-neglected garden path to the school—and stopped dead. An air of neglect came from the blackened, almost wild beds, the broad long untrodden yard. The school looked at him alertly with all its dead black windows. The glass was unbroken, and that struck him as powerfully as though they had been smashed. Then the school door opened and a squat German in a pilot cap cocked on the side emerged, peered narrowed-eyed at the sky, then noticed the thin, erect figure of the teacher, waved to him, smiled and vanished inside again. The appearance and gesture of the German seemed so unreal that Yakov Nesterovich passed a hand over his eyes as though to clear away something imaginary. It was only when he was among the trees, listening to the persistent, almost wooden rustle of leaves, that he frowned in distaste—why had he gone to the school, to see a smirking insect crawl out of the door!

Beyond the wall the trees in the factory park were burning out and giving forth their tart fragrance. He walked through the melancholy chill to the drop, at the foot of which a field stretched out, covered at this time with the grey breath of cool earth. He had passed the potato field, clad in a brown robe of weeds with the green buttons of unripe nightshade, and his feet moved through crackling tufts of grass tangled by wind and rain. Although his imagination slept, he felt that at any moment it could raise up the living expanse which should open before him from the low ploughed mound. He raised his eyes and looked long into the blue cupola of sky,

so long that its glow almost sparkled back in reflection on his face, but when he again dropped his eyes to the ground, he stopped short. He could not tell whether he was stopped by a premonition, or by what he saw in that first instant under the thorn bushes—or perhaps premonition and that instant merged into one?...

Straight in front of him, corpses lay. Yakov Nesterovich saw them, he could still stop, but his legs moved of themselves until he ordered them—no farther. His legs stopped and only then he himself stood still. For a long time, with a kind of blind attention he gazed into one face—beneath its surface pallor he could discern very familiar features visible under that surface like stones under river water; he could not make himself look away to the next face, afraid that he would recognise it at once. Nevertheless, he made the effort, and Sashko Banduristy looked up at him with the dulled but reddish eyes of an angora rabbit, which did not even hold surprise about what was to happen and had happened. The one he had not at first recognised was Genya Babanov. The third lay face downwards, but the teacher had no doubt that it was Ilko Yalovoi. He walked round them, as though expecting to see somebody else when he came close. But nobody had joined the group.

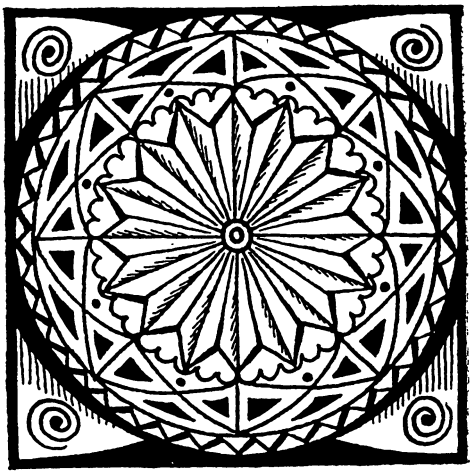
"The horses galloped past...." the teacher whispered the phrase which he had read somewhere long ago and which now floated up from some hidden corner of his consciousness, but he could not remember its end, where it spoke of a song. "The horses galloped past...."

His sister had told him that the Germans had caught some partisans, the ones who even against augmented guards had managed to blow up factories, now here, now there, and to burn the grain store.... He forgot what else they had done, but he had no doubt that they had been Sashko Banduristy, Genya Babanov and Ilko Yalovoi. The cold empty sky was like the emptiness in his heart, as black and depressing. He felt he could never leave this spot, because the whole world and everything in it was lost, leaving only the bodies of these youths to whom he had been paternally linked, lying in the autumn grass.

"The horses galloped past...." he whispered again, and still could not remember the end, although a faint light glowed in his memory, promising to burn up any moment.

He took some steps aside, behind the bushes, and knew who had been missing to make his grief complete. Ulyana and Makar lay side by side, looking in their shocking impact larger than in life, but as close here, and perhaps even closer. Yakov Nesterovich sank down beside them and closed his eyes. When he came to himself night was around him and he saw himself in the classroom—a classroom without walls, and with a starry sky for a ceiling. Before him sat his best pupils, apart from whom there had been nobody in his life and nobody remained, his pupils in whom he had seen himself young and bold.

