

DON'T SHOOT THE WHITE SWANS

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[From the Blurb:

The title novel is the heart-rending tale of a country bumpkin who is the laughing stock of his community. The hero is an unassuming, hard-working man whose natural desire to live according to his conscience brings nothing but misfortune and hardship upon himself and his family. Through his eyes the author gives a true-to-life picture of the less-than-idyllic life in a small present-day provincial Russian town.]

Some quotes from the text:

"What do you think holds work together?"

"Your head!"

"That too. Your head and your hands and a knack, but most important, your heart. A man can move mountains with his heart. But if work's just for, well, just for puttin' food on the table, it'll slip right through your fingers. Just won't come, son. And then your hands, they're all thumbs, and your head's just like an empty pot.

*

What's a man need? He needs peace. Every animal, every insect, every, you know, fir and birch tree - they're all just dying for their own peace.

*

Man suffers. Suffers a lot, my dear, kind friends. Why? Because we're all orphans, we are. Out of sorts with mother earth, in a row with father forest, in bitter separation from sister river. And there's nothing to stand on, nothing to lean against, and nothing to refresh ourselves with.

*

"People have been thinking about the nature of evil and why it exists for a long time, Kolka. For as long as they've been on earth they've been racking their brains over it. Then one day they created a devil with a tail and horns in order to explain it all away. They thought up the devil and gave him all the responsibility for the evil in the world. So it wasn't people who were to blame, but the devil. The devil led them astray. But that devil, he didn't help people, Kolka. He didn't explain the reasons, nor did he shelter or deliver people from evil. And why do you suppose?"

"Because they looked for everything on the outside! And evil - it's in a person, it's inside."

*

And then there were Pa's rules. Simple ones: never impose any rules on anyone. And he didn't. He had always lived a quiet and subdued life: always looked around to make sure he wasn't bothering anyone, wasn't standing in the sunlight, wasn't getting in anyone's way. For this he deserved heartfelt thanks, but no one thanked him. No one.

*

Every tree, son, has some use: Mother Nature doesn't like good-for-nothings. One tree grows for man - for his needs - while another grows for the forest for all kinds of critters or for mushrooms, say. And that's why, before you go swinging your axe, ya gotta look around to make sure you're not harming anyone: an elk or a hare, a mushroom or a squirrel or a hedgehog. If you hurt them, you'll be hurtin' yourself; they'll leave that chopped down forest, and you won't be able to coax 'em back for nothin'.

*

Nature's got its own levels too. The wagtail, now, it hangs around on the ground, while the hawk soars in the heavens. Everyone's been allotted his own level, and that's why there's no fuss, no crowding. Everyone's got his own business and his own dining-room. Mother Nature doesn't shortchange anyone son, and everyone's equal in her eyes.

*

On the one hand we're taught that nature is our home. But on the other hand, what do we have? We have the subjugation of Mother Nature. But Mother Nature, she just puts right up with it. She dies silently, slowly. And no man is her king. It's harmful to go calling himself king. He's just her son, her eldest son. So be sensible - don't send mama to her grave.

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DON'T SHOOT THE WHITE SWANS

Author's Note

When I enter the forest I hear Yegor's life. Amidst the bustling whisper of aspen groves, the sighs of pinewoods, the heavy waves of fir trees' paws. I look for Yegor.

I find him in the June pine forest- indefatigable and ever optimistic. I meet him in the autumn damp - serious and dishevelled. I await him in the frosty silence - pensive and bright. I see him in the springtime florescence-patient and impatient at once. And I am always amazed at how varied he was- varied for people and varied for himself.

And varied was his life - a life for himself and a life for people.

But perhaps all lives are varied? Varied for oneself and varied for people? Only is there always a sum total in these variances? Appearing or being varied, are we always one in ourselves?

Yegor was one because he was always himself. He could not and did not try to appear otherwise - neither better nor worse. And he acted not according to logic, not with a goal, not for approval from above, but however his conscience dictated.

1

Yegor Polushkin was known throughout the settlement as the loser. No one remembered now when he had received this epithet, and even his own wife, having been driven quite mad by chronic bad luck, would cry in a frenzied voice as annoying as the hum of mosquitoes: "Lord have mercy on you loser and good-for-nothing curse of my life bane of my existence ... "

She would wail it on one note, for as long as her breath held out, and she used no punctuation marks. Yegor would sigh sadly, while ten-year-old Kolka, hurt on his father's behalf, would go off behind the small shed and weep. And he wept too, because he understood even then that his mother was right.

The shouts and curses would always make Yegor feel guilty. Guilty not according to logic, but according to conscience. For this reason he never argued, but merely blamed himself and suffered.

"Folks got real bread-winners for men and their homes are rich and their wives like doves!.."

Haritina Polushkin came from Zaonezhye, and from cursing she would easily slip into lamentations. She considered herself slighted from the day of her birth, a drunk priest having christened her with an utterly impossible name, which affectionate neighbor gals shortened to two syllables.

"That Harya's at it again - picking on her bread-winner."

To add insult to injury, her own sister (and Lord, what a tub she was!), her own sister Marya strutted through the settlement like a proud peahen, pursing her lips and rolling her eyes.

"Tina just didn't get lucky with her man. That she didn't tsk, tsk! .. "

That was in her presence - Tina and a pout. Behind her back it was Harya and an ear-to-ear grin. And all in spite of the fact that she herself had lured them to the settlement. Made them sell the house, move here, put up with people's ridicule.

"They got culture here, Tina. They show movies."

They did show movies, but Haritina never went. The household was in a sorry state, her husband was a laughing stock, and she had virtually nothing to wear. Parading around in front of people in the same old dress every day - you start to look a bit familiar. But Maritsa (yes, they called *her* Harya for short while her *sister* went by Maritsa!), Maritsa had woolen dresses - five in all - two broadcloth suits and *three* jersey suits. She had something to take a look at culture in, something to show herself off in, something to put away in her chest.

And there was but one cause for Haritina's misfortune: Yegor, her beloved husband. Her lawful spouse, even though they hadn't been married in a church. The father of her only son. Her bread-winner, confound him.

By the way, he was the friend of a decent man, Fyodor Ipatovich Buryanov, Marya's husband. Two streets down, his own house with five windows. Made of branded logs it was, put together perfectly, without a hitch. The roof was made of zinc: shone like a brand-new pail. Out in the yard - two hogs, six whole sheep, and a cow named Zorka to boot. A good milker, too - with her it was just like Shrovetide year round. And then there was a cock on the roof ridge, just like real. They showed it off to all the men who came on business.

"The wonder of a local folk master. With just an axe, mind you. Made with an axe alone, just like in the olden days!"

True, this wonder had nothing to do with Fyodor Ipatovich: it just happened to be on his roof. It was Yegor Polushkin who had made the cock. He had plenty of time for amusement, but for anything worthwhile, now ...

Haritina sighed. Oh, her poor deceased mama hadn't seen her through; oh, her pa hadn't taught her well enough with the leather strap! Otherwise she might well have gotten hitched to Fyodor, not Yegor. And she would have lived like a queen.

Fyodor Buryanov had come here looking for fortune back when the woods were still thriving for as far as the eye could see. Back then there was a demand, and they felled that forest with gusto, with a crash, with bonuses.

They built a settlement, brought in electricity and a water supply. And as soon as they laid a railroad line out here there were no trees left to fell. Existence at the given stage, so to speak, had left someone's consciousness behind, having given birth to a quaint settlement that no one needed anymore amidst the wilted remains of a once thriving pinewood. With the greatest difficulty the district organizations and authorities succeeded in declaring the last remaining forest tract around Black Lake a water reserve, and the work came to a halt. But since a sawmill equipped with the last word in technology already existed in the settlement, they took to hauling timber here specially. They hauled it in, unloaded it, sawed it up and loaded it back up again, and yesterday's lumberjacks became loaders, lifters and workers at the sawmill.

As for Fyodor Ipatovich, why, he had predicted everything to the tee a year ahead of time and told Maritsa, "So much for the bonuses, Maritsa: there won't be anything left to chop down soon. I'd better look around for something more reliable while the saws are still buzzing in our ears."

And he found it: the position of forester in the last protected forest tract by Black Lake. Hay free for the cutting, fish galore, and firewood for nothing. It was then he put up that fancy house of his, accumulated lots of goods, got himself some cattle, and dressed up his woman - real fine. In a word, he was his own boss.

And he behaved accordingly: didn't grovel or fuss. And he knew the value of money and words alike: if ever he dropped either, it was for a good reason. He might keep his mouth shut a whole evening with one guy, while another would get an earful of advice.

"Nope, you didn't direct your life, Yegor: it directed you. Why do you suppose that is? Think it over."

Yegor would listen meekly, sigh: ugh, how miserably he lived, ugh, how badly. He'd driven his family to the limit, disgraced himself and was put to shame before his neighbors that was all true. Fyodor Ipatovich told everything like it was. He felt guilty before his wife, and before his son, and before good folks. Yes, he'd have to put an end to it, this life. He'd have to begin a new one: perhaps on its behalf, on

behalf of this future bright and sensible life, Fyodor Ipatovich would be so kind as to pour another round?

"Yep, turn your life around, be the boss: that's what the old folks used to say."

"You're right, Fyodor Ipatovich. Oh, how right you are!"

"Now you can handle an axe all right, I'll give you that. But - senselessly."

"Yeah, isn't it the truth."

"You need to be guided, Yegor."

"I sure do, Fyodor Ipatovich. Boy, do I ever! .. "

Yegor would sigh, distressed. And his host would sigh, pensive. And then they would all sigh. Not with sympathy, but with disapproval. And Yegor would bow his head even lower beneath their stares. He was ashamed.

But if one gave it some thought, there was nothing at all to be ashamed of. Yegor always worked conscientiously, and he lived quietly, without any escapades, and yet somehow it worked out that he was guilty all around. And he didn't argue, only grieved a lot, cursing himself for all he was worth.

From the familiar old nest, where they had lived on their native collective farm if not in wealth, then at least in respect - from this nest they had taken wing all at once. Like stupid birds or some old bachelor without house or home or kids. It was some kind of insanity.

That March - it was a snowy, biting one - his mother-in-law, Haritina's and Maritsa's mama, that is - had gone to meet her maker. She'd done it real neatly, too, right before Saint Yevdokiya's day, and all the relatives came to the funeral in sledges: the cars all got stuck in the snow. Maritsa, too, had arrived like that - alone, without her man. They mourned Mama, read the burial service, held the funeral feast - the whole bit. When Maritsa had donned a down shawl in place of her black kerchief she blurted out, "You've got no cultural life here in your manure."

"How's that?" Yegor didn't understand.

"There's nothing modern. As for us, well, Fyodor is putting up a new house: five windows on the street side. Electricity, a department store, movies every day."

"Every day - a new one?" Tina was taken aback.

"We wouldn't go to an old one, now would we? We've got a, uh ... Fashion House, and imported hardware ... "

Old images stared harshly out of the dark corner. And the Virgin on the icon wasn't smiling anymore, but frowning - but who'd taken a look at her since the old lady had given up the ghost anyway? Everyone was looking ahead, looking at that, what was it ... modernity.

"Yep, Fyodor's putting up a house - pretty as a picture. And the old one's freeing up - what'll we do with it? It's a shame to sell it: you know, the home nest and all - my little Vova crawled around on that floor. So Fyodor said to give it to you. Well of course, first you'll have to lend a hand building the new one. You're a mighty skilled carpenter, after all, Yegor."

So they helped out. For two months Yegor swung his axe from dawn till dusk. And the dawns and dusks here are northern, mind you: the good Lord set them far apart each day. You can swing till you drop before it gets dark. And then Fyodor Ipatovich would start in, "Now don't forget to hammer down that corner over there, Yegor my friend. Don't slack off, little worker, don't slack off: it's a house I'm giving you for nothing, not some dog kennel."

True, he did give him the house. Only first he took everything the termites hadn't gotten to: he even disassembled the floor. And the awning over the well. Then he went on to take the cellar apart and

remove it: the logs might come in handy. He would have started in on the shed next, but here Haritina could contain herself no longer: "You slithering snake insatiable leech confounded!"

"Now, now, Haritina, calm down. We're all one family, after all, why the fuss? You're not offended are you, Yegor? Why, I am trying to be fair."

"Gee, well... I reckon that's the way it is ... "

"Oh, all right then, use the shed. I'll throw it in as a gift." And off he went. A well-knit man. And he wore an expensive woolen coat.

They made up. Went calling on each other. Yegor would sit real timid like, listening to his host.

"The world, Yegor, rests on menfolk. It's held together by us menfolk."

"Yep, Fyodor Ipatovich. That's right."

"But do you suppose there's real manliness in you? Tell me, is there?"

"Gee, well uh ... There's my woman ... "

"I'm not talking about that, not about smut! Cripes!.."

They laughed. And Yegor chuckled along with the rest: why not get a laugh out of something silly? Fyodor Ipatovich, now, you wouldn't laugh at, but Yegor - why, go right ahead, dear friends! To your hearts' content!

But Tina just smiled. Smiled for all she was worth at the dear guests, her beloved sister, at Fyodor Ipatovich. Him especially: he was his own boss.

"Yep, you need to be guided, Yegor, guided. Without instruction you won't turn anything around. And you'll never understand life on your own. And if you don't get life, you won't learn how to live. That's how it is, Yegor Polushkin, luckless loser, that's how it is ... "

"Yep, I reckon that's the way it is ... "

2

But then there was Kolka.

"You got a pure-eyed little man growing up, Tina honey. My, but that lad's got pure eyes!"

"Well, it's a shame that he does," Haritina grumbled (she always grumbled at him. No sooner had the chairman of the village Soviet declared them man and wife than she had taken to grumbling). "There's always been just one occupation for pure-eyed folks: they do the plowing instead of having a tractor to do it."

"Now, why do you say that? It ain't so."

Kolka was growing up, cheerful and kind. He was drawn to other boys, the older ones. He would look you in the eyes, smile - and he believed everything. No matter what lies they told him, what nonsense, he would believe it on the spot. He would bat his eyes and give an astonished, "Yeah?"

There was enough simple-heartedness in that "Yeah?" for half of Russia, were the need for it ever to arise. But there didn't seem to be much of a demand for simple-heartedness as yet; the demand was for something else.

"Kolka, what're you just sittin' here for? Your pa just got run by a dump-truck: his guts are oozin' out his mouth!"

"A-ah! .. "

Kolka would run, cry out, fall down, run some more. While the men, they would laugh.

"Hey, where're ya going? He's alive, your pa. We're just pullin' your leg, kid. Just pullin' your leg, get it?"

In his joy that everything was all right, Kolka would forget to be angry. So glad was he that his pa was alive and well, that there was no dump-truck and that his pa's guts were in place: in his belly where they were supposed to be. And so he would laugh hardest of all, from the bottom of his heart.

But basically he was a normal kid. He would do swan dives and jackknives off the cliff into the river. He didn't lose his way in the woods and wasn't afraid. He could placate the meanest dogs around with just two words, pet them and tug at their ears however he wanted. And a watchdog, the froth still hanging from its fangs, would fawn at his feet like a little lap puppy. The kids marveled at this, while the grown-ups explained, "His father knows dog talk."

There was truth in this: dogs didn't touch Yegor either.

Kolka was patient as well. Once he fell from a birch tree (he was hanging a starling-house when the branch broke under him), fell to the ground through all the branches and landed with his leg twisted. Well, they straightened it out, of course, stitched him up the side, smothered him in iodine from head to toe - and he only groaned. Even the doctor was amazed.

"Hmm, that's a tough one you got there!" she said.

But later, when everything had healed and set, Yegor was in the yard and heard his son crying in the shed (Kolka had been sleeping there since his baby sister was born. And a mighty loud-mouthed sister she was - just like her mama). He peered in: Kolka was lying on his stomach, only his shoulders were heaving.

"Hey son, what's wrong?"

Kolka raised his tear-streaked face: his lips quivered.

"Uncas ... "

"Yeah?"

"They killed Uncas. With a knife in the back. How could they - in the back like that?"

"Who's Un ... Uncas?"

"The last of the Mohicans. The very last one, Pa! .. "

Neither father nor son slept the next night. Kolka paced about the shed composing a poem.

"Uncas hunted the enemy, prepared to wage a battle. He caught up with him and began to fight..."

Nothing came after that, but Kolka didn't give up. He rushed around the cramped passage between the wood pile and the trestle-bed, mumbling all sorts of words and waving his arms. Behind the plank-board wall the piglet snorted, intrigued.

In the meantime, Yegor sat in the kitchen in his long under-wear and shirt of coarse calico and, moving his lips read the book about the Indians. Over strange names familiar pines rustled, beneath the mysterious pirogue the same fish darted about, and it would have been no trick to split wood chips for the samovar with a tomahawk. Therefore it seemed to Yegor that the story was taking place not in faraway America, but here, somewhere on the Pechora or Vychegda river, and these clever names had been thought up just to make it all more captivating. The night cold blew in from the porch, Yegor stamped his numbed feet and read on, painstakingly following each line with his finger. A few days later, having at long last mastered the thickest book in his life, he said to Kolka, "Good book."

Kolka gave a suspicious snuffle, and Yegor clarified, "About good men."

Generally speaking, Kolka's tears lay hidden not far beneath the surface. Others' grief, women's songs, books and pity made him cry, but he was ashamed of his tears and therefore tried to cry in private.

But now Vova, his cousin - there was just a year between them - cried only from insult. Not from pain, not from pity - from insult. He cried hard, till he shook. And he was easily insulted. Sometimes he would get insulted just like that, out of the blue.

Vova didn't like to read books: he was given money for the movies. He liked the movies a lot and saw them all, and if it was one about spies, he'd see it three times or more. Then he would tell Kolka about it.

"Then he socked it to him - pow, pow! Knocked the wind out of him!"

"Ow that hurts!" Kolka gasped.