"The horses galloped past," he told them, "but the song followed them all day, and all night, and then another day...."



THE WOOD CARVING

The autumn orchards were seething quietly, the trees took fire,—first one or two leaves only, then the golden and crimson flame spread further, deeper, until all the trees blazed brightly, sunk in silence, shedding their blood drop by rustling drop. In the morning warm rain fell, quiet and misty like summer rain, but the sun soon dried up the earth, the orchards and the roads. The village lay as it were in a blue ravine, celestial cliffs rose over it in a kind of triumphant lightness. This was the time for weddings in the village, music hung in the air—sounds that gripped the heart, that rose loudly, then sank, dying

away, wavering like a weak campfire. Cocks crowed, drowning the wedding music, but it came to life again as soon as they were quiet.

Chechil sat behind his cottage, hidden from the street by maize sheaves. Before him was a flood of milky light, mellow and fragrant, reminiscent of the stuffiness of forest dusks, and the fine "mushroom" rain. Chechil's fingers were rough, oil had eaten into the skin in a way to defy all washing, but now he made them careful and sensitive, made them obedient to every movement of his spirit. And they actually were sensitive and careful, in these moments they seemed to have a life of their own, while Chechil himself stood aside. His fingers were happy, inspired, they anticipated each of his wishes and set to work carrying it out with enjoyable zeal. The unnecessary fragments of wood fell and scattered in dead, flattened flakes, yet a moment ago they had still been part of one wooden block, still necessary, still containing hidden potentialities, and he must not waste these potentialities, or destroy them accidentally. The fingers lived their own life, in these moments they were quite different from the fingers which the whole week long grasped levers or touched the soil, rolled a cigarette or held a bucket and pump handle, or grasped a sack of grain like pincers to heave it into a truck. Then they hardly noticed what they were doing, they were in the midst of their everyday work, and like the hands, like Chechil himself, they obeyed, they were reliable and hard-working. But when Chechil sat down to

his wood carving those fingers changed because in that moment Chechil himself changed and his mood at once passed to them, so that they only seemed to live their own life, in reality they lived with Chechil in one mutual joy.

The smells of autumn were a little more moist, a little more dense behind the cottage; here there were the swollen orchards, the upturned soil of the kitchen gardens, and over everything the tart smell of raindrops still standing amidst the petals of wilted and faded dahlias. The sky constantly changed, its blue gradually paled and it became deeper. And because the sky was so lofty the hills and the village and the oaks on its edge seemed to shrink and settle lower; but Chechil was unconscious of all this, it only touched him in passing. The chips of birch wood slipped with a faint rustle through his fingers and the familiar face began to emerge more clearly from the wood.

From chaos a forehead rose, high and round, and with every touch it gained expression, with every touch it became alive, it breathed life—and Chechil, thrilled with keen excitement, with intoxicating, incommunicable eagerness thought that this was *his*, *his* forehead! Such a rush of joy surged through him that Chechil did not know how to contain it, his happy heart did not beat, it thumped, his happy hands burned, the fingers seemed to boil—and off balance, glowing fierily. he could do nothing and only now noticed the autumn about him. He felt its loveliness as though he had never seen it before. It filled him with its scents, it soothed him, and Chechil

again started his work. A stroke—and another bump is cleared away; raise the superciliary ridge a little here and the eyes are narrower, in them is born that affection one feels, which flows through one, there is a more noticeable wise gentleness which invites trust, they hold greater friendliness. Chips fall to the ground, a rustling white rain that settles silently on the straw—and the brow not only lives, it begins to glow with all it contains, it radiates wisdom that each one can feel and understand.

Chechil was tired, his fingers were tired. Uncertainty seized upon him. He was afraid to make one more movement—the true image would vanish, be destroyed. He was afraid to touch that which had been born, he looked at it as though it had been made not by him, but by some other; and even if it were by him, Chechil, the image had drawn away from him, it lived its own life. Even to look at it, let alone work on it, had become difficult, as though he had taken upon his shoulders a weight beyond his powers and now his legs buckled under it.