"Sissy! They're *spies!*"

And then there was Vova's dream. Kolka, for example, had a different dream each day, but Vova had just one for every day: "If only I could discover some kind of spell that would put everyone to sleep. Every last one! And then I'd take a ruble from each."

"How come just one ruble?"

"So that no one would notice. One ruble from each person - that's ... wow! Know how much? About two thousand, I bet."

Since Kolka had never had any money anyway, he never thought about it. His dreams, therefore, were also moneyless ones: about travels, about animals, about space. They were light dreams, weightless ones.

"It'd sure be swell to see a real live elephant. I heard that in Moscow there's an elephant that walks down the street every morning."

"For free?"

"Well, it's on the street, after all."

"They're lying. Nothing's for free."

Vova had a weighty way of speaking, just like his father, Fyodor Ipatovich. And he had the same way of staring: with a squint. A particular kind of squint, a Buryanov squint. This pleased Fyodor Ipatovich.

"You gotta look through everything, Vova, my boy. Everything up top is lies."

And Vova did try to look through everything, but Kolka went on hanging around his cousin anyway. He didn't argue, didn't fight, though, true, he didn't particularly listen to him either. Whenever Vova got really pushy, he would just leave. There was just one thing he couldn't forgive: when Vova poked fun at his father, at Yegor Polushkin. At times this was carried to excess, but they would make up quickly - they were flesh and blood after all.

It was Kolka's father who had told him about the elephant that walked the streets of Moscow every morning. Who knows where he had found out about this elephant, since they had no television, and Yegor didn't read the papers, but he spoke with authority and Kolka had no doubts. If Pa said so, that meant it was the truth.

Actually, they'd seen elephants only in pictures, and once in the movies. They had shown a circus, and the elephant had stood on one foreleg, made a comical bow and flapped its ears. After that they had talked about elephants for days.

"Smart animal."

"Pa, do they use them for plowing in India?"

"Naw." Yegor didn't really know what elephants did in India, so he spoke off the cuff. "It's a might too strong for plowing. Pull the plow right out."

"So what do they do down there?"

"What do they do? All kinds of heavy stuff. Fell trees, for example."

"Sure would be swell if we had an elephant here, huh, Pa? He'd stack the logs and planks."

"Yeah. 'Cept they eat a lot. You'd never store up enough hay."

"So what do they do in India?"

"Well, uh, they've got it all squared away with feed. Just one long summer there: cut the grass twenty times or more."

"And they don't need felt boots, huh, Pa? I bet it's real nice!"

"Now, I don't know 'bout that. We have it better yet. 'Cause this is Russia. The very finest country of all."

"The very, very finest?"

"The very finest, son. They sing songs about it all over the world."

"That mean we're happy, Pa?"

"Don't you doubt it for a minute. That's for sure."

And Kolka didn't doubt it: if Pa said so, that meant it was true. Especially since Yegor himself believed it whole-heartedly. And if Yegor believed something whole-heartedly, then he talked about it in a special way, and he never changed his mind, and he would even argue firmly about it with Fyodor Ipatovich.

"You're a dumb guy, Yegor, if you go rambling on like that. Hey, what kinda shirt ya got on there? Hm?"

"A blue one."

"A blue one! That's one piece of rot you've got on: after the third wash it won't do for nothin' but a wipe rag. Now, I've got a *foreign* one. Rinse it, give it a shake - no ironing, and it's like new!"

"I do just fine in this one. It's closer to the body."

"Closer! Your shirt's fit for catchin' fish: it's closer to the wind, not the body."

"Tell me, Fyodor Ipatovich, don't the sparks fly when you take off your shirt in the dark?"

"So?"

"There ya have it. That's 'cause it's alien, that shirt of yours. It's so foul it makes electricity. You don't see sparks flying off my shirt. That's 'cause me and it are one; it cuddles my body."

"You're a loser, Yegor. One word: loser! Nature's done ya wrong."

"Yeah, well uh, gee. I reckon that's the way it is ... " Yegor smiled. Smiled meekly. But Kolka was indignant. Mighty indignant, though he didn't dare argue in the presence of grown-ups: that would just disgrace his father. Once alone together, he rebuked his father: "Why'd you keep quiet, Pa? He says all that stuff about you and you take it."

"Sleep don't favor quarrelsome folks, Kolka. They sleep bad. Pine away. That's a fact, son."

"They pine away from indigestion!?" Kolka snapped angrily.

He was angry because Yegor was lying. Lying and hiding his eyes: Kolka didn't like that. He didn't like his father that way - pitiful. And Yegor was aware that his son was ashamed of him and was tormented by this shame, and Yegor was tormented by it too.

"Yeah, well uh, gee. I reckon that's the way it is ... "

And all this torment, shame day in and day out, his wife's shrieks and the neighbors' smirks - it all came from one root, and this root was Yegor's work. It just wasn't going anywhere, this work of his, at the new place - as if some spell had suddenly been cast over it, as if Yegor's hands had failed him or his senses had gone off to market. And Yegor rambled about, he was feverish, and at night he slept far worse than quarrelsome Fyodor Ipatovich.

"You need to be guided, Yegor. Guided!"

But then there was Kolka. No one else had a Kolka like his. Such a pure-eyed little man!..

Yegor Polushkin was having no luck with his work in the new place. True, the first two months, when he was swinging an axe from sunup to sundown for Fyodor Ipatovich, everything seemed to be going just fine. Though Fyodor Ipatovich did guide him, he did not urge him on - that would not have served his own purposes. You can't rush a master - a master is his own boss: any employer can figure that out. And though he would run around and get under his skin, he didn't have the gumption to ever really push him. And Yegor worked as his heart willed: when to push, when to rest, and when to step aside and take a look at his work from a distance. Not hastily either, not on the run, but calmly, closely, three smokes' worth. That work fed him and his family daily, brought him a pair of old trousers and a house. Basically, Yegor did not lament or get angry: by law, according to the agreement everything had been done. He took half a month to get settled in his new abode, revelled in it for another week, and then set out to look for work. Not for the sake of his kinsfolk's house and conveniences, but for bread.

A carpenter is a carpenter: work always pursues him, not he work. Especially since the whole town had seen the fruits of Yegor's labor - why, the cock made with his axe crowed from the roof ridge to the ends of the earth. So they took Yegor, hats off you could say, into the carpentry team of the local construction agency. They took him all right, but half a month later. ..

"Polushkin! How long ya plan to keep pokin' at that wall?"

"Gee, well uh ... The boards don't quite meet."

"So to hell with them boards! You gonna be livin' here or something? We got a plan to meet, bonuses -"

"Gee, but folks are gonna -"

"Down off that ladder! Get movin' on the next site!"

"Gee, but the cracks."

"Get down here I said!"

And so Yegor climbed down. Climbed down, went to the next site, ashamed to look at his own work. And he left the next site, too, under the flagrant cursing of the foreman, and went somewhere again, to some super-new building, did something somewhere, swung his axe, and again they dragged him off, not giving him the chance to do it so that his conscience wouldn't torment him. And a month later Yegor suddenly threw down the gloves that belonged to the agency, took up the axe that was his own and stomped home five hours before the end of the work day.

"I can't do it there, Tina honey, don't you go gettin' cross. They don't do work - they just goof off."

"Oh good-for-nothing curse of my life bane of my existence!"

"Yeah, well uh, yeah. I reckon that's the way it is ... "

He moved on to a different team, then to a different agency, then somewhere else again. He rambled about, suffered, put up with all kinds of chastising, but he just could not learn to put up with that helter-skelter style of work. He roamed from one project to the next, one team to the next, until he'd had a go at every one in the settlement. And just as soon as he had, he gave up and became an odd-job man. This meant going wherever you were sent and doing whatever you were told.

Here too, however, things ran amuck. In May - the earth had just taken its first breath - he was assigned to dig a trench under the sewerage system. The foreman himself staked out the trench with a string, hammered in some post to make a line, and measured the depth with a shovel.

"Down to here, Polushkin. And keep it in line with the string. "

"Sure thing, got it."

"Chuck the dirt in one direction, don't scatter it all over the place."

"Gee, uh ... "

"I'm not gonna give you any quotas: you're a conscientious guy. But make it -"

"Don't you worry."

"All right, Polushkin. Now get started."

Yegor spit on his hands and started in. The earth was rich, fragrant, gave way to the shovel easily and didn't stick to the blade. And it emitted such a gentle, kind warmth, that Yegor grew at once happy and contented. And he dug with the same effort, diligence and pleasure that had once accompanied his work in his native village. Now the May sun was shining bright, the sparrows were rejoicing, the sky shone a deep blue, the air was alive! And so Yegor, having forgotten about smoking breaks, smoothed the floor over and carved away at the walls, and the trench could barely keep up with him.

"You're a regular jackhammer, Polushkin!" said the foreman energetically, taking a look three hours later just for peace of mind. "You're not digging; you're writing, you know!"

Writing was hardly one of Yegor's strong points, so his supervisor's praise was somewhat lost on him. But the tone was clear, and he made a special effort just to please a good man. When the foreman showed up at the end of the day to see if the quotas had been met, he found a trench three work days' worth in length.

"That's three shifts ya done!" said the foreman in amazement, striding along the trench. "You'll be one of our best, Polushkin, and I'd like to -"

He stopped short, for the trench, which stretched right along the string, made a neat little loop around a tussock that was in no way outstanding, and then raced on, straight as an arrow. Unable to believe his eyes, the foreman stared for some time at the mysterious loop and the tussock, no less mysterious, then pointed a finger at it and asked in a near whisper, "What is that?"

"Ants," Yegor explained.

"What ants?"

"You know, those uh ... red ones. A family, by the looks of it. They've got a house, kids. And their home, well, you know, it's in that there tussock."

"Their home, you say?"

"Well, you know, I, uh, took a look and figured that -"

"You figured, did you?"

Yegor did not pick up on this already ill-boding refrain. He was very proud of the justly deserved praise and his own initiative, which had made it possible to save the anthill that had chanced to find itself in the way of municipal construction. And therefore he added with enthusiasm, "Why go wreckin' things for no reason? Better for me to dig around -"

"And where am I supposed to find crooked pipes? Did you give that any thought? Whose head should I use to put a bend in them cast-iron pipes? Didn't think of that? Good God, what in the ... "

The foreman told everyone about the loop around the anthill, leaving Yegor nowhere to turn. But Yegor tolerated it all in keeping with his great propensity to tolerance, even smiled sheepishly, while Kolka went about bruised and scraped from head to toe. Yegor noticed the bruises at once, but he left his son alone: merely sighed. A week later, however, Kolka's teacher came by.

"Would you be Yegor Savelich Polushkin?"

It was rare that anyone addressed Yegor by his patronymic - oh, so rare! And here was this pip-squeak of a girl speaking to him with such respect.

"You know, Kolka hasn't been to school for five days now."

"How's that?"

"Someone probably gave him a hard time, Yegor Savelich. At first he was fighting a lot, and then he disappeared. I bumped into him on the street yesterday, wanted to ask him about it, but he ran away."

"Wasn't very polite of him."

"Talk to him, Yegor Savelich. Only gently, please: he's a sensitive boy."

"Course, when the chance comes along. I thank ya for your trouble."

Late that evening, when the blue glow of television screens appeared in windows, Yegor found Kolka in the shed. Kolka feigned sleep, started snoring louder than the piglet. His father didn't try to wake him, just sat down on the trestle-bed, took out his tobacco pouch and began rolling a cigarette.

"Your teacher was by here a bit ago. Nice lady."

Kolka fell quiet. And the piglet fell quiet too.

"Don't you go causin' her no worry, son. I'm sure she's got troubles enough without us."

Kolka turned over, sat up and stared wide-eyed. Those were dry and furious eyes.

"I knocked Tolya Bezuglov's tooth out!"

"Oh! Now what'd ya do that for?"

"He keeps laughing."

"Gee, well, let 'im. Cryin's no good, but laughin' - be my guest. "

"But it's you he's laughing at! You! At how you curved the pipes around the anthill."

"So I did," Yegor admitted. "I just kinda forgot that cast iron pipes don't bend. Felt sorry for them ants, see: a family, kids, familiar spot."

"And what did you get for it besides laughs? They redug the trench straight anyhow - you got yourself a bad name for nothing."

"I didn't exactly get myself a bad name, son, but uh ... " Yegor sighed and paused, collecting his scattered thoughts. "What do you think holds work together?"

"Your head!"

"That too. Your head and your hands and a knack, but most important, your heart. A man can move mountains with his heart. But if work's just for, well, just for puttin' food on the table, it'll slip right through your fingers. Just won't come, son. And then your hands, they're all thumbs, and your head's just like an empty pot. And the good Lord forbid, son, you get your place wrong. 'Cause the place determines everything for the heart. As for me, well, you see, I came to the wrong place: my soul don't sit quiet - it's all riled up. And it's noisy here, and folks are all antsy, and the bosses, they're all in a hurry, pushing and shouting. And what it boils down to, Kolka, is that I lost myself a little. And I don't have no idea how to find me. No idea - that's the problem. And the fact that they laugh, well let 'em laugh to their hearts' content. No need takin' offense at folks. That's the last thing ya need - to hold a grudge 'gainst folks. The very last."

And he told his son this not as a lesson, but as his conscience willed. He couldn't take offense at people himself, forgave insults generously, and didn't even harbor a grudge against the foreman who had given him a bad name throughout the settlement and barred him from work for good. He turned in yet another pair of work gloves and went once again to the hiring agency.

"What am I gonna do with you, Polushkin?" sighed the director. "You're quiet and diligent and you don't drink, and then there's the family, but you don't last anywhere more than two weeks ... Where now ... "

"It's up to you," said Yegor. "Wherever there's an assignment."

"Assignment!" The director huffed and puffed and scratched the back of his head. "Listen, Polushkin, we got a boat rental opening up here on the pond. Maybe we'll make ya a boatman, eh? What'd ya say?"

"All right," said Yegor. "I can row, and I know how to caulk and tar. Yeah, that's all right."

The previous summer they had dammed the little river near the settlement. It swelled, flooded the ravines, spread toward the forest: to that same last one left around Black Lake. The old clearings came back to life, the birch wood curled anew, the fir groves and pinewoods bristled. And not only local folks, but tourists from the district center started coming here. From Moscow even, so they say.

Then the local authorities saw how the situation could be used to their advantage. What does the tourist, especially one from the capital, need? He needs nature. Amidst his asphalt and cement-block high rises he begins to yearn for it from autumn on, because he's cut off from the land by stone. And this stone, it not only chills the soul; it agitates it without respite, because stone is incapable of quelling the city racket. It's nothing like wood - warm and ever-enduring. And this city racket, rebounding off stone and cement, rolls down streets and alleys, creeps into apartments and rattles the defenseless human soul. And now this soul finds no peace day or night; only in dreams does it see dew-covered dawns and transparent sunsets. And this human soul longs for peace, just like a miner after his shift longs for a bowl of cabbage soup and a piece of black bread.

But you will not captivate the city dweller with pure, unadulterated nature. In the first place, there's not much of it left, unadulterated, that is, and in the second place, he's spoiled, this tourist. He's used to fussing, rushing around, so that he'll sit idly by a little stream for two hours at most, and then he'll either turn the transistor on full blast, or, God forbid, reach for his bottle. And wherever there's one bottle, there's bound to be a second, and where there's a second, there's always disgrace. In order to avoid this, the tourist must be diverted. Give him a boat, organize fishing, mushroom and berry gathering, facilities of some kind. And there are two things to be gained here: less disgrace, and a bit of money is siphoned out of the tourist's pocket into the local budget, because each will put in his penny. You can be sure of that for these pleasures and facilities.

Yegor received all these explanations from the director of the boat rental station, Yakov Prokopych Sazanov. He was an elderly man, very weary of life, and he spoke quietly and wore a simple expression. He had been the head of a team of lumberjacks and had slipped up: he managed to get caught square beneath a falling old pine. He lay around in hospitals for half a year after that before everything was put back in former place. And as soon as he came around a little he was sent here to the boat rental station.

"What's your responsibility gonna be, Polushkin? First and foremost you're gonna be looking after repairs. Make sure everything's in order: the seats are in place, the floorboards are sturdy, the oars are in good shape and there's not more than a cupful of water in the boats.

"I'll keep 'em dry," Yegor assured him. "Got it."

"What's your second responsibility gonna be? Your second responsibility is the dock. Keeping it clean, like a good housewife keeps up the homestead."

"Got it. I'll make it clean enough to eat off."

"Eating on the dock's not allowed," said Yakov Prokopych wearily. "We'll put some tables out under an awning and a counter without drinks. Well, tea maybe. Or else someone'll drown and they'll turn us in."

"What if they bring their own?"

"Their own doesn't concern us: they're free people. But if they bring two of their own, now - that's where we draw the line."

"Ah-hah!"

"Politely though." Yakov Prokopych held up his finger importantly. "Politeness is your third responsibility. Tourists are nervous folks, sickly folks, you could say. Ya gotta be polite with 'em. "

"Oh yeah, that goes without saying, Yakov Prokopych. You can count on that."

It was easy to talk to the director: he didn't shout, didn't curse, didn't rush him. He said sensible things in a sensible voice.

"I'll do to renting of the boats myself. But if someone wants to be taken to the other side, then that's your job. You dock wherever they say, help 'em unload their stuff and shove off only after they say thanks."

"So I'm s'posed to wait for the thanks, right?"

"That's just for instance, Polushkin, just for instance. They might say, for example: dismissed - then you shove off."

"Got it."

"The most important thing is to help folks. Maybe build 'em a campfire or something. Oblige 'em, in other words."

"Gee, uh ... "

Yakov Prokopych looked at Yegor, pondered, then asked, "Ever driven a motor boat?"

"You bet I have!" This question delighted Yegor, because it exceeded the limits of his carpentry skills. It was something above and beyond the call of duty, out of the ordinary, and he was proud of it. "Well, uh, I sure have, Yakov Prokopych! Out there in our village we got giant lakes! Sometimes the chairman would send me -"

"Which ones ya know?"