The rest of the Sunday passed in a daze. But his thoughts constantly returned and Chechil could not hold out, he went up to his unfinished carving, looked at it with new, very keen eyes—not only looked at it, studied it. Suddenly he began to understand that it should be better. Fuller, more alive. Just the urge which tormented him was not enough—he needed great skill, great mastery, so as to pour everything into this work. In such moments he was not sure he would be able to carry out what he had planned,

but the desire to complete his carving did not leave him.

Monday came, warm, with soft, almost too soft air and the lines of field roads vaguely misty; the weekdays followed one after another, days filled with the concerns of work. Chechil ploughed by the forest from morning till night, and sometimes during the night too; the soil rolled over slowly from the shares, and after a night the field was very visibly changed: yesterday grey, it was now a gleaming black, it frowned, it was more collected, it had not the squelching feebleness of its unploughed state. The darkness of night had, as it were, washed over the ploughland: the tractor, and the forest, and Chechil himself, and everything about had gained lightness and beauty. Now those fingers, weary and half forgotten in the night, looked different, they quivered into life, they remembered the carving. Because whatever they did, whatever they undertook, they still had another life which drew them back to it. Gnarled, bruised, tobacco-stained, with half-moons of soil under the nails, those fingers still remembered the joy and inspiration they had known, giving life to the wood.

The shift ended, the slightly pockmarked Kisel arrived. They smoked a silent cigarette. Kisel climbed up onto the tractor, the plough shook, black soil began to rise from the shares and another narrow strip was added to the great black lake. Chechil went back to the village. It was pleasant to meet people as he returned from the field—Uncle Prokop, the one-legged miller white with flour, the librarian Frosya driving out her

father's cow to join the herd, the stableman Savochka, rolling along on springy legs, smiling at everybody, telling himself something, wagging his head in surprise, Granny Paraska, tall and stout, in dark clothes—she looked at everybody as though she wanted to draw out their most treasured thoughts, and the carpenter Garashchuk, thin and sinewy, with awkward trusting hands—he walked as though afraid of bumping into someone.

In the middle of the week, when restlessness seized his fingers, Chechil again turned to his carving. At first he did not know where to begin, he was afraid to touch the wood, but a fuller understanding which had matured in this time made him set to work. And he submitted to himself, to his wish, his eagerness, and worked. The outline of the head rose expressively from the wood, the brow acquired new lines that gave it life—and suddenly Chechil caught himself thinking that the image he was making was not only like itself, it was like the people with whom he lived, the kolkhoz members with whom he worked, whom he met and talked with. Look at one and you could see that dear look from narrowed eyes, look at another and you recognised the lines of justice in the lips which were ready to tremble with affection. It was not the first time Chechil had felt this, he did not know how to regard it, but in the depths of his soul he was sure it was good, that it was the only way he could express things. After such musings the familiar form became closer, better understood, as though it had opened before him one more door into its

own world. More than once he had asked himself: had he the right to undertake this, was he not taking too much, too confidently, upon himself? But the life he lived was linked by a thousand threads with this man. And his own whole life today, and his future life, had been determined by him beforehand. So he believed he had made no mistake in carving his head in this way and no other, he had the right, he had taken on just what his shoulders could carry.

The fields were ploughed and sown, and every apple-tree in the orchards blazed with its own fire, and shed it; the first frosts showed in the mornings, in the shadows by sheds and in hollows. The geese put on weight. but tried to fly, with a heavy whistling of wings they rose over the dug kitchen gardens and flopped down to the ground before they reached the end of the pond.

In this late autumn Chechil's work was set up in the club. A pedestal of oaken boards was prepared, painted, and covered with red bunting. Lenin looked at the people with thoughtful warmth. He seemed to feel quite easy and comfortable with them, as though he had always been there, as though he too worked in the kolkhoz and had just dropped into the club to join in their talk about the harvest and the preparations for sowing....

Chechil's fingers were still unquiet, they still held the joy which they had experienced such a little while ago, and sought it again. Chechil himself seemed to have become sterner, more mature. But once when the club was empty he

stood for a long time before Lenin. He was thinking that his children would see Lenin differently, because their life would be different. And they too would feel he was like them, just as Chechil felt with regard to himself.

*Dedicated to Andrei Golovko**

GLOAMING, GLOAMING

Cloud-shadows slipped over the earth, the grass on the verges of roads bowed and the quick rippling waves took on a shimmering grey. The white stubble darkened, its paleness extinguished by the shadow, the red cows turned copper-coloured and the hay-cocks seemed smaller under the shadow-weight. The shadow rolled on and

* Andrei Golovko (b. 1897), the oldest writer in Soviet Ukraine.

the light patch of a summer day fled, quivering in bright haste. Now it enveloped Ivan, breathed chillily on his arms and legs, and only grandad in the distance was still bright; then he too was extinguished and became a little smaller like the hay-cock, because now the sun was completely hidden, and from behind the clouds its rays fell in glittering walls. At first those walls were close, but then they too moved away from mound to mound, their bright transparency seeming to sing.

"Ivan," grandad called, "run and turn the spotted cow, she's getting into the grain."

When you run, you mustn't step plump down onto the stubble, you push it with your toes sideways, then it won't prick. But the cut stalks of goosefoot and thistles prick all the same. The soles of Ivan's feet, however, were so horny that nothing hurt them. "You could run about in winter barefoot," grandad often said, "wi' the thick soles you grow on your feet summertime, ye'd never feel the cold!"

Ivan quickly ran to cut off the cow; flying beetles bumped hard against his chest, bounced off again and continued their flight. A bumble-bee flew past with a loud buzzing, then his gold-dusted velvet back dived into the clover. Where do the bumble-bees go when it rains, Ivan wondered and imagined a bumble-bee clinging to a leaf and the drops falling heavily on it. They shelter in combs in the clay-pits, he decided. As he ran he pulled at a chicory flower, but his hands slipped up the stalk leaving petals on his fingers, and for a moment the torn stem seemed

to give forth a pale blue mist. Then the cow saw Ivan and made off back from the unreaped grain; all he could do was to shake a stick at her.

He sat down by the wall of standing grain. The ground had not yet cooled, it breathed warmth. It was pleasant here, the wind passed over his head, lightly touching his hair. A ladybird quivered on an ear, and spread its wings; he placed it on his palm, examined the dark spots on its back and asked: "Gloaming, gloaming, will evening soon be coming?"

Evening was far off, and after looking at the ladybird he set it back on the ear. The ear rocked, and the ladybird clung to the beard and sat immobile.

"Gloaming, gloaming—" Ivan repeated on a plaintive note and saw two more ladybirds, quiet and indifferent. Then on one ear he saw two black bugs sucking the juice out of the grain; he removed them and buried them in the ground. He stamped the soil down and spat on it, so that they should not get out.

Heavy clouds had rolled over the sky. A shaft of sunshine shot down from between them and grandad was illumined by the brightness. He was standing quite still, leaning on his stick, looking straight in front of him, over the cocks, over the black tufts of clover, beyond the cold, distant horizon. What does he see, Ivan wondered; he looked in the same direction but saw nothing; he only fancied that the drizzle trailed away from the rick, wet strips were descending to the earth, rain was falling over the grove and moving towards the village.... There was a freshness in

the air, it tickled his throat, his lungs were gladdened by the chill, and Ivan drew in the quivering wind with great gulps. The gap in the clouds quickly closed, hiding the sun; grandad turned pallid and small again, and still stood there looking before him in watchful concentration.

Thunder rolled over the sky, and somewhere in the distance an echo replied. Then lightning flashed with no thunder. Quietness.

"Ivan!" grandad called. "Turn back the hornless cow."

Heavy drops drowned in the dry grain. They fell with determination, but they were few and the grain gave forth no rain-voice. But it awakened, rustled faintly and swayed heavily in the wind.... Ivan turned back the hornless cow and returned to grandad. He had already unrolled his sacking hood and pulled it over his head; now his eyes under their shaggy brows looked sternly at the boy from their depth.