"Well, the uh ... the Wind I know. And the Arrow."

"We've got the Wind - three of 'em. It's a valuable thing - ya gotta understand that. Registered in my name. Take special care of 'em: I'm gonna give 'em out only as your personal responsibility. And only for transporting to the farthest parts of the lake: you can get everywhere else in the rowboats."

"I'm an old pro when it comes to motor boats! Don't you worry! This is right up my alley!"

But there was no need for motorboats as yet, because the long-distance tourist was somehow late in coming. And the short-distance tourists and local young people were interested only in renting rowboats. Yakov Prokopych himself took care of this business, while Yegor caulked, repaired and painted with abandon the decrepit inventory. He tired with pleasure, and slept soundly, and he began to smile differently: not hastily, not on the go, but wearily ...

4

Kolka attended school regularly now. He showed up half an hour early, before the teacher. And he sat still during lessons, and when the lesson was about something interesting - animals or about history and geography, say - his mouth would fall open. Everyone waited for this moment, the whole class. And as soon as it happened, everyone would freeze at once, and Vova would covertly raise his straw, so that the teacher wouldn't see, cram it full of spit wads, take aim, blow, and - right into Kolka's gaping mouth. Oh, what fun!

How many times had Kolka had fallen victim to this trick? - no one could keep count. For some time after each instance he would remember to keep his mouth shut real tight lip to lip. But the teacher had only to launch into a lecture on ancient heroes or begin reading poetry and he would forget himself. He would lose himself, hang on every word, and that was probably why his mouth would fall open, so that none of these words would slip by him. That's when Vova would take aim and fire. And if he hit his target, Olya Kuzina would clap her hands, while Vova would brag, "I'm a sniper, that's what I am. I can nail anyone with a rock from a hundred feet away!"

Olya Kuzina would stare at him with wide eyes. Only her lashes would quiver slightly. They were the kind of lashes anyone would pick a fight over, but Kolka wasn't up to it.

"Did ya hear what Nona Yurievna said about the warrior Ilya Muromets? She says he sat stock still for thirty-three years, and when the wandering minstrels came -"

"You opened your mouth! And I landed a spit wad in it!"

"A spit wad with ink in it!" Olya Kuzina rejoiced.

"You're a scatter-brain, and I'm a sniper! Right, Olya?"

Vova was really riding his high horse now. In fact, two days ago, he was so high that he forgot about his spitting straw. He walked around with his chest thrust out, boasting, "Papa got called away to town on business. Promised to bring me back a bamboo fishing rod."

Fyodor Ipatovich had a big send-off with lots of food and pomp and whatnot. They wished him bon voyage, a speedy return and a successful trip. Fyodor Ipatovich furrowed his brow, got to thinking and said, "I wonder what it is they want all of a sudden?"

"They want advice," Haritina prompted. "Advice, Fyodor Ipatovich, a meeting with you."

"A meeting?" Their host sighed for some reason, "Mhm ... "

"A safe successful journey to ya, Fyodor Ipatovich!"

Their host raised his glass and toasted, thanked them. But he didn't drink; set his glass aside, grew sombre. "What could they be calling me in for, hm?"

He left in good order: well fed, tipsy, and utterly self satisfied. He was gone for a week and returned without warning: he sent neither letter nor telegram ahead of time. Maritsa flew into a flutter. "Good gracious me! We can't sit guests down to an empty table?"

"Hang on, Marya. No need for guests."

"How's that, no need, Fyodor honey? But it's custom. Not something we thought up ourselves."

Then Fyodor Ipatovich blurted out, "All right, call 'em over. T'hell with them and their customs ... "

Fyodor Ipatovich liked to receive guests grandly, with lots of room and plenty of time. But he was choosy, too: he didn't sit just anyone down at his table. An instructor from the district executive committee would drop in now and then (he loved fishing more than he did his young wife!), some folks from the local Soviet came by. And of course, the director of commerce, the manager of the general store and the head of the garage: after all, a man's got to be practical in this day and age. And (how could he get around it) the family: Yegor Polushkin and his Harya, ever so sweet.

"Greetings to ya, Fyodor Ipatovich, welcome back! How were your travels around the district center? What did you hear at the market about price hikes? What's the word on outer space?"

Fyodor Ipatovich was in no hurry to answer. He took down his imported suitcase, unfastened the straps in the presence of his guests and said, "Just a little something here for gifts - now don't go too hard on me. Nothing useful - just, you know, souvenirs."

He had a gift for everyone, left no one out. Yegor and Haritina got something too: what could he do? He even gave Kolka a compass.

"Here you go, nephew. So you don't get lost."

For some reason this made everyone laugh. But Kolka glowed with delight, like an early star: a real compass! With an arrow and a north-south and everything.

"Hey! There at the helm! Four points to the west! Hold her steady!"

"Aye-aye, holdin' steady!"

That's what the compass said to him. And as far as getting lost in the woods went, well, Kolka was as sure of himself there as you are in your own apartment. On which side of the tree is the bark rougher? Don't know? Well Kolka does, so he had no need for a compass in the woods. But he did need it for his travels. Needed it badly in fact.

"Keep her steady! Any sign of the Promised Land?"

"No sign, captain! Just stormy sea all around!"

"Hold this course! Land up ahead!"

Of course, he was hollering to himself; why frighten folks for no reason? They wouldn't understand: just get upset.

And Vova got a collapsable fishing rod, three-jointed. "There's gonna be fish galore!" he bragged. "Hey, Pop, what kind should I catch for you?"

"The bigger the better!" everyone cried. "With lots of fat beneath the skin!"

Fyodor Ipatovich smiled. He stroked his son's bristly head and smiled sadly. And when the most important guests had gone, he could contain himself no longer: "The new forest warden called me in. A hot shot from the capital. Why's the forest not in order? he asks me. Where are the acts for the cutting? What preventive measures, he asks, have been taken against forest pests? And the whole time he's looking at a map: never even been in our forest himself. And here he is making threats."

"Oh my," Yegor sighed; Fyodor Ipatovich was complaining to him because there was no one else to complain to, and he felt like complaining. "Me too, you know - I've got uh ... troubles too."

But Yegor's troubles didn't worry Fyodor Ipatovich much: he had problems enough of his own.

"Yeah. Well, never mind, he'll come around. Life's cracked tougher nuts than this one. He'll break down and come crawling back. No forest warden can hang on here without me - I know all the ins and outs. And I also know who hits the bottle with who on Saturday nights. Who drinks with who and what they look like afterwards."

"Yeah, what they look like, all right. Who looks how, that's right," Yegor mumbled.

He put away two glasses and dwelled on his own misfortunes.

He was miserable for having incited the anger of weary Yakov Prokopych for the first time and now he was afraid of losing his quiet, respectful position at the dock, obtained through such ordeal.

"I, you know, wanted to make it clearer which one was where. So you wouldn't have to hunt around and so they'd be pretty."

" 'Did the accounts on the timber sales come in?' " their host droned on about his own affairs. "All right, we'll make accounts for you. You'll have all the accounts, since you want to keep tabs so badly. Oh yeah, we'll start keeping tabs and you won't hang on too long in that office of yours. No-o sir, not long -"

"And he says, make 'em blue. But if we make 'em all blue, or all red, say - what'll we get? We'll get total indifference -"

"Indifference?" Fyodor Ipatovich blinked his red eyes (he'd put away a few himself in his grief). "You said it right, brother-in-law, about indifference. Well, I'll show him indifference. I'll get even, I'll -"

"That's it," Yegor nodded. "Beauty - do you mean to tell me beauty is when everything's the same? Beauty is when everything's different! One, let's say, is blue, and another, on the cont'ry, is red. And how can we get by without beauty? Without beauty there's no festivity. Beauty, why it's -"

"What are you rambling on about, you confounded loser? What beauty? He's demanding money from me for the house - money, get it? And you - beauty! Phooey!"

Yegor fawned upon his host, chuckled: why cross him for nothing? But he was upset. Really upset, because after all he hadn't succeeded in sharing his grief. And to lie down to sleep with your grief, after two glasses much less - you'd dream about devils. Real ones - tails, horns, hooves and all. A distressing dream: the devils come to strangle you, so the old folks say. And they know what's what. No doubt they'd had their share of drink in their lifetime - enough to fill Lake Onega. Both in happiness and in grief.

And again Yegor tossed and turned in bed, sighed, blamed himself. Oh, he was good-for-nothing, a loser, one of God's outcasts!

Yegor tried at this job - would even forget smoking breaks. He moved around at a trot like a young buck. The director would just open his mouth, "Hey you, Polushkin -"

"Got it, Yakov Prokopych!"

And off he would dash. If he got it right - great; if he didn't, back he would run: for an explanation. But his efforts were like those of a bride before her future mother-in-law.

"You did a good job caulking the boats, Polushkin. And you tarred 'em good, I'll give you that... Stop - where ya going?"

"I'm uh -"

"Hear me out first, then take off. Now we need to give the boats a festive appearance. Blue. And the oars - only the blades, understand? - red: so we can spot 'em from far away in case someone lets 'em go. And you're to paint a number on the bow of each boat. With black paint, the way it's done. So here's the paint, here are the brushes and here's the paper with the numbers. As soon as you paint one number, cross it off so you don't get 'em mixed up. Paint the second one, cross off the second one. Got it, Polushkin?"

"Got it, Yakov Prokopych. What's there to get wrong?" He snatched up the jars, and only the soles of his bare feet flashed as he scurried off. They were bare because Yegor spared his boots and wore them only from his house to the dock and back. At work he bustled around barefoot. Bare feet was more comfortable and quicker, and he didn't wear out his boots needlessly that way.

For three days he turned the boats blue. What eight-hour work day? He stayed as long as he could work. Yakov Prokopych would already have taken inventory, hung up the locks, looked everything over and prepared to leave, and Yegor would still be going great guns.

"Finish up, Polushkin."

"Just a sec, Yakov Prokopych, just a sec."

"It's after; four already. It's time."

"You go on ahead, Yakov Prokopych. Don't worry about the paint and the brushes: I'll take 'em home with me."

"Well, if that's the way you want it, Polushkin."

"So long, Yakov Prokopych! My best to the folks at home."

He didn't even turn around, so as not to lose time. He put on two coats of paint, breathed heavily, stuck out his tongue: out of satisfaction. While the boats were drying, he turned his attention to the oars. Here he tried especially hard: red doesn't like to be rushed. Slap on too much and it turns cold, thick; skimp and you've got pink on your hands. And Yegor had a feel for color: he'd done his share of house painting, and from deep within he was particularly geared toward colors, from the very day of his baptism, so to speak. So he tried it this way and that, and at last it came out just how he wanted. The blades on those oars were like fire - you could spot them from far, far away.

And just as soon as he took up the numbers, just as soon as he had painted the first two (No. 7 and No. 9 - according to the list), his hand went limp. It was dull - black on blue. After all, a number is all a number is - there's nothing more to it. Pure arithmetic. And when arithmetic is on sky blue - it can be downright upsetting, can spoil a person's mood. And it was a person in a good mood who'd be taking this boat: for a little rest, for his pleasure. And he gets number nine: black on blue. Just like on your house: and right off it starts you thinking of your mother-in-law. So much for the good mood.

And suddenly Yegor was struck. A certain clarity filled his head - such clarity that he threw down his brush and ran around his boats. And suddenly he was so overjoyed and genuinely shaken by this joy - unfamiliar, exciting - that he couldn't even take up his brush. It was as if something had suddenly frightened him, but in a good, cheerful way.

Of course, it would have been wise to get a second opinion just then, since Yakov Prokopych had already headed home, and therefore Yegor, having had a smoke and still just as excited, took his brush and, for starters, stroked over the painstakingly painted numbers "7" and "9". Then, taking a deep breath, he set the brush aside once again and dug in his pocket for the stub of his carpenter's pencil.

This time he worked long into the night: thank goodness the nights were light. His faithful wife ran out beyond the gate five times, tried wailing just for practice: what if he had drowned, that man of hers? But until he had completed the job he had undertaken, until he had washed out the brushes, until he had tidied up and admired his work to his heart's content, Yegor did not hurry home.

"Good God where have you been tramping around all the dark night damn you good-for-nothing -"

"I was working, Tina," Yegor said calmly with an air of importance. "Hush, now: I did a useful thing. Yakov Prokopych'll have a nice surprise tomorrow."

At the crack of dawn Yegor ran down to the dock: he couldn't sleep, couldn't wait. He admired his artistic labor once again and with tremendous joyous impatience took to awaiting the director's arrival.

"There!" he said instead of good morning. "Take a look at what I thought up."

Yakov Prokopych looked long and hard. He looked seriously, without a smile. Yegor, on the other hand, smiled from ear to ear: smiled so that his cheekbones ached.

"So," said Yakov Prokopych at last. "What am I supposed to make of this?"

"Animation," Yegor explained. "What's a number, anyway? Plain old arithmetic. Black on blue: can't even make it out from far away. Let's say you order number seven taken out. All right, fine, so ya look around for that number seven. But here you've got a picture on the bow: a duckling. Folks'll spot a duckling right off."

In place of formal black numbers on the sky blue of the boats birds, flowers and beasts were brightly painted: a duckling, a puppy, a dahlia, a chick. Yegor had drawn them garishly, with little regard for realism, but he had conveyed a faultless accuracy of detail in each drawing: the puppy was lop-eared, the dahlia had a resilient stem bent by the heavy flower, the duckling's beak was open cheerfully.

"It'll make it fun for everyone," Yegor went on excitedly. "I'm in the chick, and you're in, say, the piglet. Try and catch me! Races."

"Races?" repeated Yakov Prokopych, perplexed. "The duckling and the piglet? I see. Great. And what if, heaven forbid, someone capsizes? If they steal a boat, heaven forbid again? If it gets carried away by the wind (that'll be your fault, by the way)? What, I'd like to know, am I supposed to report to the police? Save our chick? Put a search out for the piglet? Someone swiped our dahlia? Hm?!"

"Gee uh ... "

"Gee uh, get busy and paint over the blasted things! Paint over everyone of those duck-pigs so good they don't show up on x-ray! Paint them this instant, write the numbers according to the list and

without any monkey business. This is no kindergarten, you know; this is a cultural place: someone from the party committee could come here. Now, could I put the secretary of the party committee in a dahlia, hm? Could I? What'll they have to say about your ducklings and piglets, hm? Don't know? Well I know: abstract. They'll say it's abstract, Polushkin."

"What'll they say?"

"Don't test my nerves, Polushkin," said Yakov Prokopych emphatically. "Don't test 'em. I was contused by a pine tree; I've got the papers to prove it. So if I give you a wack over the head with an oar ... "

Yegor walked away. Long and mundane was the process of painting over the creations of his hands and heart. He sighed. But those stubborn duckies and piggies would peer out anew beneath each coat of freshly dried paint, and Yegor would take up his brush once again and paint over the little critters, as gay as in fairy tales. Then he painted on the black numbers, coldly and painstakingly. According to the list.

"You're a dangerous guy, Polushkin," said Yakov Prokopych with a sigh when Yegor reported that everything was done.

Yakov Prokopych drank tea from a thermos. Funny fat bellied fish with cock's tails decorated the thermos. Yegor stared at them, shifting from one bare foot to the other.

"They warned me," the director went on. "All the foremen warned me. They said you were a restless character with an imagination. But I didn't believe 'em."

Yegor sighed quietly, but he didn't breath a word of apology. He knew that he should apologize - for the sake of a peaceful future - that Yakov Prokopych was expecting it, but he couldn't. He couldn't make himself, because he couldn't agree with his superior just then. He agreed with the thermos.

"You gotta live the way that's proper, Polushkin. You're told to do such-and-such, you do such-and-such. Or else, if everyone starts getting ideas ... You know what'll happen?"

"What?" asked Yegor.

Yakov Prokopych finished chewing his bread and drank down the last of his tea. Then he said incisively, "It's something we don't even dare think about."

"What about space?" Yegor asked for some reason (what had gotten into him, anyway?). "First it was people's fantasies: I heard that on the radio. And now -"

"Ever heard cussing?"

"Now and then," sighed Yegor.

"What is it? Cussing is illicit scolding, get it? And then there's licit scolding. Right? Well the same goes for imagination: there's licit and there's illicit. You've got the uncensored kind."

"You mean the piggy and the ducky - they're illicit?" Yegor asked skeptically.

"I'm speaking in generalities, Polushkin. In the broad sense. "

"In the broad sense they'd be a duck and a pig."

"A duck can't keep company with a pig!" Yakov Prokopych suddenly exploded. "Now get out of my sight before I personally give you a dose of illicit imagination!"

It was shortly after this conversation that Fyodor Ipatovich returned, and the whole community went out to greet him. That was why Yegor had begun to pine after only two glasses, why he had grown lonely and anxious.

But, as it soon became dear, his anxiety was premature. Weary Yakov Prokopych harbored no ill feelings in his heart once he had had his say, and he soon forgot about the misadventure altogether. Once again Yegor smiled cheerfully and dashed about, his bare soles flashing.

"Got it, Yakov Prokopych!"

But misfortune was creeping up from somewhere else. A grave misfortune, like a cloud on St. Ilijah's Day. But a person is not fated to know about his own misfortune ahead of time, and therefore it always comes as a bolt from the blue. And then there is nothing one can do but sigh and scratch the back of one's head.

"I reckon that's the way it is!"

5

Vodka was to blame for it all. Actually, not even vodka, but something else - who knows exactly what it was. Bad luck, in a word.

Generally speaking, Yegor drank little: he had neither the money nor much of a liking for the stuff. Not that he refused it, of course - heavens no. He had brains enough to know better. True, he wasn't offered it, wasn't given the honor. Only his brother-in-law, Fyodor Ipatovich, treated him to it. On occasion.