"Get under shelter," said grandad, "and pull a sack over you, or ye'll just get sick some way or other."

Ivan parted the sheaves and crawled in under a cock. He settled himself so that he could see only the edge of the field and grandad with the cows, and felt he was well sheltered. The rain grew heavier, drops fell with a hiss on the sheaves, and now the dry straw smelt of wet straw, and dampness was added to the rough astringency of the grain. The monotonous rustle of the rain was depressing, but his spirits soon rose because the sky was split and illuminated by lightning,

forked, like a willow root on the rain-washed bank. Grandad was still standing in the middle of the field, looking into the distance. Some of the cows were grazing, the rest stood patiently under the rain, their eyes on the stubble. What is he looking at, Ivan again wondered about grandad, and he wanted to climb out of his shelter, rise on tiptoe and at last see what grandad saw. But the rain deterred him and he burrowed more comfortably into the cock.

Ivan dozed, and dreamed of a chariot rolling through the celestial hollows among the clouds. In the chariot grandad stood motionless, holding the reins. But there were no horses. On high wheels with huge spokes and melodious rims the chariot raced so fast that your ears rang with it. The boy opened his eyes; the rain was pouring down, sinking noisily into the stubble. The cows were still visible in the dusk. Thunder rolled, lightning flashed and in its weird pallid light grandad appeared again, still standing in the same place. The field was phosphorescently dumb in the quivering, unreal light that each flash shed, and the hay-cocks too seemed unreal, ghostly, and grandad was not like himself—he was etched, tall and broad-shouldered against the lowering sky. He looked as though he might vanish with the lightning, just as though he had never existed. The lightning did vanish and Ivan, his heart contracting with a premonition of something bad, shouted loudly.

"Grandad!"

His voice sounded strange to him and he shouted again.

"Grandad Bokhno!"

Some power pulled him out of the dry sheaves and set him on his feet. His legs had gone to sleep, he did not feel them, but he ran—over the softened stubble that chilled his bare feet. He gulped in the damp air. He saw grandad still standing there, nothing had happened to him, but he could not stop. Panting, he clutched at grandad's knees and struggled to get his breath.

"Now, now, calm down," said grandad. "Stop shaking."

Ivan said nothing. He could not come to himself.

"You must have dozed off and had a bad dream," grandad guessed, bending over him and stroking the tousled head with a horny hand.

Ivan just went on hugging grandad's knees and said nothing. For an instant he remembered the ladybird he had held, and then set on an ear. That ladybird affected him so that he was ready to cry.

"It's a feeling heart you've got, lad," grandad murmured, still stroking the boy's shoulder with his bony hand.

Then again he gazed before him. The rain had almost stopped, the last few drops were falling, light, fragile and gay, for the sun was breaking through. There was still a slight drizzle among the hay-cocks, but beyond it the horizon was clear—in the soft, washed air it showed as a fleecy line drawn in sun-paint. The approaching evening emerged more expressively summerlike after the recent heat of the day, again there was a smell of reaping.

"Go and turn that cow back, Ivan," said grandad, shaking the boy's shoulder, "or the hornless one'll be in the grain again."

Ivan drove the cow back, then stayed by the unreaped grain. It was bowed, the ears trembled under the weight of clinging drops, then shook themselves free and stood erect, swaying. Ivan looked at grandad, but could not make up his mind to go back to him. Something tremendous throbbed in his breast, and he trembled barely perceptibly, as though with cold.

On an ear he found the ladybird, laid it on his palm and asked very confidingly, "Gloaming, gloaming, will evening soon be coming?"

The ladybird quickly crawled onto his finger. Ivan held it up. The ladybird climbed to the finger-tip, its wings opened, they fluttered, then it flew and melted into the distance.

A CAMPFIRE IN THE NIGHT

The leaves had fallen. A little while ago they had blazed and fluttered circling down, and now the trees were bare. The leaves had blazed in the night when nobody could see them. And they had fallen at night, not only in the daytime, and that too had been hidden from all eyes. One could only imagine how they had burned and fallen in the darkness. I knew that in the hollow plenty could be raked together, enough to make a fire. Three limes stood there. Three chance limes, with nothing else growing about them, not even thorn bushes. All around lay the fields, either ploughed or left with their stubble. I hoped I could gather

up the dry, bright red leaves, although to reach them I must go a long way, but at the same time I was afraid the wind might have scattered them. What would I do if the wind had carried them away into the waste?