Occasion were few and far between, but Yegor got drunk quickly. Perhaps because his bass string wasn't tuned properly, or he had some internal disease, or he was simply weak, eating nothing but potatoes and cabbage all year long. Yegor got drunk quickly, and Haritina didn't lag far behind him: after half a glass she'd be blooming a poppy red, while a whole glass had her singing songs. And she knew a great abundance of songs, too, though after a little vodka she often sang the refrains alone. Not even the refrains, but one refrain. One singular refrain, but a sad one at that:

Oh, woe-woe-woe.

Oh, woe is me!

Who will save me, young and sweet,

From all my misery ...

So, it seemed that drink set her off in a sorrowful direction. For drink goes to different parts of people's bodies; one, to the voice; another, to the fist; another, to the heart; another, to the head; and as for Yegor - it went to the legs. They couldn't keep him up, bent in all directions and got so tangled up you'd swear there weren't two, but eight of them, like a crab. This circumstance always had the same effect on Yegor: he grew very gay and loved everyone very much. Actually, he always loved everyone very much. Even when he was sober.

Early that morning the first tourists came calling: three men accompanying two gals. Apparently they'd come from afar: they were carting sacks galore. Nor did they look much like local folks: all the men wore pants with rivets and no caps, while their ladies, on the contrary, wore white caps. And they wore the same kind of pants, only skin tight. So tight that Yegor kept sneaking peeks in their direction. As soon as he relaxed control of himself he'd take another peek: so there was something here worth peeking at.

"Welcome, fine guests, welcome," Yakov Prokopych sang rather than said. And he took off his cap respectfully. "Where might you folks be coming from, just out of curiosity?"

"Can't see from here," they replied. "Can you take us over to the other side?"

"We can." Yakov Prokopych donned his cap once again and hid his smile. "We'll take you for the rental fee on a motor boat. I'll ask that you pay the round-trip fee."

"Why's that?"

"The boat will take you wherever you want, but, then it'll come back empty."

"That's fair," said the second one and reached for his wallet.

Yegor distinguished the three men by their coloring: Grey, Baldy and Balding. He did likewise for the dames: Red and Piebald. They kept out of things: Grey and Balding did the talking. Baldy admired the scenery.

"So," he asked, "get much fish around here?"

The gals fussed around their bags, while Kolka busied himself nearby. School had ended, so he came by here now and then to help his father. The gals paid no attention to him, but when Red pulled a pair of binoculars (real, honest-to-goodness binoculars!) out of one of the bags, he was drawn in a flash. As if by a winch.

"Oh, what a darling boy!" said Piebald. "What's your name, little boy?"

"Kolka," said Kolka, his voice suddenly hoarse: he introduced himself in a bass.

"You get a lot of mushrooms around here, Kolka?"

"It's still early for mushrooms," Kolka boomed. "White stems've come up here and there, but the first layer hasn't come up for brown rings yet."

"The first what?" Red even lowered the binoculars.

"The first layer hasn't come up," Kolka explained, and his feet took a step toward the binoculars on their own. "Mushrooms come in layers: first brown rings, then red caps and squirrel's bread. Only after that does the layer of real mushrooms come up: milk caps and chestnuts."

"A layer's when there's lots of them, right?"

"Yeah. Then they're good for picking. Till then it's not worth it."

And he took another step toward the binoculars: his stomach was all but touching them. And he couldn't take his eyes off them. For those were real binoculars, dear friends!

"Do you want to take a look?"

Kolka wanted to say yes; his mouth dropped open, but instead of "yes" he produced a kind of gurgling sound. An incoherent gurgling, but Red held out the binoculars to him anyway:

"Just don't drop them."

"Nuh-uh."

While Pa was getting the motor boat ready and receiving instructions from Yakov Prokopych, Kolka looked through the binoculars. When he peered through the little windows everything seemed big. Through the big windows everything was small. This was totally inexplicable: things should look big through the big windows and small through the small ones, right? It was all wrong. Not at all the way it ought to have been. And this peculiarity engaged Kolka as much if not more than the binoculars' true function: he kept turning it and staring at a crow from different ends.

"Why do you keep turning it?" Red asked. "You're supposed to look here through the eyepiece."

"I know," said Kolka quietly.

"Then why do you keep turning it?"

"Just because," said Kolka shyly. "It's interesting."

"Son!" Yegor called him. "Come and gi'me a hand, son."

Kolka thrust the binoculars into Red's hands, wanted to say thank you, but some gurgle crept out of his throat again, and he had no choice but to dash off without expressing his gratitude. Then Piebald said, "Savage."

"Oh, let him be," said Red with a lazy wave of her hand. "Just an ordinary ill-bred child."

Under the scrutinous eye of Yakov Prokopych Yegor hitched the Wind to the bow of number nine (the former duckling - fat and important-looking, Yegor remembered that) and put the fuel tank in place. Kolka brought the oars, the rowlocks and the scoop - everything that went with the boat.

"Everything's hunky-dory, Yakov Prokopych," Yegor reported.

"Give her a test run first," said the director and explained to the tourists: "The first motorized navigation, you could say. Don't want any malfunctions."

"Could we possibly get through this whole ritual a bit faster?" Baldy inquired peevishly.

"This is how it's done, citizen tourists: safety requirements. Come on, Polushkin, shove off."

Yakov Prokopych had invented the bit about the safety requirements off the cuff, for there were no such requirements. He was looking out for his own safety.

"Start 'er up here, Polushkin, where I can see 'er. Do a loop and hitch 'er up back here where I'm standing."

"Got it."

Kolka rowed away from the dock. Yegor fiddled with the motor, stuck his fingers into it and started it with one yank. He let it idle first, deftly engaged the propeller, made a few runs for the director's peace of mind and docked without a bump. He docked it well: he saw at a glance when to cut the motor. And - grinned:

"Right on, Yakov Prokopych!"

"You know how it's done," said the director. "I give you permission to load 'er up."

Yegor and his son jumped onto the dock and quickly loaded on all the bags. Then the tourists took their seats, Kolka - he positioned himself in the bow - shoved off, Yegor started the Wind up once more, and the boat sped off toward the far wooded bank.

Neither Yegor, much less Kolka heard what the tourists talked about along the way. Yegor for the roar of the motor, and Kolka because he sat in the bow watching the waves scurry away and the far bank turn slowly, reluctantly toward him. And Kolka could have no thoughts for the tourists: he was the sailor on the lookout and regretted only that, in the first place, he had left his compass at home, and in the second, the red lady had let him look through the binoculars prematurely. Now was when he needed those binoculars!

In the meantime, the tourists chattered on about how the reservoir was new and could not have any fish to speak of. Their words occasionally reached Yegor, but he paid them no heed, fully absorbed in the important assignment entrusted to him. And what business had he with these strangers who had escaped to the peace and quiet for but a matter of days! He knew his own business: to deliver them wherever they ordered, help them get settled and shove off only when he had been dismissed.

"Take us to that cliff over there!" ordered Grey. "We'll make a little reconnaissance mission."

They made little reconnaissance missions in three places, until at last Red and Piebald reached an agreement. Then they ordered their gear unloaded, and Yegor and his son helped the tourists lug their things to the site selected for their camp.

This was a cheery little glade, protected by a dense fir grove.

Here the tourists quickly pitched their bright-yellow tent on aluminum poles, with a fly and awning, assigned Yegor the task of preparing a place for a campfire, while Kolka was given the privilege of inflating the rubber rafts. Kolka blew them up with elation, reddening from the strain and trying hard to do everything right. Yegor, in the meantime, having received a hatchet from Balding, went to the woods to chop up some kindling.

"What a lovely spot!" chattered Piebald. "The air is just heavenly!"

"Seems to me there's not much in the way of fishing around here," said Grey. "Hey, kid, how's the fish here?"

"Ruff," said Kolka, panting (he was inflating the fourth mattress at this point).

"Ruff's only fit for soup. Any worthwhile kind of fish?"

"Naw."

There might in fact have been fish, but Kolka, for his young age and lack of tackle, specialized primarily in ruff. Besides which, he was utterly engrossed in the process of inflating and didn't venture to hold a conversation.

"Do much fishing yourself?" Baldy inquired.

"Naw."

Kolka kept his replies monosyllabic, since in order to answer he had to stop blowing, and the air would quickly leak out of the raft. He squeezed the nipple as hard as he could, but the rubber was thick in that spot and Kolka hadn't strength enough.

"How about your pa - does he do much fishing?"

"Naw."

"Why's that?"

"Naw."

"Fascinating conversation," Piebald sighed. "I told you: he's a typical savage."

"Good for you, Kolka," Red said in unexpected praise. "You inflate mattresses real well. Tired?"

"Naw."

Kolka didn't really understand why he was a "typical savage", though he suspected insult. But he didn't let it get to him: he had no time to, for one, and besides, the red lady had praised him in time. And for the sake of this praise Kolka was willing to blow up not five but fifty-five rafts without rest.

But Kolka was so spent from trying by the time he reached the fifth mattress that his head rang like an empty pot. He wheezed, turned red, panted, but he didn't stop blowing: the job had to be completed, and it wasn't every day he was called upon to inflate mattresses. After all, that fact deserved appreciation: a raft was for travel. All this made him huff and puff so that he could no longer hear what the tourists were talking about. And when he had finished with the last one, closed the hole with a stopper and caught his breath a little, his pa came tramping out of the fir grove. He brought dry fir branches for firewood and said, "I'm afraid it wasn't such a swell spot we picked after all, dear friends. There's an anthill there beyond the grove: them ants are gonna give ya trouble. Oughta move somewhere else."

"Is it a big anthill?" asked Grey.

"Big as a cellar," said Yegor. "A solid family, well established."

"How interesting!" said Red. "Would you show it to me?"

"Sure thing," said Yegor.

Everyone went to look at the anthill, and Kolka too: he figured it would be a bit easier to catch his breath on the go. Hardly had they peered beyond the first fir trees when they saw it: a mountain. What cellar? - it was the size of a whole bath house. A good two meters.

"A skyscraper!" said Balding. "A miracle of nature." Ants scurried about everywhere - more than you could begin to count. Big ants: black ones. A bite from one of those would send you hopping, and Kolka (he was barefoot, mind you) kept his distance.

"That's the kind of trouble you'll have," said Yegor. "Over yonder a bit I spotted another little glade. Let me give you a hand with your things: you'll have peace, and they won't be bothered."

"They're good for rheumatism, ants are," said Balding thoughtfully. "So if anyone's got rheumatism ... "

"Ow!" squealed Piebald. "They bite, the little buggers!"

"They pick up the scent," said Yegor. "Those are independent fellas."

"Yeah," Baldy sighed. "Unpleasant neighbors. What a shame."

"No sweat!" said Grey with a wave of his hand: "We'll conquer them! Hey, what's your name? Yegor? Lend us a little gasoline, would ya, Yegor? Got a can?"

Yegor didn't understand what the gasoline was for, but he brought it anyway: he found a can. He brought it and handed it to Grey.

"Here ya go."

"Thanks, chum," said Grey. "We'll take your sharp wits into consideration. All right, step back, everyone."

And with that he splashed the entire contents onto the anthill. Splashed it, lit a match - the flame flared up like a rocket. It whined and hissed, enveloping the entire giant ant home in an instant.

The little black-headed creatures scurried about, withering from the unbearable heat, the dry needles crackled, and even the old fir tree which had sheltered the ant empire for dozens of years swayed and quivered from the scorching air rising to the heavens.

Yegor and Kolka stood by in silence. Sheltering their faces from the heat, they looked on as the ants shriveled and burned, as they stubbornly refused to flee, but, rather, defying death, they marched resolutely into the very heart of that scorching hell in the vain hopes of saving but one larva. Father and son watched that giant structure - the painstaking labor of millions of tiny creatures - disintegrate before their very eyes, they watched the needles on the old fir tree curl from the heat and the thousands of ants race toward the fire from all directions, gallantly throwing themselves into the flames.

"Wee, fireworks!" Piebald said with glee. "Victory!"

"Well, that's that," Grey snickered. "Man is the king of nature. Right, kid?"

"King?" Kolka echoed in a daze.

"King, kid. Conqueror and victor."

The anthill burned up, subsiding into dead grey ash. Baldy poked it with a stick, a flame burst forth anew, and that was the end. That part of the population which had not perished scurried frantically about the charred ruins.

"We've won ourselves a place in the sun," Baldy explained. "Now no one will bother or disturb us."

"Hey, we ought to celebrate our victory," said Balding.

"Think of something quick, girls."

"That's right," Grey seconded. "We have to thank our friend here."

"And say the last rites for the ants!" Baldy roared with laughter.

And they all started back to camp.

Behind them trudged befuddled Yegor, carrying the empty can in which he had so eagerly supplied them with the gasoline. Kolka tried to catch his eye, but he avoided the boy's gaze, turned away, and Kolka asked in a whisper, "How could they, Pa? Why, those are living creatures ... "

"Yeah," sighed Yegor. "I reckon that's just the way it is, son ... "

His heart was heavy, and he would have liked to leave at once, but they hadn't ordered him to go yet. Without a word he prepared a spot for the fire, cut forked sticks, and when he finished the gals laid a vinyl tablecloth and spread the food.

"Come on," they called, "we'll have a quick bite."

"We, uh ... you know ... That's not necessary."

"All work deserves payment," said Grey. "Salami for the kid, for example. Hey kid, want some salami?"

Kolka couldn't hold out against salami: he didn't see much of it, salami, that is. And he moved toward the picnic spread before his father, who was still sighing and downcast. He glanced at Kolka and said quietly, "Ya oughta rinse your hands off, son. Go on, they're dirty."

Kolka had his hands washed in a jiffy and was given a roll with salami. He was in ecstasy, but still ants scurried before his eyes. Bustling, confused, gallant. They scurried, curled, fell, and their bellies burst from the ghastly heat.

Yegor, too, saw the ants. He even rubbed his eyes to make them go away, to erase them from his memory, but they kept creeping back in. He was depressed, and he didn't feel like doing anything, nor did he want to sit down at that table. But he sat down anyway, when they called him a second time. He sat down in silence, though it would have been proper to say a few kind words to the folks for the invitation. He sat down in silence and in silence accepted an enameled mug from Grey.

"Drink, Yegor. You take some when you're tired, don't ya? One can see it in your eyes."

"Well, uh ... On occasion."

"Consider this an occasion."

"Well, here's to your vacation. To a nice rest."

He could barely get the words out. A shadow hung over his heart, and he put away that mug without waiting for anyone else.

"Now that's Russian style!" said Balding with surprise.

Never in his life had Yegor subjected himself to such a dose.

And the stuff he was drinking was a might stronger than vodka, too: went straight to his head and swept all the ants away. And these fellows suddenly seemed so near and dear, so kind and friendly that Yegor forgot his inhibitions, smiled from ear to ear, and unleashed his tongue.

"Here we got nature all around. Yep. This is where to come when ya wanna get away from it all. Peace and quiet. What's a man need? He needs peace. Every animal, every insect, every, you know, fir and birch tree - they're all just dying for their own peace. Ants, now, on the other hand, they uh ... Them too."

"You're a philosopher, Yegor," laughed Grey. "What's your theory?"

"Hold on, dear sir, hold on. What is it I want to say? What I want is -"

"You want some more booze!"

"Hold on, now, dear sir ... "

Whenever Yegor took a dose that size he addressed everyone the same way: "dear sir". This was the first stage, so to speak. At the second stage he warmed up: "dear friend" was the address he used. He would blink his affectionate eyes, love everyone boundlessly, pity them for some reason, and would try to say something nice, something that would make them happy. But his thoughts would grow confused and scurry about, just like the black ants, while he had never had words enough to begin with: clearly he had not been let his share at birth. And when he downed the second glass, why, he would fog over completely.

"Man suffers. Suffers a lot, my dear, kind friends. Why? Because we're all orphans, we are. Out of sorts with mother earth, in a row with father forest, in bitter separation from sister river. And there's nothing to stand on, nothing to lean against, and nothing to refresh ourselves with. And this goes especially for you, my dear, kind friends. You suffer the most and the sky above you is grey. Ours is blue. And how can you have black on blue, I ask? Numbers on the blue of the heavens? No sir, dear friend, that's no good: arithmetic across the sky. It was meant for other things, for beauty, for the soul to breathe. Yep!"

"You're a regular poet, man. A story-teller!"

"Now hold on, kind friend, hold on. What is it I want to say? I want it to be nice for everyone, that's all. I want everyone to have plen'y o'warm sunshine, to rejoice in the soft rain, to get pleasure out of the lush grass. I want there to be more joy all around, more joy, my dear, kind friends! Man oughta work for the joy and cheerfulness of his soul."

"Why don't you do a little jig for us instead - to cheer us up. How 'bout it? *Aye, luli, aye, luli!* 'The moon's a shinin', the big bright moon.'"

"Don't!" Red interjected. "What are you doing - he can barely stand up!"

"Who can't stand up? Yegor can't? Why, our Yegor's a real brick!"

"Come on, Yegor, old pal! You respect us?"

"That I do, good friends of mine!"

"Pa, don't!"

"I gotta, Kolka, little buddy. Ya gotta respect folks. Happily. To make everyone happy! Well, all right, so you burned up the ants. So what if you did, dear, kind friends of mine!"

Balding began clapping his hands:

"Kalinka, kalinka, kalinka ... Come on, Yegor!"

They sang and clapped their hands: only Kolka and Red looked on angrily, but Yegor couldn't see them. He saw elusive, swimming faces, and it seemed to him that these faces were swimming into joyous smiles.

"Oh, good kind friends of mine! How could I not respect you?"

Three times he stood up - and fell down. Fell down and laughed to tears, and everyone else laughed and had a good time. Somehow he managed to get to his feet, staggered around the glade in a ridiculous fashion, waving his arms every which way. But his legs wobbled and his feet got tangled up, and he kept lunging everywhere except where he wanted. The tourists roared with laughter, someone was already dancing with Yegor, while Red embraced Kolka and offered him candies.