Cat-ice crackled under my feet. At first the crackling was sharp, then duller. When I walked further over the icy skin it crackled again, thin and high, and behind the thin ice-music was a softer, duller sound. The whole road was white with hoar-frost, hard, gripped by the cold. No cattle were grazing along the river-bank, and a grey melancholy lay over it. On the pond three ducks were swimming, one following the other as though tied together, never altering their deadly monotonous linear movement.

I walked leisurely, with no haste, not yet feeling any excitement although I knew it could rise any moment—I could not say when it would be born, perhaps it was already stirring unnoticed; I walked leisurely, looking from side to side as though trying to absorb for always that wild, alert expectation. For the present only one thought stirred in me—of her, that she would surely have decided—today—to come. She had not written that she would visit me, we had not made any arrangements earlier, before we parted. Still less had there been any arrangement about where we should meet, but I walked towards the thoughtful, expectant field, and sometimes ice cracked under my feet, thinly or more solidly; I walked towards the place where the road from the station branched out into the road to our village—she could come no other way.

I remembered very well when I had felt that sudden certainty she would come. It had been at a lesson. Or possibly I was only trying to convince myself that it had been at the lesson, in reality the assumption had come earlier, when I had not been thinking of it at all. At the lesson we had been writing grammar examples on the board. Children rose from their desks, picked up the chalk and traced words on the blackboard—flowing white lines constantly born from their fingers. Or possibly they were not born from those fingers, but in some other way, and it only seemed to me that it was the fingers. The children wrote examples in their exercise books, words flowed one after the other from their pens, and I was a part of this mysterious process—then suddenly I thought: today she will come. It did not seem at all unexpected, somehow I knew, quite suddenly, that she would come, why had I not known it before! But the children continued their writing, the chalk left its white lines like hoar-frost, and I knew already that after lessons I would pass through the village, then cross the fields and wait for her at the crossroads, in the gully, at night. That I would make a fire, it would send up yellow flames and I would warm my cold fingers at it, while the black invisible night lay around, it would thrill me with a wild, alert chill.

Now I was walking over the fields, my legs moved lightly and easily, and I talked to her although she was not there, although at that time I still did not know where she was; nevertheless I talked to her, told her how I had been hunting that autumn, firing my shot-gun at ducks on the

lakes. Why I chose hunting to tell her and myself I do not know, but I badly wanted to tell her about my recent experiences, my memory of how my neighbour Koval and I had sat in the grey mist before dawn, the boat rocking very gently, noiselessly, and he had yawned silently into his hand, but I had trembled with excitement and the fresh early morning chill. Over the grove the sky already had the watery pallor of dawn, the clouds stood out clearly—and then Koval suddenly fired. Now, too, remembering that shot I started involuntarily, I remembered clearly how I had sat motionless, frozen in the moment of that shot. There was nothing special in all that I related, and she too knew that it was all in the natural order of things, but she was experiencing my hunting with me for the first time, while I had already experienced it many times, and we both enjoyed it, and she hid a smile. We had first met at my sister's, in Lvov region, at a wedding. There was music in the dark village club, and we danced and said nothing. Neither of us felt like talking; we circled in a waltz, drank to the health of bride and bridegroom and went outside into the quiet summer night. Stars were bright in the sky, silence enveloped the houses, and we too were silent. I was then a student, who she was I did not know and for some reason did not want to ask—I liked her as she was. Do you have to ask: where are you from, how do you come to be here, when you feel the question might sound out of place, not in harmony with your mood and hers? Then we danced again, it was pleasant to circle amidst the sounds, amidst the