"Don't worry, Kolka, don't worry. It'll pass. It's just, you know, temporary."

Kolka didn't take the candy. And he watched through tears. They were angry, burning tears.

"Come on, Yegor, bash it out!" Grey bellowed. "We're having a great time!"

"Oh, kind friend, for you ... "

Yegor made faces, fell - and laughed. He laughed from the bottom of his heart, from the bottom of his soul: he was feeling fine, really fine.

"Aye, luli, aye, luli! Clap your hands, stomp your feet!"

"Don't..." Kolka suddenly cried - exploded - wrenching himself free from Red's arms. "Stop it, Pa, stop it!"

"Hold on, son, hold on. It's a holiday and all! We met some fine folk. Wonderful folks even!"

And again he gave it his all: lurched, lunged, fell, got up. "Pa, stop it..." Kolka shouted through his tears and tugged his father from the glade. "Stop it ... "

"Don't interfere in our fun, kid! Go on, get outa here."

"Move those feet, Yegor! Ye're having a grand old time!"

"You're mean!" Kolka shouted. "Mean, wicked! We're just like those ants to you, aren't we? Just like those ants!"

"Hey, Yegor, your son's insulting us here. It's not nice."

"Give us a show of paternal authority, Yegor!"

"Shame on you!" cried Red. "He's not in his right mind, he's drunk. How can you do this?!"

But no one listened to her: they were having a good time. They shouted, danced, whistled, stamped their feet and clapped their hands. Kolka, sobbing violently, kept trying to pull his father away, while Yegor kept falling, resisting.

"Give him a whack, Yegor! He's too young to be bossing grown-ups around."

"You're too young to be bossin' grown-ups around ... " Yegor muttered, shoving Kolka away. "Get outa here. Go on home, 'long the shore."

"Pa-a!"

Whack!

Yegor swung and hit. It was the first time in his life he'd hit his son and it scared him: his heart froze. And suddenly everyone grew quiet. And the dancing stopped. Kolka stopped crying instantly: as if someone had switched him off. He stood up in silence, wiped his face on his sleeve, glanced up into his father's cloudy eyes and walked away.

"Kolka! Kolka, come back!" Red shouted after him. Kolka didn't turn around. He walked along the shore through the bushes and through his tears. Then he disappeared from sight.

It had become quiet and awkward on the glade. Yegor swayed, staring dumbly at the ground. No one said anything.

"You oughta be ashamed of yourselves!" said Red loudly. She disappeared into the tent. And everyone did feel suddenly ashamed, avoided each other's eyes. Grey said with a sigh, "We got a little carried away, there. All right, pal, move along now. Here's three rubles, climb into your tub and - take to the high seas."

Clenching the note in his hand and swaying, Yegor made his way to the bank. Everyone watched in silence how he stumbled down the precipice, how he trudged through the water to the boat, how he tried long and unsuccessfully to climb into in. Piebald said with disgust, "Alcoholic."

With great difficulty Yegor clambered into the boat and, tripping over the oars, somehow managed to row away from shore. Then, swaying, he got to his feet, lowered the motor into the water, tugged hard on the starting cord and, losing his balance, flew overboard into the water.

"He'll drown! .. " yelled Piebald.

Yegor popped up: the water only came to his chest. Slimy strands of mire clung to his forehead. He grabbed hold of the side, trying to climb in.

"He won't drown," said Grey. "It's shallow here."

"Hey pal, stick to the oars!" Baldy hollered. "Leave the motor alone, use the oars!"

"Ducky!" Yegor suddenly replied gleefully. "It's my little ducky! Ducky and piggy having a race!"

The sides were high, and in order to climb in, Yegor rocked the boat with all his might. Once he had it swinging he flopped in, but the boat suddenly jerked out from under him and flipped over. The brightly painted oars floated on the murky water. Yegor disappeared under water once again, then emerged again, snorting like horse. No longer even attempting to turn the boat over, he felt for the rope in the water and staggered along the shore, pulling the boat behind him.

"Hey, need some help?" Baldy called out.

Yegor didn't reply. He trudged chest-deep through the water, covered with mire like a water-sprite. He would take a faulty step, fall down, get up again, shaking his head and spitting. But he held fast to the rope, and the boat, keel-up, rolled heavily along behind him.

But the motor was no longer on the stern. Neither the motor, nor the gas tank, nor the rowlocks: everything had sunk to the bottom. But Yegor did not look back and didn't have his wits about him then anyway. He simply dragged the boat around the entire reservoir back to the office of weary Yakov Prokopych.

6

"The clever man finds fortune where the fool lost it" - that's what the old folks said. And they knew a lot, since fools were no fewer in their day than in ours.

Fyodor Ipatovich lived day to day in a state of great anxiety. It wasn't the money - the money was there. But the fact was that a sensible person couldn't part with his money voluntarily. Just like that, hand out his money for nothing. This was an unbearable task for Fyodor Ipatovich.

But it was a task which had to be carried out, unbearable as it was. It had to, because the new forest warden (he was polite, dag nab him!) had leafed through the accounts at their very first meeting, looked at the certificates and asked, "How much did your house cost you, Mr. Buryanov?"

"My house?" Fyodor Ipatovich was a clever fellow: figured out right off what the city smarty pants was getting at. "Why, I gave my old one for it. My brother-in-law put up the new one for me, so I gave him my old one. Everything's square across the board: I can bring you a notarized copy -"

"I'm not asking about the construction. I'm asking: what's the cost of the timber you built your new house out of? Who gave you permission to cut in a protected zone and where's that letter of permission? Where are the accounts, registers, certificates?"

"Well, you can't keep track of everything, Yuri Petrovich. This is our forest business."

"It's your criminal business, Buryanov."

On this cheery note they parted. True, the forest warden gave him a time limit: two weeks. He asked him to have everything in order in two weeks, or else ...

"Or else we're done for, Maritsa. He'll take us to court."

"Oh Lordy, Fyodor honey!"

"So you want to keep tabs? Okay, we'll keep tabs!"

The money was there, all right, but he couldn't bring himself to part with it. Especially since the house was already standing. The house was standing - pretty as a picture with the cock on the roof. To start shelling out money after the fact - that was more than he could bear.

Fyodor Ipatovich put the pressure on. He took in a couple hundred for firewood. From the same woods, mind you: while the forest warden was sitting in town glancing at the map, the goods were there for the taking. It was a sin not to get them while the getting was good. But he was afraid to go whole hog: he was afraid because word had gotten around town that the warden was strict. He looked for other possibilities. He looked himself and he coached his son.

"Sniff around, Vova. Where do you smell money?"

And Vova sniffed it out all right. Not a lot, true: thirty for the advice, permission and transport. But thirty - that was money too.

Fyodor Ipatovich made this thirty off the tourists. They had grown bored on the reservoir by that very evening: the fish weren't biting. Vova was the first to discover this (he had been sent after his cousin, but who could be bothered with a cousin when there was money to be made!); he discovered it and reported back to his father. The latter arrived on the scene without delay, shook hands with the men folk, and had a smoke by the campfire, lamented over the lack of fish and said, "There is one little spot that's got plenty of fish and mushrooms and berries. But it's off limits. That's why the pike there are - wow!"

He dickered for some time, jacking up the price, refusing and declining offers. But when it had grown dark, he personally arrived with his old mare and transported the tourists ten kilometers to the shore of Black Lake. Indeed the fish there were still biting, and this bite cost the tourists precisely thirty rubles. Fyodor Ipatovich knew how to live all right, there could be no denying that!

For this reason Yegor, who, having come to and returned to his senses two days later and recollected where he had been, did not find the tourists there. He found the campfire, empty cans and eggshells.

But the tourists had up and disappeared. Vanished into thin air.

And the motor, too, had disappeared. It was a good motor, a new one: "Wind", eight horsepower and one Yegor power. Yes, the motor was gone, and the gas tank and the forged rowlocks. True, the oars were still there: Yegor caught sight of them among the reeds. Their blades glowed like flames - you could spot them from miles away.

But he found all this later, when he had come to. Back on that gay day itself he could only giggle. He had tugged the boat back to Yakov Prokopych's office at sunset, produced guffaws of laughter by way of an explanation, and started for home on wobbly legs. And the dogs tagged along behind him.

It was with this canine company that he staggered into his own yard. Dogs usually dislike drunks, but Yegor they liked in any state. He was dead drunk, barely standing, and yet the hounds followed at his heels, as if he were the neighborhood bitch. And they say that he didn't even knock on the gate himself, but one of his pals rapped out the signal with his own paw.

Well, maybe they stretched the truth a bit here ...

Haritina, in the meantime, having stuffed Yegor into the shed with colossal difficulty and locked him in there to keep him out of trouble, went straight to her brother-in-law, to Fyodor Ipatovich, to inform him that Kolka was missing.

"Hold on reporting it, Tina; there'll be plenty of time to go to the police. We need to look for your Kolka: maybe he just got to playing somewhere."

He detailed Vova for the search: along the shore, along Yegor's barge-hauling trail. Vova ran a little ways, shouted, whistled, and with a whistle came upon the tourists. He yanked off his cap while still at a distance, just as his father had taught him.

"How do you do, folks. I'm looking for my cousin. My cousin Kolka's missing. Did you happen to see him?"

"Your cousin visited us all right. Back this morning." And they told him the whole story - about how Uncle Yegor had gotten drunk, and how badly he had behaved, and how he had picked a fight.

"That's like him," Vova supplied. "He's a trouble-maker, that uncle of mine."

Meanwhile Haritina, crying her heart out, ran all around town, and even forgot about her lamentations. She merely said through her sobs, "Have you seen my darling Kolka, kind folks? My boy, Kolka?"

No one had seen Kolka. Kolka had disappeared, while in the meantime baby sister Olya was back at the house. Olya and Yegor, but Yegor was snoring away in the shed, while Olya was screaming her lungs out. And this screaming followed Haritina from street to street, from alley to alley, from house to house: she was a loud one, that daughter of hers. And as long as she heard her, at least her heart didn't ache for her daughter: she's wailing-means she's alive. But the second she grew quiet, Haritina's legs all but collapsed beneath her.

"They've strangled her!"

Who had strangled her- this question didn't enter her mind. She raced back, her kerchief flying out behind her. She burst into the house: there was Kolka's teacher, Nona Yurievna, standing by the crib, while in the crib lay Olya grinning with all four teeth.

"Good evening, Haritina Makarovna. Don't you worry, please, Kolka's at my place."

"What d'ya mean, at your place? What right do you have kidnapping other folks' kids?"

"He's deeply hurt, Haritina Makarovna. But he won't say who hurt him: just keeps shaking all over. I gave him some valerian and tea, and he went to sleep. So please don't you worry, and tell Yegor Savelich not to worry either."

"He's out havin' a chat with the hog. So he's not doin' a lot of worryin'."

"Everything'll be all right, Haritina Makarovna. Everything'll be all right: we'll straighten it all out tomorrow."

Haritina didn't believe her: she ran off with Nona Yurievna to have a look for herself. And sure enough, Kolka was asleep on a folding bed beneath the young teacher's blanket. He was fast asleep, his cheeks streaked with dried tears. Nona Yurievna categorically forbade Haritina to wake him and sent her on home after this inspection. And Haritina was in no mood to argue just then.

The next morning Kolka didn't show up, while Yegor, though he had slept it off, was still unable to recall a thing. He lay all day long in the shed, gulping down water and moaning. He didn't even get up to see Yakov Prokopych when the latter came calling in person. He couldn't understand what was what, who Yakov Prokopych was or why he had come, on what business.

The business, however, was grim.

"Motor, gas tank and rowlocks. Three hundred rubles."

"Three hun-dred?"

Haritina had never in her life laid eyes on this kind of money and therefore pronounced all sums over a hundred with particular deference.

"Three hun-dred?.. Yakov Prokopych, have mercy on us!"

"I'd have mercy: the law won't have mercy, Mrs. Polushkin. If I don't have the goods back in three days, I'll have to go to the police. Draw up a statement I will."

Yakov Prokopych left. And Haritina made straight for the shed: she shook her hubby, tugged on him, cursed him, hit him even, but Yegor just moaned. Then with tremendous difficulty he opened his mouth, moved his tongue: "Where was I?"

She had no thoughts for Kolka now: he was passing his time at Nona Yurievna's, safe and sound. Now they might just all perish at once, lock, stock and barrel, and therefore Haritina, having hauled a tub of water out to the shed to her husband, shut him in once more and dashed off again to her only kin: to her sister Maritsa and Fyodor Ipatovich.

"Save us, kinfolk of mine! They want three hun-dred rubles!"

"That's the law," said Fyodor Ipatovich and sighed heavily. "The law, Tina - there's no getting around it."

"But we'll have to go begging! *Begging*, sis!"

"Well, that's just the way it is, you know. They're making demands on us too. And not three hundred, mind you: a tab bit more. But you don't see us running around, don't see us groveling at people's feet. So, Harya my dear, that's how it goes, honey."

Haritina raced around all day, complained to some folks, but came home empty-handed all the same. She hustled and bustled about, but the day was shot - and it was as if it had never been at all: everything remained just as it had been. The motor on the lake bottom, three hundred like a noose around her neck, her husband keeping company with the pig, and Kolka at a stranger's house.

In the course of the night Yegor dried out the tub, slept good and long, and by morning was back in form once and for all. He emerged from the shed more quiet than before, though that hardly seemed

possible. Haritina, meanwhile, having wasted away into a stick overnight, also grew suddenly soft spoken and begged of her husband but one thing: "Try to remember, Yegor honey, where you were. Who you were drinkin' with and which way you went afterwards ... "

True, she knew a thing or two herself: not from Kolka - he wouldn't utter a word. Just looked away. From her nephew Vova.

"Some tourists gave it to him, Aunt Tina."

"Tourists?" Yegor's head was foggy. Foggy, vacant and unaccommodating: as if all his thoughts had hightailed it out of there and left a lot of junk and garbage behind. "What tourists is that?"

"Go to Sazanov, to Yakov Prokopych, Yegor. He knows everything. And find that motor. For the love of God and our children, find it!"

Yegor spent the better part of the day searching for the Wind and the gas tank and rowlocks on the lake bottom. He dove, groped around, waded through the water, combing the bottom with his feet. He stood shivering on the bank, smoked a cigarette, and climbed back into the water. He didn't remember where he had capsized the boat, and there was no one there to show him: those tourists were already on Black Lake enjoying fresh fish. Chilled to the bone, having smoked a pack of tobacco, Yegor put an end to the diving. He found one rowlock in the mire and both oars in the reeds and it was with these that he appeared before Yakov Prokopych.

"Give me a boat, Yakov Prokopych. I can poke around the bottom with a boat-hook - like this it's too cold. It's awful cold tramping around in the mire."

"No boat for you, Polushkin. You've lost my trust. Come up with the property, then we'll see."

"About what's that?"

"About your future."

"My future's gonna be in the hospital. It's cold out, Yakov Prokopych. My legs'll freeze."

"No, Polushkin, and don't ask. Those are my principles."

"Nothing'll happen to your principle, Yakov Prokopych. I swear to God."

"Principles, Polushkin, you know -"

"I know, Yakov Prokopych. I know everything now."

Yegor stood nodding a bit, sighed a few times. Yakov Prokopych started rambling on about something again - something long and dreary - but Yegor wasn't listening. He blinked two unwanted tears away between his fair lashes and said suddenly, irrelevantly, "Well all right, go ride in your boat."

And hurled the one and only rowlock which he had spent half a day looking for back into the water. And walked away. Yakov Prokopych seemed to grow dumb at first, assumed a rather stupid look, even let his jaw drop, so it seems. Only then did he bellow, "Polushkin! Stop, I say! Polushkin!"

Yegor stopped. Looked back and said quietly, "What're ye hollerin' about, Sazanov? Three hundred rubles against me. You'll get your three hundred rubles. You'll get 'em. Those happen to be my principles."

He strode home, staring at his feet. And once home he didn't raise his eyes: he shrouded them beneath his white brows, and, try as she might, Haritina was unable to intercept his gaze.

"Didn't ya find it, Yegor? Didn't ya find that motor, I'm asking?"

Yegor didn't answer. He walked over to the kitchen table, yanked out the drawer and dumped all the spoons and whatnot right out onto the table.

"We've still got half a day, Yegor, honey - tomorrow. Maybe we could go look together? Maybe we could scour the whole bottom?"

Yegor said nothing. He surveyed the knives in silence: which one wouldn't bend. He chose one, took a whetstone from the shelf, spit on it and took to sharpening the blade. Haritina froze.

"What're you sharpening that knife there for, Yegor Savelich?"

Yegor drew the knife across the whetstone in silence: whisk, whisk. And he knit his brows into one solid line. His brows were sun-bleached, unthreatening, but he knit them anyway.

"Yegor Savelich ... "

"Boil some water, Haritina. And get some tubs ready."

"What ever for?"

"I'm gonna finish off the hog."

Haritina jumped up like a brooding hen. "What?!"

"Do like I told you."

"What on ... What's gotten into you? Think o' what you're doin', you miserable loser! You put a knife to that hog and what are we gonna eat this winter? What? The grace of God?"

"I've told you all there is to tell."

"I won't let you! I won't let you - won't allow it! Good people ... "

"Quit your hollerin', Haritina. I've got my principles too. He's not the only one."

He'd never slaughtered a hog before in his life: he had always turned to someone with a tougher eye ... But now he seemed to have gone mad: he sobbed and shook and stabbed blindly with the knife. He made a mess of the hog's throat, but kill it he did. And that hog of theirs was instantly salted, drenched in the tears of four eyes.

It was a good thing Kolka wasn't there. Kolka was sitting it out at his teacher's house, at Nona Yurievna's. Many thanks that a good soul had come along, though she was just a girl all alone in the world. From the city.