people, the smiles, as though isolated from all yet together with all, and especially with her. The next day, a Sunday, she did not come to the continuing celebration and my sister said she had left for home in the morning, for Lugansk, because she had just stopped over with relatives while passing through. So it was a chance acquaintanceship. I had learned nothing about her and then, when I could no longer ask her her name and everything else, I regretted it, with a kind of clear, melancholy regret. It was only later that my sister wrote and told me her name—Lesya, and her address. Then we began to exchange letters. She worked in a confectionery factory and was studying by correspondence at a power-engineering school. I invited her to visit me and she replied jokingly that she would most certainly come, I should expect her soon. Of course, I knew it was only a joke, that perhaps we would sometime arrange for me to visit her. But at the lesson that day, when the white chalk lines flowed from children's fingers as they wrote grammar examples on the board, I was suddenly certain that she would come today, that whatever happened I must go to meet her because her train would arrive at night and without help she might lose her way in the darkness.

My legs moved easily and lightly, my breath came gay and sweet, I imagined that she was walking beside me although I was only setting out to meet her. I sang one song, and a second, melodies seethed in my head, I seized on one, then another and without finishing it remembered a third. I sang in a confusion of songs and melo-

dies, we seemed to be moving through their sound, and I felt my heart becoming more unquiet, the rime gleamed a more agitated white along the road, the fields lay grey, there was nobody anywhere—then I noticed in the distance a boy hurrying across the deep stubble. He came no closer but showed vaguely against the pale misty background, moving across the pathless field.

For a long time I walked, and for a long time the boy walked, parallelling me. Then he swung right, grew slowly smaller, appearing and disappearing in the white mist, and finally vanished entirely. I found myself in a gully and crossed the frozen ploughland. Evening was noticeably close. Soon I saw my lonely thick limes, first they loomed out of the dusk, then came closer, growing, until I was beside them. This was where the road from the station sent out its branch to our village. This was where Lesya must walk or drive past.

I stopped a little, but it seemed strange to stand still after a long walk and I circled the limes, laying a hand on each as I passed. The trees were bare, the leaves lay about, dusted with rime; they could have been carried away by winds sweeping along the gully trough, but they lay in small furrows among the tall weeds. I started gathering leaves and pulling dead weeds—there were plenty of them, dry and light, the rime brushed off them easily, and soon I was breathing on my cold fingers and dancing for warmth. A crow circled annoyingly above me. It gradually came lower and I could hear

the raucous cawing which every now and then came from its beak. It circled, searching, and I began to have a dislike for this circling over my head; I picked up a dry clod and threw it up, but the clod could not reach it and fell back, senseless and absurd. I sat down on the fuel I had collected, eyes fixed on the ground, closed my ears and saw only frost-flattened grass, nothing more, and when I looked up the crow was gone and I was glad the sky was empty and nothing was circling over me.

Then for some reason I was sure that now, this moment, she was walking alone over the darkening fields, through the unknown, and everything here might frighten her, I absolutely must go to meet her—go just a little way and we would meet. I walked fast, almost running. First I decided to go as far as the stubble to look for her; then to the sunflower stalks; a little later to the telephone poles that stretched in a scanty grey ribbon. But no Lesya. She had been delayed, I thought, the train came late, and I trailed glumly back. It was quite dark now, I sat down on the heap of dry grass and leaves, nobody was near, only the three limes stood round me dumb, silent, looming in the darkness as dense shaggy patches. I imagined how the train had arrived, its powerful headlights stabbing through the darkness, how it had rumbled away, and Lesya had walked briskly from the station with her small suitcase, every now and then glancing at the map I had drawn and which she now probably knew by heart. She was sure to have brought a small suitcase, practically all the girls of

twenty used them, especially as she was coming to a place she did not know and she would want to bring a new frock and blouse and so on. She was now rather frightened, walking alone, she was beginning to wish she had warned me so that I could have met her at the station and everything would have been better, less strange, but now there was nothing to be done, it was her own fault, she had wanted to arrange a wonderful surprise for both of us—for herself and for me.