By nightfall they had divided it up: the meat they tied up in sacks, the pluck they kept for themselves. Yegor slung the sacks over his shoulder and left that night for the station. He hoped to reach the city by sunup and get a good spot at the market, one a bit more forward, since he hadn't any faith left in his own forwardness. He hadn't been too bold a fellow as it was, and now all the more so, all his vigor had sunk to the depths, like a fish in the cold.

"I reckon that's just the way it is!"

7

It so happened that Kolka Polushkin had never had a serious rift with anyone in his life. He had had neither occasion nor pugnacious buddies, and though he'd gone through his fair share of pain, this pain had hurt only his flesh. No one had ever touched his soul up till then, no one had hurt it, and so it was unaccustomed to pain. The lad had an unhardened soul: a great shortcoming in life, of course, if that life is measured by his uncle's standards, his uncle Fyodor Ipatovich Buryanov.

But Kolka was guided by his own standards, and therefore his father's smack smouldered in him like a firebrand. Burned and smite him, and wouldn't go out. A trifle, it would seem, nothing really: after all, it was the hand of kin that had struck him, not the neighbor's. Try to explain to someone and they'd just laugh.

"Quit your pouting, kid! That's your own father you're givin' the lip, think of that."

But thought alone was clearly not enough, no matter how much thinking Kolka did. There was something else needed here, and therefore, blind from tears, he had gone where - he believed - they would understand everything without thought - understand, figure things out and help.

"And they said: 'Give him a whack!' And he did."

But you be kind and be strong!

Nona Yurievna was a good listener. She looked at him as she would a grown-up, looked at him seriously, and it was precisely this look that made Kolka suddenly break down completely into convulsive sobbing. He sobbed, burying his head in Nona's lap, and she didn't try to comfort him. Neither comfort nor persuade him that it was nothing, that it would be forgotten: it was his father, after all, who had done it, not some stranger. Kolka feared talk of all kind just then, but Nona Yurievna didn't talk: instead she gave him sweet tea to drink, some medicine and put him to bed.

"We'll talk tomorrow, Kolka."

Come morning Kolka was somewhat calmer, but the hurt remained. It seemed to have lodged itself inside of him, lodged itself so deep that he could now almost look at it from without. It was as though it were sitting in a cage like some kind of animal. And Kolka was constantly aware of that unaccommodating creature inside him; he examined it and didn't smile. This was a serious matter.

"If he'd hit me himself. If he'd done it himself, Nona Yurievna, 'cause he was cross or something. But they egged him on. Why'd he let them do that? Why?"

"But your father, Kolka - why, he's a kind man. A very kind man. Don't you agree?"

"So what if he's kind?"

Nona Yurievna didn't argue: it was hard to argue here: Kolka was a bit more familiar with the subject. She hinted cautiously: perhaps she would talk to his father? But Kolka challenged this suggestion: "Let the guilty one be the first to come around."

"Can you really demand that of your elders?"

"Since he's my elder he ought to be setting an example: isn't that what you taught us? Well, what kind of an example is he setting? Acting like a serf? Well, no way am I gonna be a serf, no way!"

Nona Yurievna sighed. Somewhere far away, in inaccessible, all but fairy-tale Leningrad, her lonely schoolteacher mother remained. She had been the only one in a large noisy family to survive the siege¹ and had later, in peace time, lost her husband. She was as quiet, diligent and conscientious as Nona: when her daughter had been assigned to this God-forsaken place after completing her studies, she had merely wept.

"Take care, daughter."

"Take care, Mama."

Nona lived like a mouse in the settlement: from home to school, from school home. No dances, no parties: as though she were sixty-eight, not twenty-three.

"Would you like to hear a song about Stenka Razin?"² Nona Yurievna had two whole boxes of records. And even more books. This made her landlady apprehensive.

¹ The siege of Leningrad by German troops during World War II claimed the lives of nearly half the city's inhabitants (1941-44).-Tr.

² In 1670 Stenka Razin, a Don Cossack, led soldiers and common people in a rebellion against the established order in Russia. He was captured and executed in 1671.- Tr.

"You'll never get married, Nona."

"Why do you say that?"

"You spend an awful lot on books. Give yourself a break: men don't like the bookish type."

Perhaps men didn't, but Kolka sure did. They listened to records all day long, read poetry, talked about animals and listened to records some more.

"Wow, what a voice, eh Nona Yurievna? Gosh, the lamp's even shaking!"

"That's Chaliapin, Kolka. Fyodor Ivanovich Chaliapin, remember that, please."

"I sure will. I bet he was real strong, wasn't he?"

"It's hard to say, Kolka. To leave one's homeland and die in a strange country - is that strength or weakness? Weakness, it seems to me."

"Maybe he was offended?"

"How can one take offense at one's homeland? Your homeland is always right, Kolka. People might make mistakes, might be wrong or even bad, but your homeland can't be bad, now, can it? It makes no sense to take offense at it."

"Daddy says that we have the very finest country. The very, very finest!"

"The very, very finest, Kolka."

Nona Yurievna smiled sadly, but it was not for Kolka to understand why she smiled sadly. He did not yet know the meaning of loneliness, the meaning of melancholy. And even his first encounter with ordinary human injustice, his first real hurt was at least clear and comprehensible. While Nona's sadness was sometimes inexplicable even to her.

The next day Kolka could stand his voluntary seclusion no longer and ran away. While his Pa was diving a countless number of times for the motor, Kolka made his way out of the settlement through back yards so as not to run into his mother.

Three roads opened up before him at once, just like in fairy tales: one to the river where the local kids were swimming; another to the forest across the dam; and the third to the boat rental station, where until just recently he had gone with the greatest of pleasure. And, like the hero in a fairy tale, Kolka hesitated, pondered, sighed and turned to the left: toward the boat station of weary Yakov Prokopych.

"Well, what do you have to say?" Yakov Prokopych asked in response to Kolka's "good morning". "What additional bad news do you have for me?"

Nervous and even stuttering slightly in his nervousness, Kolka hastily and effusively told Yakov Prokopych all about the events of two days before. He told him about how smoothly the boat had glided across the water and how the distant shores had come into sight. About how diligently Yegor had helped the tourists. He told him about the rubber rafts and the campfire, the ant inferno and the yellow tent. He told him about the salami and the bun and the two enamel cups his Pa had put away in his weariness, at the visitors' insistence. And he also told him about how his Pa had then danced, how he had fallen ...

Yakov Prokopych listened closely, didn't interrupt: just blinked angrily. In the end he asked by way of clarification, "So you left, is that right?"

"I left," Kolka sighed, not having made up his mind to mention the part about the slap. "I left and he stayed. With the motor and all."

"So you're not to blame," said the director after a pause. "But I'm not holding you responsible: you weren't the one working for me."

"That's not what I meant," sighed Kolka. "I told you everything like it was. He's real upset, Yakov Prokopych, sir."

"He's upset for free, while I'm upset for money. All right... I got it. You're young yet to do the teaching. Young. Get outa here. Go on, and don't come around: I forbid it."

Kolka left. True, without particular regrets, because he hadn't counted on anything when he brought the subject up. But he couldn't not have spoken with Yakov Prokopych, he couldn't not have told him how it had all been, knowing that Pa would never tell a soul himself. And the possibility that Yakov Prokopych, having learned the facts, would simply send him away Kolka had anticipated and was therefore neither surprised nor disconcerted. Caught up in his thoughts, he went once again to his teacher.

"Why are people so mean, Nona Yurievna?"

"That's not so, Kolka, people are kind. Very kind."

"Then why do they hurt others?"

"Why?"

Nona Yurievna sighed: easy for you to ask the questions. She could simply give no answer, of course. Or she could get around it with something like, you'll find out when you grow up - you're still young. Or she could change the subject. But Nona looked Kolka in the eyes and was unable to deceive him. They were pure eyes. And they demanded purity.

"People have been thinking about the nature of evil and why it exists for a long time, Kolka. For as long as they've been on earth they've been racking their brains over it. Then one day they created a devil with a tail and horns in order to explain it all away. They thought up the devil and gave him all the responsibility for the evil in the world. So it wasn't people who were to blame, but the devil. The devil led them astray. But that devil, he didn't help people, Kolka. He didn't explain the reasons, nor did he shelter or deliver people from evil. And why do you suppose?"

"Because they looked for everything on the outside! And evil - it's in a person, it's inside."

"And what else is inside a person?"

"His stomach! Evil comes from his stomach! Each guy worries about his stomach and hurts everyone all around him."

"Besides his stomach he's got a conscience, too, Kolka. Rut this is the kind of feeling that needs to ripen. Ripen and strengthen. And sometimes it happens that a person's conscience doesn't ripen. It remains tiny, green and inedible. And then this person is left without an advisor, without an inspector inside himself. And then he can't tell what's good and what's evil anymore: everything runs together and gets mixed up. And then, in order to define boundaries for himself, in order not to go committing a bunch of crimes with that half-baked conscience of his, people like this think up rules for themselves."

"What kind of rules?"

"Rules of conduct: what's all right to do and what's not. They extend their own teeny-tiny conscience outside its boundaries and make it an unconditional rule for everyone. For example, they believe that a young woman shouldn't live alone. And if she does live alone, it means that something's wrong. It means you have to keep an eye on her, suspect her, spread all sorts of ridiculous rumors ... "

Nona Yurievna stopped. She realized she was carrying on about her own self, that she had drawn a private and personal conclusion from something general and broad. She even got frightened.

"Oh Lord, I forgot to turn the stove off!"

She ran out, but Kolka didn't notice this. He sat, his brow furrowed, absorbed in his own thoughts. He tried Nona Yurievna's words out on his own affairs.

As far as the rules were concerned, everything fit. Kolka had seen folks who lived by their own rules, and considered anyone who didn't abide by those same rules either a fool or a trickster. And if the rules by which Yakov Prokopych lived were simple and constant, then the rules of his own uncle Fyodor Ipatovich differed from them drastically. They were far more cultivated and flexible than the rectilinear quirks of Yakov Prokopych Sazanov, contused by a pine tree. They could justify and permit anything - whatever was convenient for Fyodor Ipatovich at any given moment.

And then there were Pa's rules. Simple ones: never impose any rules on anyone. And he didn't. He had always lived a quiet and subdued life: always looked around to make sure he wasn't bothering anyone, wasn't standing in the sunlight, wasn't getting in anyone's way. For this he deserved heartfelt thanks, but no one thanked him. No one.

Kolka knit his brows and wondered what rules he ought to live by. And how to make it so that that were no more rules at all, so that people all around acted according to their conscience alone. The way his Pa acted.

And while Kolka was racking his brains over the problems of good and evil, schoolteacher Nona Yurievna was quietly weeping in the kitchen. Her landlady had gone, so she could grieve to her heart's content openly, without having to wear the pasted-on smile, grieve over her luckless fate, over her glasses, over acquired awkwardness, and over her prolonged loneliness.

And perhaps men really didn't like bookish girls?

8

The train pulled in to the district center so early that Yegor found himself at the market by five a.m. The market was still closed, so he parked himself by the gates, putting his sacks down on the pavement. He took to supporting a nearby post with his shoulder, rolled himself a cigarette in place of breakfast and began thinking apprehensively about the forthcoming trade operation. He's never been anything of a merchant - why, his hands were molded to the axe, not to scales and weights. Back home in the heat of the moment he had overestimated his own capabilities, and now, downcast and sighing, he regretted it dearly.

Let's face it: Yegor was afraid of the market. He feared and distrusted it, and believed they would trick him in the end no matter what. In the end they would outsmart him somewhere, and he could only hope that they wouldn't cheat him out of all the kilograms at once. If he could just get something out of it, if only two of the three hundred that hung over his head like bad weather.

In the meantime, the town was coming to life: car engines started up, street cleaners began shuffling about, early-morning ladies clacked along on their high heels. Yegor moved closer to his sacks just in case, trading the comfortable more remote post for an uncomfortable close one, but no particular activity around the farmer's market was yet to be observed. True, some people appeared, but no one opened the gates Yegor had chosen.

"*What* is that?"

Yegor turned around: an official. In a hat and glasses, carrying a briefcase. And pointing a finger at the sacks.

"*What* is that, I asked."

"Why, it's pork," Yegor explained hastily. "Fresh pork. Slaughtered it myself."

"Slaughtered it, eh?" The man's eyebrows shifted menacingly beneath his hat up, down, up, down. "That's blood! Unsanitary blood is trickling down the pavement - that's what I'm seeing here distinctly with the unaided eye."

A pitiful little stream of ichor was indeed seeping out from under the sacks. Yegor glanced at it, then at the strict official, understood nothing and hastily batted his eyes.

"They reject the market goods for tricks like that," the official with the briefcase went on sternly. "What goods did you say you had there?"

"Me? I don't have any goods. I've got fresh meat. Pork."

"All the more so you've to go by the rules. Ever heard of cholera? No? Cleanliness is the pledge of health! Your name?"

"Mine?"

"Your name, I asked."

"Why ... Polushkin."

"Pol-ushkin." The gentleman in the hat pulled out a notebook and carefully recorded Yegor's last name, which left Yegor quite baffled. "We'll lower the value rating. You know what for. Draw your own conclusion."

He tucked his notebook away in his pocket and walked off without looking back, while Yegor looked after him, batting his eyes in astonishment. Then he started for the sacks - wanted to gather them up so everything would be sanitary - but he didn't have a chance. Two fellows came lumbering out of the market: one well on in his years, the other middle-aged. The elderly one sighed and said with a click of his tongue, "What a parasite!"

"Huh?" asked Yegor.

"Know who that was?" asked the middle-aged one. "Head of inspection. He stamps the meat."

"Stamps?"

"No stamp, no sale. They won't let you sell and they won't give you access to the refrigerator. And then the goods - they go rotten."

"Huh?" asked Yegor.

"Tough cookies all of 'em - something awful!" sighed the elderly man. "Tough and overly cautious: hear about the epidemic?"

"Huh?"

"They're crackin' down ... "

The two men grieved, sighed and chattered away about hygiene, sanitary inspection, epidemics, categories, stamps, refrigerators. One stood to the right, the other to the left, while Yegor turned his head from side to side, following their conversation so intently that his neck ached.

"Yep, you're done for now, pal."

The elderly man pointed at the middle-aged one. "Last month he went down three hundred."

"Huh?"

"Flew away. You know, bye-bye three hundred. Just like those birdies."

"Huh?"

"Yep, it's the sad truth ... What've ya got there, veal?"

"Pork." Yegor, his mouth agape, looked from one to the other. "What should I do, eh fellas? Give me some advice."

"What's there to advise? Take your sacks and go on home. You can turn it in at your own collective farm for a ruble a kilo."

"A ruble?"

"They won't take it for a ruble," said the middle-aged man.

"Why would they want it for a ruble? Seventy kopecks at best."

"Seventy kopecks? I can't sell it at seventy kopecks - I can't no how. I got a debt. Three hundred."

"Ooh, that's rough," sighed the elderly man. "It's a real shame, sure enough, but if he took your name down, that's it."

"Oh-h?"

"Why don't you help the guy out, eh?" the middle-aged man requested on Yegor's behalf. "He's in debt, see, and his pork chops are rotting."

"That's tough," the elderly one lamented. "Tough business all right. Incredibly tough!"

"I understand!" Yegor whispered, glancing around. "I'll, uh, you know, take your trouble into consideration, as they say. I won't forget it."

"That's unnecessary," said the elderly man sternly. "Here I am opening up my heart to you, you could say, and you talk about money. It's insulting."

"Insulting," the middle-aged man conferred.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean it!" Yegor exclaimed anxiously. "I Just ... you know ... I was just rambling - honest!"

"Just rambling," said the middle-aged man. "Should we bail him out?"

"The most important thing here is how to get around the officials," the elderly man reasoned. "They know the name: the name's written down. That's the tricky thing. Maybe it'd be best to sell it all at once, huh? The whole kit and caboodle. Wholesale, as they say: a ruble and a half a kilo."

"A ruble and a half?!" Yegor was aghast. "Dear friends, you can't mean it! Why, that's highway robbery."

"Highway robbery, you say? And the fact that they took your name down - what do you call that? It's your own fault - spreading out unsanitarily here - and then you go crying highway robbery! Who needs you, anyway? Here we were trying to help, in a friendly way."

"Take it or leave it," said the middle-aged man. "It's up to you."

And the two of them walked away. Yegor felt miserable. He hemmed and hawed, then could stand it no more. "Hey fellas! Hey!"

They stopped. "Two and a half..."

"Get outa here!"

And went themselves instead. Yegor got more wound up than ever:

"Hey fellas! Kind gentlemen, don't leave me!"

They stopped again.

"What do you want? Here we are showing you respect, helping you out, just like that, for nothing, you could say, and you can't make up your mind."

"You're not a serious guy. That's what it boils down to."

"Where are you going, friends? What about me?"

"Fend for yourself."

They started for the corner, beyond the market. Yegor shouted after them, "Wait! All right, what's the point in thinking about profit. I'll give you the whole kit and caboodle for two hundred thirty."

He knew these guys were tricking him. Tricking and deceiving him, and this knowledge only heightened a kind of weary awareness in his heart. And suddenly he recalled Fyodor Ipatovich, who had capitalized on someone else's grief; Yakov Prokopych, whose only concern was that no one else's misfortune

affected him personally; the tourists and these shifty characters here; and many others just as petty, mean and self centered. He recalled all of them at once and said, "The whole kit and caboodle ... "

"Well, you know, first we've got to get an estimate here. Throw your goods on the scale."

They estimated. Yegor went home with two hundred.

Without the meat, however, and with presents. A pocket knife for someone, a kerchief for another, he had something for everyone, left no one out. There was even money enough for vodka. He announced as soon as he stepped through the door, "Call the guests over, Haritina. Get everyone: the team leaders, the foreman, Yakov Prokopych, our obliging kin. Call them all: Yegor Polushkin wants to treat the community."

"What on earth are you thinking of what great ideas have you got in your head?"