I took a box of matches out of my pocket; it was small and cold, it seemed incredible that I need only strike a match and fire would spurt up from somewhere, it would tremble and sway like a tiny wild creature, then it would leap over to the fuel and engage it in flame. I moved a few leaves and weeds aside and struck a match, carried the flame carefully, sheltered in my hands; soon sparks leaped in the wind, they were quick and eager, they seized on the blades of grass one after the other, a globe of brightness spread round me and I sat within it as though in some illusory nest. The encircling night seemed to be blacker than before, impenetrable; when a weed suddenly flared up, a shaft of light thrust into the darkness, and within it I saw the grass flattened by frost, and humps and hollows. My shadow swayed behind me. Close to the fire it was clear, but farther away it merged with the night, and melted away; I could not guess how far it might go because it was very long, as though it could even reach the sky, hidden in the heights.

As I added twigs to the fire it burned up and I watched the twigs bending, seized by a yellow or white glow, then growing a skin of ash, cracking, giving out a heat barely tangible as I moved away for more fuel, then when my hands approached the fire the gentle warmth became heat again. It began to feel somewhat strange, sitting there in the night, in the autumn, feeling myself alone, waiting for her and not even knowing where she was at this moment. It might be that she had had no idea of coming, she was sitting at home doing something, or she had gone to a concert at the factory club, or to the cinema with the girls—there were plenty of things she could be doing in her Lugansk, her own town where everything was familiar from childhood. I felt still more alone in the autumn night, in the gully. It was bitter to reflect that she had probably been joking and had expected her words to be taken as a joke. It could only be that, I well remembered her letter, I knew that they should be read as a joke, but when the white chalk lines flowed from children's fingers on the blackboard, when they wrote grammar examples, I had decided that she would certainly come and I must go to the crossing to meet her.

Now I was waiting for Lesya, beside a campfire. When I moved my shadow moved with me. The air smelt of fire and frost. Silence, broken very occasionally by the crackling of weeds or a rustle when I moved my legs. I looked into the flames and then raised my eyes to look into the darkness—something incomprehensibly strange stirred in me, as though I were completely solitary in the

world, there was nobody else, I was alone in an endless expanse and there was nobody to whom I could speak because there was no need for it and nobody would hear. Suddenly the feeling seized me that I had forgotten how to talk, that I would never again say a word, and then I made an effort to pronounce some word, any word.... I sought that word in the great, dark, empty corners of memory, but nothing was there, as though there never had been anything, and only one thought still lived in my mind—of this fire swaying before me, making my shadow move. Then I made up my mind, opened my lips and said, "fire...". I listened to the sound of my voice and marvelled to find that here it sounded different, out of place; I heard it die away and vanish—where?—leaving no trace, because it had not struck the attention of anybody. I tried to remember something else, searched in the farthest reaches of memory and from somewhere brought up the word "field". The word, not spoken, seemed huge and I tensed and said softly, "field...". Again I listened to the sound, to the silence which followed, and watched the swaying tongues of flame. I sought for some other word but with no success and I felt despondent and rather strange. I tossed leaves onto the fire and when they blazed up brightly, raising a great balloon of light and enveloping me in it, I suddenly remembered a new word that was always alive within me; it was greater than "fire", greater than "field", it was boundless, endless. The word rang in me, I could not even venture to speak it but compelled myself, opened

my lips and loudly said, "Lesya!..." Then I, laughed. And so I sat there by the fire waiting for her although she had not promised to come she had only been joking, but still I waited for her, to meet her, lest she pass by.

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ЕВГЕН ГУЦАЛО

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Евген Гуцало

Yevgen Gutsalo (born 1937, resident in Kiev) is one of the most popular and gifted contemporary prose writers in the Ukraine. His first collection of short stories, People Among People, *which came out in 1962, attracted immediate attention. Since then, about twenty short story collections have been published in Ukrainian, Russian and other languages of the Soviet peoples. "Gutsalo is kindly, warm-hearted and wise," the well-known Moscow poet Boris Slutsky wrote in the* Literaturnaya Gazeta. *"Duplication, triplication of feeling is part of his talent. His wisdom is expressed in an augmented keenness of observation of people and situations."*

The present collection includes Yevgen Gutsalo's best stories. His main attention is given to nature in his native Ukraine, the bright, happy world of childhood, and people who work, usually village people with their cares and worries, their memories of the past and dreams of the future.

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