He didn't let Haritina get going full swing. He sat down at the head of the table without taking off his boots, and said, bringing his fist down on the table, "Enough! Let's have just one day without grief!"

"But you're in debt three hundred. And for the whole hog you got two. Where's the other hundred?"

"I'm the head, I'll think of something."

"You're the head and I'm the neck: the family yoke's on me..."

Yegor snatched the money out of his pocket and waved it in the air.

"Grieve over these pieces of paper? What are ya gonna do - measure the beauty of life with 'em? Wipe your tears on 'em? Make one huge bonfire and burn 'em all - that's what we oughta do! Burn 'em and dance on the ashes! Do a circle dance around the flames! Warmth for the cold, light for the blind! No more poor, no rich, no debts, no favors! No - Yep, I'd be the first to throw my last rubles into that fiery-"

"Yeg-orrrr!"

Haritina fell at his feet: why, he'd burn their last rubles she wouldn't put it past him. He'd burn them, then they'd take him away and he'd wind up either behind bars or swinging from an aspen.

"Don't do us in, Yegor honey, don't ruin the children. I'll do whatever you say, I'll call everyone over, cook and bake and give 'em plenty to drink. Only give me the money for safe keeping. Give it to me, in the name of the good Lord."

Yegor suddenly grew limp: as if someone had let the air out of him. He threw the twenty market notes down on the table and said, "I want plenty of vodka. Enough to drown themselves in if they want."

Haritina nodded and crept toward the door like a mouse.

Yegor sat down on the bench, took out his tobacco-pouch and began rolling himself a cigarette - his favorite friend and advisor. He rolled it slowly, laboriously. And not to save tobacco he didn't care about saving anything just then! - but because he wanted to think. But those thoughts of his were disobedient, scattered to all corners, and he tried to gather them up, line them up one beside the next, like shreds of tobacco in a piece of newspaper.

There was a lot he wanted to think about. He wanted to understand what had happened to him, why and - most important - what for. He wanted to figure out who was right and who was wrong. He wanted to decide what to do next, how to come up with another hundred and where to look for tomorrow's pay. He wanted to dream about the triumph of justice, about the punishment of all wrong-doers, evil and selfish people. He wanted happiness and joy, peace and quiet. And respect. If only just a little.

And besides that, he really wanted to cry, but Yegor didn't know how to cry and therefore simply smoked sullenly, his gaze fixed on the table. And when he tore it away and looked around, he suddenly noticed Kolka standing in the doorway.

"Son ... " And he rose. And bowed his head. Then he said softly, "I, uh, slaughtered the hog, son. Yep."

"I know."

Kolka walked up to the table and sat down at his mother's place - on the stool. But Yegor went on standing, his head bowed in shame.

"Sit down, Pa."

Yegor obediently lowered himself to the bench. He blindly jabbed his cigarette butt into the geranium pot on the window sill: only the tobacco crackled. His eyes wandered - wandered around Kolka. Kolka looked at him, looked at him hard, in a grown-up way. Then he said, "It's not your fault, Pa. It's my fault."

"Your fault? How do you figure that?"

"I didn't stop you in time," sighed Kolka. "And once you get wound up ... "

"You're right there, son."

"I didn't stop you. So that makes it my fault. And I wish you'd stop staring at the table. Look at me, all right? Like before."

Yegor's lips quivered: you couldn't tell whether he wanted to smile or whistle. He barely got a grip on himself.

"My pure-eyed -"

"All right, all right," said Kolka angrily and turned away. And it was a good thing he did, because Yegor suddenly felt a twitch in his nose and all on their own two tears streamed down his unshaven cheeks. He wiped them away, smiled and took to rolling his cigarette once again. And while he rolled it, and while he lighted it, the two of them sat in silence: father and son. Then Kolka turned around and exclaimed with a gleam in his eye, "I listened to this man over at Nona Yurievna's, Pa - what a voice! Just like an elephant!"

Come evening Haritina had made pig's fry, steamed it and set it out on the table. Yegor sat at the head of the table in a clean shirt: to the left were the gifts, to the right the bottles. He met each guest with a gift and a thick glass tumbler.

"To your health, dear guest. Wet your gullet, fill your belly and admire the gift."

Haritina didn't get the team-leaders or foremen over (maybe she didn't want to), but Yakov Prokopych did drop in.

"I'm not holding a grudge against you, Polushkin, that's why I came. But I have sincere respect for the law. So I'm showing my respect for you and the law too. That's the way I look at the question."

"Have a seat, Yakov Prokopych. Sample our cooking."

"With great pleasure. Everything's got to be observed, right? Everything in the proper fashion. And everything that's not proper is fantasy. And fantasies oughta be doused in gasoline and set fire to."

Fyodor Ipatovich was also present. But he was all wrapped up in himself, shrouded in gloom. So he kept quiet: ate and drank. But here he answered Yakov Prokopych: "Everyone can find something to suit himself at someone else's fire. One can extinguish it, another can gape, while another can warm his hands."

Yakov Prokopych jumped on him: "What is that remark supposed to mean, Fyodor Ipatovich?"

"It's the conformists that oughta be burned, not fantasies. They oughta be rounded up and burned. Over a very slow fire. "

An argument would have flared up had Maritsa not interfered. She nudged her husband.

"Don't argue. Don't start in. Let's just mind our own business."

And Vova chimed in on the other side, "We might need a boat sometime ... "

Meanwhile, up at the head of the table, Yegor didn't hear a thing. He handed out the gifts, poured the vodka. He drank and he served the others.

"Drink up, dear guests! Fyodor Ipatovich, dear brother-in-law of mine, why ya lookin's so down in the mouth and uptight, pal? Smile, look kindly, give us a priceless word."

"A word? That I can do." Fyodor Ipatovich raised his glass. "Here's to your return, host. And to your solving your predicament. Since everyone around is such a conformist, you can't get by without a solution. You got out of it - good for you. Yep. You have my praise. A pure soul's lookin' to heaven."

"Heaven?" grieved Haritina. "Heaven's a long ways away. We're still a hun-dred rubles away from heaven."

Maritsa was taken aback: "What do ya mean, Tina, what hundred's that? The hog must've brought some profit..."

Haritina had been restraining herself. She'd been holding back all day, but now she gave in. She suddenly let out in a wail like a funeral knell, "Oh Maritsa, sister of mine, oh Fyodor Ipatovich, brother of mine, oh kind guests ... "

"What's wrong, Tina? Hold off on your bellowin' a minute."

"Two hun-dred rubles for the whole thing."

"Two hundred?" Fyodor Ipatovich even dropped his bread. "Two hundred rubles? How on earth do you get that? What's that per kilo?"

"Whatever it might be, that's how it came out," said Yegor. "Eat, drink, dear -"

"Now, wait a minute!" Fyodor Ipatovich interjected sternly. "Fresh pork's not mutton. Not this time of year and not in town. Four rubles a kilo - that's what it goes for! Four rubles - I know that for a fact."

Everyone around the table froze. And Yakov Prokopych put in, "My wife talked around that price."

"Oh Lord!" Haritina gasped. "Oh Lord, good people!"

"Hold on!" Fyodor Ipatovich slapped his hand down on the table: forgot in his dismay that he wasn't at home. "So what it boils down to is that you shortchanged yourself two hundred rubles, Yegor. And in debt, mind you, with a family and in poverty - you gave two hundred to some stranger? What a confounded loser you are!"

Yegor brought his gnarled fist down on the table with such a bang that the glasses jumped.

"Quiet! You count everything, don't you? Add up your gains, deduct your losses? Well, don't you dare go counting and deducting in my house, is that clear to everyone? I'm the master of this house. And there's only one thing I can count: who needs a house built, who needs a roof covered, who needs a window cut - that's what I count. And I order my son to count the same things in life. I've got three shares of land, and those three shares live by my rules and count what I count. My rule's a simple one: don't count rubles - count songs. Is that clear to everyone? Then sing, Haritina, I order you."

Everyone sat in silence, stunned. They stared at Yegor, their mouths agape. This struck Kolka as very funny: he jumped up from the table and ran to the porch so he could laugh to his heart's content.

"Sing, Tina," said Yegor. "Sing a nice song."

Haritina sniveled. She propped her cheek in her hand, grew serious, as was proper, and ... And once again she set off in entirely the wrong direction:

Oh, woe-woe-woe.

Oh, woe is me!

Who will save me, young and sweet,

From all my misery ...

The next day a notice appeared at the state procurement office. It was the size of a newspaper. In block letters all citizens were informed that the regional procurement officials would be accepting linden bark from the population. Soaked and dried, at half a ruble per kilo. Fifty kopecks.

Yegor stood reading the notice for a long time. He did some calculating: half a ruble per kilo - that would be a ruble for two. Eight rubles a pood³: money. You could make a lot of money if you hauled in five poods a day.

Fyodor Ipatovich, on the other hand, didn't bother with calculations. There was no time: as soon as he read the notice he ran off to harness his horse. He climbed in the cart and started for the forest along with Vova. With knives ready to go: he didn't have to bother getting permission for bark-stripping. Or make his way through the thickets of fallen trees to the linden groves: first come, first serve - that was an old rule.

Well, Yegor in the meantime slurped meatless cabbage soup and speculated like a shopkeeper.

"So, eight rubles a pood. You can earn a whole salary in a day if you put your mind to it."

Haritina didn't argue: she'd grown quiet since the hog's wake. She bustled about the house, scurried around the settlement, called on acquaintances. She pleaded, demanded, made requests. Yegor was in the dark: no one enlightened him, and it wouldn't have done for him to ask. It did well to observe masculine pride at all costs.

And as far as the bark was concerned - it was for real. Those quick on the upstart got permission from the forester - Fyodor Ipatovich that would be - and headed for the forest early Saturday and Sunday mornings. Started out early and came back with a bushel. A bushel on the back through the thickets isn't going to bring you a lot of rubles, that was clear. But if someone had a motorcycle he could haul out up to twenty-five kilos. For a week they soaked, twisted and dried them, and - off to the procurement office. On the scales, if you please.

Well, Fyodor Ipatovich didn't squander his talents on trifles: he came out of the forest with his cart full the very first night. The horse could barely draw it. And - what a head that man had! - it wasn't back to the settlement that he brought it, not to his five-windowed house: why subject himself to unnecessary surveillance? He drove the mare right into the water, unharnessed her there, leaving the cart along with the bark to soak: a wagon's no motorcycle-wouldn't do it any harm. It would be easier on the mare this way, there'd be less talk, and the water would condition the goods right there in the cart. And when they were ready - harness the horse and haul it all ashore. Shaking it out and drying it - that was Maritsa's job. Besides, he had a second cart in his keeping: just harness the horse and strip that bark while there was money to be had.

Fyodor Ipatovich brought three cartloads from the forest this way while his brother-in-law was still speculating. It wore him out, of course: work demands sweat. He tormented Vova, overworked himself and exhausted the mare. Vova, out and out, collapsed on the doorstep, and his mother put him, half-asleep, to bed. As for Fyodor Ipatovich, he held himself together exclusively by homemade liquor: flavored with dill. It fortifies. And no sooner had he put away a glass (Maritsa didn't even have a chance to clear the decanter from the table), no sooner had he taken it for his health than how do you do, Yegor Polushkin. In unshaven person.

"Greetings, enjoy your meal."

Fyodor Ipatovich choked - no, not on the glass, but in his grief.

"Have a seat, dear brother-in-law, renowned merchant."

³ Pood-an old Russian unit of weight, approx. 16 kilograms.- Tr.

This was sarcastic, but Yegor paid no attention to the sarcasm - his attention was focused elsewhere. He nodded, thanked him, smiled and turned to the door to hang up his cap. And when he had hung it up and stepped up to the table, straightening his jacket, he blinked in disbelief: the decanter was gone. No decanter, no glass: nothing but a bowl of potatoes on the table. With lard, granted.

"I've, uh, come to you on business, Fyodor Ipatovich."

"You eat first. The business will wait."

They ate. Maritsa brought out the tea. They drank. Then they lit up and got around to business.

"I need a certificate of permission from you. Concerning the bark and all. Half a ruble a kilo."

"Is that right?" Fyodor Ipatovich asked in amazement.

"It's a rich state we've got: half a ruble here, half a ruble there."

"As long as they're handin' it out ... " Fyodor Ipatovich grunted. Sighed heavily.

"Not very thrifty," he said. "That forest's a reserve: water reserve, it's called. And we go stripping it."

"Gee, uh ... "

"Let's say you strip a linden. And it dries out. You make a profit, but what about the state? For the state it's a loss."

"Right you are. Only it depends on how you strip it. If you know -"

"We don't think about the state," Yegor's host went on lamenting. "We don't think about Russia at all. But we ought to."

"We really ought to, Fyodor Ipatovich. Oh, how we ought to!"

They both sighed, grew pensive. They stared at their cigarettes.

"You have to know how to strip the bark properly, Yegor, old pal, like you said. But with prospects. For the future, you know. That's what we gotta think about."

"That I understand, Fyodor Ipatovich."

"Well, all right, that's that. I'll write you out that paper, seeing's how you're kin. And considering your crisis situation."

Fyodor Ipatovich did right in considering it: there was such a situation indeed. Though Yegor had already paid off the debt for the drowned motor, he didn't stay on at his former job - at the quiet and respectable dock. He left himself, of his own free will.

"I guess those are just my principles, Yakov Prokopych." And again he ran wherever he was sent, did whatever he was ordered. And he tried as hard he could. It wasn't even that he tried: to try is when it's purpose, when you force yourself just to make everything come together right. But it never even entered Yegor's mind to do something badly, to trick someone, make something in a slipshod way, just to be done with it. He worked all his life both out of fear and according to his conscience, and the fact that things didn't always come out right, well, that was not his fault but his misfortune. A talent, you could say, he had - one given him at birth.

But come Saturday - the mist was just lifting, floating over the earth - Yegor took up a bundle of twine, sharpened his knives, stuck his axe in his belt and started off for the forest reserve. For bark, which was valued at half a ruble a kilogram. And he took Kolka along with him: every extra pood was a whole eight rubles extra. Though he had yet to have anything extra.

"The linden is an important tree," said Yegor, striding down the overgrown forest path. "In former times, son, it covered the feet of half of Russia, gave us spoons to eat with and treated folks with sweets."

"What's it got that's sweet?"

"Why, the flower. The honey from that flower is special, golden honey. Bees respect the lindens; they give a big yield. It's the most useful tree."

"What about the birch?"

"The birch is for beauty."

"And the fir?"

"That's for materials. The fir, pine, cedar, larch. They're building houses or other useful structures. Every tree, son, has some use: Mother Nature doesn't like good-for-nothings. One tree grows for man - for his needs - while another grows for the forest for all kinds of critters or for mushrooms, say. And that's why, before you go swinging your axe, ya gotta look around to make sure you're not harming anyone: an elk or a hare, a mushroom or a squirrel or a hedgehog. If you hurt them, you'll be hurtin' yourself; they'll leave that chopped down forest, and you won't be able to coax 'em back for nothin'."

How pleasant it was for them to walk along that out-of-the-way path, tramp barefoot through the dew-covered grass, listen to the birds and talk about wise Mother Nature, who had made provisions for everything and preserved everything for the benefit of all living creatures. By this time the sun had already poked up its head, turning the pinecones to gold, and the bumblebees in the grass began to sing. At every turn Kolka glanced at his compass: "We turned to the west, Pa."

"We'll be there soon. Know why I'm heading for the far linden grove, son? Because the nearby one is mighty handsome. It's right in its prime, all ablossom, and we best leave it alone. We'll head for the depths: won't do our legs no harm. And we'll let this grove blossom for the bees' delight and for the benefit of Mother Nature."

"Pa, do bumblebees fly to lindens?"

"Bumblebees? Bumblebees, son, stay low mostly: they're mighty heavy. They stick to the clover and flowers of all sorts. Nature's got its own levels too. The wagtail, now, it hangs around on the ground, while the hawk soars in the heavens. Everyone's been allotted his own level, and that's why there's no fuss, no crowding. Everyone's got his own business and his own dining-room. Mother Nature doesn't shortchange anyone son, and everyone's equal in her eyes."

"Can't we be like Mother Nature?"

"Gee, uh ... How to put it, son. We oughta be, of course, but it doesn't work out."

"Why not?"

"Well, because all the levels are mixed up. In the forest, say, everything's clear: one guy was born a hedgehog, another a squirrel. One pokes around on the ground, the other jumps from branch to branch. But people, why, they're all born the same. They're all naked, they all scream, they all demand mama's teat and make dirty diapers. And no one knows who's a hazel-grouse, say, and who's a falcon. And that's why, just in case, everyone wants to be eagles. But it's not enough just to want to be an eagle. An eagle's got an eagle eye and a falcon's wings ... Know what that smell is, son? Linden. Right around this bend here -"

They got right around that bend there, and Yegor fell silent. He fell silent and stopped in bewilderment, blinking dumbly. Kolka stopped too. And neither said a word, and in the sweltering morning quiet they could hear the fierce humming of the fuzzy bumblebees there on their ground level.

The bare lindens dropped their wilted blossoms heavily to the ground. The trunks, white like a woman's body, shone dully in the green twilight, and the ground beneath them was wet from their juices, which the roots continued to pump up to the limbs, already doomed.

"They killed 'em," said Yegor and pulled off his cap. "They killed 'em for money, for half-rubles."

While father and son stood dumbstruck before the vandalized linden grove, Haritina was completing the final lap of a distance she herself had designated. She was sprinting for the finish, for that sacred line beyond which she pictured for herself if not an easy life, then at least a comfortable one.

For all her vociferousness, she hadn't really been allotted much in the way of character: to shout at her husband was no problem, but to bang her fist on someone's desk sorry. She feared these desks with an indescribable terror, just as she feared the people behind them and official papers and official walls hung with posters right up to the ceiling. She would enter timidly, hang about in the doorway: she didn't dare demand and she didn't know how to ask. So, breaking out in perspiration from her knees to her cerebellum, she would mutter, "I'll take any job. With a salary. I've got a family, and all."

"What's your profession?"

"My profession? I've tended cattle."

"We haven't got any cattle."

"Well, have ya got menfolk? I can tend to them too. Wash, do laundry."

"Yes, Polushkin, that's a rare profession you've got there! Have you your passport with you?" They would leaf through the document and frown. "You've got a baby daughter."

"Olya."

"We haven't got nursery. The nursery's under Pyotr Petrovich's jurisdiction. Go see him: he'll decide."

She went to Pyotr Petrovich: the second lap. From Pyotr Petrovich to Ivan Ivanovich on the third. And from there ...

"Whatever the boss says. I don't really have any objections, but there are lots of kids and just one nursery."

That was the last lap, the bell lap: she was approaching the finish line now. And beyond that line lay either a concrete salary twice a month, or an end to all her dreams. Haritina was terribly afraid of that end, and therefore she prepared for her meeting with the last boss with all her feminine acumen. She hemmed her new dress up to the knees, preened herself and did up her hair as best she could. She even took a handbag along a gift from her sister Maritsa on her birthday. Olya she left with the teacher, Nona Yurievna: let her get some practice. It was high time she had her own. She'd had her fun.

Petrified with fright, Haritina touched the sacred door: as if she were going in to see the bogeyman or the big bad wolf. But beyond the door, in place of the bogeyman, there sat a maiden with long, loose hair. And her nails were skittering along a typewriter keyboard.

"I came to see the boss. Polushkin's the name."

"This way."

Haritina was moved: such graciousness. Not "wait", not "go on in", but "this way". And personally escorted her to the office.

The boss - an elderly man in dark glasses - sat at a desk, just as he was supposed to. He looked straight ahead, but it was difficult to tell if his look was stern or not; since glasses are like dampers in an oven door.

"Polushkin," said the maiden. "Concerning employment."

And she was gone, leaving Haritina in a sweet-smelling cloud. The boss said, "How do you do, Mrs. Polushkin. Have a seat."

And he held his hand out across the desk. Not to her - she was standing to one side - but straight across, and Haritina had to take a step over in order to shake it.

"So, you don't have any profession?"

"I can do housework mostly."

Haritina had quickly grown used to the fact that in every new place, every new boss asked the same thing. So now she rattled off, "I do housework mostly. Well, and I've got children, you see. Two. Olya's the little one: she can't be left alone. And we had to slaughter the hog ... "

The boss listened, didn't turn his head, but it was not clear where he was looking, nor how he was looking. And this is what threw Haritina off, so that she rambled on about everything that was irrelevant rather than getting to the point, and she got so carried away that she couldn't stop. The children, the motor, the hog, inexorable Sazanov, her own loser of a husband - she strung them all together in one ligature. And got mixed up in it herself.

"So what do you need, Mrs. Polushkin? A nursery or work?"

"Well, without a nursery I can't work: there's no one to take care of the girl. I can't go on troubling Nona Yurievna forever."

Oh, if she could only tell where he was looking and *how*!

"All right, if we find a place in the nursery for your daughter, where do you want to work? Would you like to acquire a profession, or do odd jobs?"

"Whatever you say. Keep an eye on something or do the cleaning."

"You don't have any preferences at all? You must."

Haritina sighed. "I have just one preference: to earn our daily bread. I don't have no more faith in my husband, and the kids gotta be clothed and fed, educated and put on their feet. And now my hands are tied because of Olya: I can't leave her with Nona Yurievna day in and day out."

The boss smiled. "We'll find a place for your Olya. Where's your application, here?" And suddenly he was feeling around the desk without moving his head. He poked at a piece of paper. "This it?"

Haritina stood up.

"Oh Lord, why, you're not blind are you, kind sir?"

"I'm afraid so, Mrs. Polushkin, I lost my sight. But, like you said, we've got to earn our daily bread, right?"

"I'll bet it was all that learning that did your eyes in, huh?"

"Not learning - the war. At first I could still see a little, and then everything got worse and worse. Till there was just blackness. So, is this your application?"

Haritina's lips were quivering; she wanted to lament, to let out the soulful wail of a peasant woman. But she got a hold of herself. And she guided the man's hand when he drew up the resolution, his dark glasses still fixed on the opposite wall of the office.

When she came home, husband and son were sitting stock still, like saints.

"What about the bark?"

"There is no bark. The lindens are standing naked as virgins. And the blossoms are drippin' off 'em."

Haritina did not begin to shout, though Yegor was ready for it. She merely sighed.

"A blind man takes better care of me than my own husband."

Yegor was terribly offended. He jumped up even.

"He oughta take care of the forest instead! He oughta have a look at that wholesale thievery! He oughta round up all them bark-strippers!"

He dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand and went outside. To have a smoke.

The idea of tricking fate with a career in bark was the last demonstration of Yegor's internal protest. And whether because this was his last one and there was no more protest in storage, or simply because its failure had been so terribly graphic, Yegor placed a big fat cross on all jobs at once. He had no more faith in his own luck, in his labor or in his capabilities, stopped lighting for himself and his family, and - burned out. He went to work regularly, dug where he was told, buried whatever they ordered, but he did everything reluctantly now, at half-speed, trying to keep from getting orders at all. He would sit off somewhere, as far as possible from his superiors, smoke, squint at the sun and have no desire to think about anything at all. He avoided thoughts, shied away from them. But they crept in anyway.

They crept in anyway. They were small thoughts; slimy and black like leeches. They sucked Yegor's blood, and no sooner had he swiped off one than another would latch on, and when he'd brushed that one away, a third would start sucking, and Yegor did little else but fight them off. And his heart knew no peace; in place of peace grew something - undetected, uncontrolled - illusively disturbing, something which Yegor himself defined in one word: *why*? There were many of these why's, and Yegor didn't know the answer to any of them. But he needed an answer, his conscience demanded an answer, those leeches were sucking an answer out of him, and, in order to forget just a tad, in order to drown out that ruckus in his heart if only a bit, Yegor began to drink. In quiet, so that the wife wouldn't scold, and just a little, because he had no money. But whereas before he had tried to bring home every kopeck, like some kind of starling, now he would swipe a ruble from home now and then. He would swipe it and plan on a threesome.

Friends materialized at once: Crock and Phil. Crock was completely bald, like a knee cap, had a nose like a seedy cucumber and eyes like two red currants. And to top it off there was a mouth from which curses flowed and into which vodka did the same. It flowed in with a splash, as if Crock had not a gullet but a funnel for filling gas tanks. Without a cork or a bottom.

Phil couldn't do it this way. Phil would swing his glass away and hold up one finger. "We don't drink to get drunk, but just so we don't get unused to it."

Phil liked to talk over his liquor, and this always irritated Crock: he was forever anxious to fill up his tank. But Phil valued the process, not the result, and therefore he tried to be the last to drink, so that no one would step on his heels. He would pour out the remains, jiggle the bottle over the glass till the thirteenth drop had trickled out, and reason, "What's in it, in this here liquid? In this here liquid are seven drowned dames: grief and joy, old age and youth, love and advice and eighteen years. Remember everything I do, when I'm drinking you."

Yegor, on the other hand, drank in silence. He drank greedily, gulping: he hurried to make the leeches fall off. Not to remember, in other words, but to forget. Each man cures whatever he's got that hurts.

It helped, but not for long. And in order to prolong it, he needed money. He learned to pick it up here and there doing odd jobs: Crock was a great master at this. He would contract to unload a truck or fix some old woman's fence or come up with something else. He was quick as long as he was sober. But Yegor would grow angry.

"With your ability you oughta be doin' a real work, not this slipshod stuff."

"Work won't go anywhere: we'll wet our whistles and then finish up. And if we don't finish it, well it can just..."

And he explained what it could do. And Phil summed it all up: "Machines should work, people mentally relax."

However, it would happen on occasion that even Crock was unable to get any piecework together. Then they would do as they were ordered, curse, quarrel, suffer, while the leeches would so torment Yegor that he would throw down his shovel and run home. Thank goodness Haritina was now working as a dishwasher in the cafeteria and couldn't catch him in the act. Yegor would swipe a ruble, or sometimes two, from the sacred place and rush back, back to his friends and comrades.

"What's in it, in this here liquid?"

Tears - that's what was in it: however busy Haritina may have been with home, children and now work, she kept track of those rubles. And she couldn't figure out where the leak was. In the heat of the moment she jumped on Kolka: "You little thief, shameless hooligan!"

And lit in on him. By the hair, by the ears - whatever she could get her hands on. And she wailed as she did, and Olya wailed and Kolka cried out in pain. Yegor would have kept his mouth shut, but his son was looking mighty perplexed. And that look pierced his soul.

"I took that money, Tina."

He said it and was filled with terror. Terror that numbed him: now what would he say? What lie could he make up?

"What for?"

Thank God she hadn't asked immediately, but in two stages, if you will. It gave Yegor a chance to think and Kolka to wriggle free. Kolka wiped his nose but didn't run away. He stared at his father.

"I, uh ... lent it to a fellow I know. He really needs it."

"He needs it, and what about us? And what, may I ask, are we supposed to buy our food with? What are we to live on, you confounded loser? No answer? You put your cap on this instant, go find him and demand that money back!"

Give a woman a job and before you know it she'll be bossing you around at home. That's a fact.

"That's an order!"

Yegor donned his cap and went out through the gate. Now where to? To his brother-in-law, to Fyodor Ipatovich, on bended knee? Then he just might give him the money, but he'd needle him first. He'd carry on, he would. Should he put up with it? And what if he didn't give him the money and then went and told Haritina all about it? So, where else could he go? There was nowhere else.

Reasoning this way, Yegor made a loop around the settlement and arrived back home. He pulled off his cap and blurted out from the doorway, "Slipped away, that fellow. Vanished from these parts."

Haritina took a deep breath - so that her chest bulged, just like at those sweet eighteen years the song sung about and Phil looked for at the bottom of his glass. And off she went:

"Lord have mercy on you loser and good-for-nothing curse of my life bane of my existence ... "

Yegor hung his head, listened, glanced at his son. But Kolka was looking neither at him nor at his mother, but at the compass. He stared at the compass and heard nothing, because the next day he would have to give that priceless compass away for nothing.

And it was all Olya's fault. Not his sister Olya, but Olya Kuzina, with the eyelashes and the braid. Vova often tugged on that braid, and she would laugh. First she would whack him, as if she meant it, but then she would show her fine little teeth. Kolka was awfully fond of the way she laughed, but he didn't dare even dream of tugging on her braid. He would just look on from afar. And hid his eyes if she happened to look his way.

They saw each other rarely now: vacation and all. Nevertheless, they did meet up occasionally at the river. True, she bathed beyond the bushes with the other girls, but even from there her laughter would reach Kolka's ears. And then Kolka would want very badly to do something great: swim across the river,

catch a pike by the tailor save someone (best if it were Olya herself) from sure death. But the river was wide, no pikes happened along, and no one ever threatened to drown. And so he only showed off his dives, but she paid no attention to them.

Yesterday he and Vova had started out to a new place to swim, and Olya Kuzina had tagged along. Once on the bank she was the first to pull off her shift and - into the water. Vova followed suit, while Kolka got tangled up in a pant leg and fell down on the grass. By the time he untangled himself, they were already in the water. He wanted to dash in after them but took one look and changed his mind. He walked off a bit and sat down on the sand. And suddenly he felt so low, so awful, that he was no longer tempted by either the water or the sunshine. The world became gloomy, as if it were autumn. Vova was teaching Olya Kuzina how to swim. He demonstrated, held her explained, and shouted.

"You dope! Whad'ya go jerking everything at once for? Here, I'll hold ya up. That's it."

And Olya listened to him, as if she really were a dope. She knew, after all, that Kolka was a far better swimmer than Vova and he wasn't afraid of the deep either, but all the same. She was letting Vova teach her, and giggling to boot.

So Kolka didn't go in the water. He listened to that laughter and Vova's strict words and thought about what he would say were Olya to have a change of heart and call him into the water. But Olya didn't have a change of heart: she frolicked until she got cold, and then scurried out, snatched up her shift and ran into the bushes to wring out her panties. Vova darted up to him. He flopped down on his belly, his eyes wide.

"I grabbed Olya by the titties!"

Kolka had no idea how much blood he had there in his body, but at that instant it all rushed to his face. The pit of his stomach contracted for lack of it.

"She doesn't even got any yet..."

"Well, so what? I grabbed the place where they're gonna be!"

Kolka prayed to God that it would begin snowing, that a thunderstorm would strike suddenly, or a hurricane roll in. And it helped: true, none of these things happened, but Olya refused to go in the water again, no matter how insistent Vova was.

"No, and that's final. My mama won't let me."

Does a fellow need much joy? "No," she had said, and Kolka instantly forgot everything: the swimming, her laughter, and Vova's nasty words. Vova was lying - of course he was lying - and that was that! Now Kolka no longer walked along the bank in silence, but talked about tropical countries. About seas he had never been on, about elephants he had never seen. But he talked as if he'd been and seen, and Olya's eyes grew ever wider.

Vova, in the meantime, was very angry and therefore walked along behind. And not even at their heels - as if he'd want to do that - but off to one side, right through the bushes. He trampled them on purpose and made a lot of noise, also on purpose.

"You know how clever they are, those elephants? They understand everything! They come to work at the sound of the whistle, like people, and to lunch too."

"Really?" Olya's mother expressed her surprise this way, so Olya did the same: "Do they eat them?"

Kolka sighed: Oh, you don't ask about the interesting stuff.

He thought for a moment.

"Too expensive."

"If only someone would treat me to elephant meat! Why, I'd do anything for him, *anything!*"

Nope, even at the promise of such a fantastic reward Kolka wouldn't kill an elephant for her. Nope, that's not what elephants were put on this earth for - for little girls to eat them. Even very pretty little girls.

That's what he thought. But he said diplomatically. "They're impossible to come by here. For any kind of money."

"I found an elephant!" Vova cried out suddenly. "A local elephant!"

And burst out of the bushes carrying a puppy. It was a scrawny pup, abandoned, with an ear someone had ripped. Something - maybe it was water, or maybe tears - was streaming down its face, and it kept trying to lick Vova's hand. With its little tongue. Clumsy little tongue.

"Oh, yuck! Foul creature!" Olya Kuzina even hid behind Kolka. "Ugh, he's mangy. And sick."

"We'll drown 'im," said Vova with glee. "Maybe he's got rabies."

"How're ya gonna drown him?" Olya peered out from behind Kolka, her eyes lighting up. "Throw him in the water?"

"Might swim out that way. Here, hold him; I'll look for a rock."

He shoved the puppy at Kolka, but Kolka backed away and hid his hands. And he tried to say something, too, but the words suddenly disappeared. And all the while that Vova was searching for a rock along the bank with the puppy in his arms, Kolka tried to recall the words. Very important words, burning words - but they weren't there.

And there weren't any rocks either, search as Vova might.

Kolka secretly rejoiced, but no sooner had he muttered, "Too bad ... " than Vova cried out triumphantly: "I don't need no boulder! I'll just go into the water and hold him under. He'll suffocate in a jiffy!"

And he ran towards the water. But Kolka's throat constricted again, and again the words disappeared. Then he simply caught up with Vova and grabbed him by the shorts at the water's edge.

"Let go!" Vova pulled away, and - snap! went the elastic on his rear. "I found him, I'm the boss, so there! Now I'll do whatever I want with him."

"He found him, he's the boss," Olya Kuzina chimed. "And now he can do whatever he wants with him. So let him drown the thing: it's interesting."

"Like Gerasim and Mumu⁴," Vova announced and started into the water once again.

"Give him to me," Kolka asked quietly. "Give him to me, huh? I'll give you whatever you want for him. Whatever-ever you want."

"What've ya got?" Vova asked with scorn, though he did stop. "You guys don't have anything anymore besides debts: Papa said so."

"Besides debts!" Olya Kuzina laughed (and that laugh of hers - as if she'd swallowed a bell). "They don't have anything - *nothing*: not even a hog!"

"Give 'im to me," Kolka was suddenly shaking, as if he'd just climbed out of the water after having dived in. "You want ... If you want, I'll give you my compass for him, huh? I'll give it to you for keeps, just don't drown the critter. Poor thing. "

"Poor thing!" laughed Olya Kuzina. "He feels *sorry* for it!"

⁴ *Gerasim and Mumu* - from Ivan Turgenev's tale (published in 1852) *Mumu* about a deaf-mute serf, Gerasim, who is forced to drown his last connection to the world, his pet dog *Mumu*. - Tr.

But Vova didn't laugh; he looked at his cousin.

"For keeps?" he asked: he was distrusting - Fyodor Ipatovich all over.

"Cross my heart," Kolka swore. "Hope to die and never swim again."

Vova said nothing. He was thinking.

"What does he need your compass for?" asked Olya Kuzina. "Like he really needs that old compass! I'll bet it only costs about eighty-five kopecks. And you know how much a puppy costs? Lots! You'd never be able to buy one - that's how much."

"I don't mean for the puppy," Kolka explained, and he felt so rotten inside he could have cried. He regretted the compass and he was sorry for the pup, and he was suddenly and inexplicably sorry for himself too, and sorry for something else, though he couldn't for the life of him figure out what that something was. And he added, "I'll give you the compass if you don't drown him, never."

"Of course," said Vova pompously. "A compass isn't enough for a puppy."

And he rocked the puppy in his arms, as if considering. "I don't want him for keeps," Kolka sighed. "He can live with you if you want. Just so that you never drown him."

"Well, for that. .." Vova frowned just like his father, sighed.

"For that, all right. Whad'ya say, Olya?"

"For that, all right," she said.

She didn't even have words of her own - that was the really maddening thing about it. She echoed his words, just like the talking parrot Kolka had read about in *Robinson Crusoe*.

"All right, but he's gonna live with me for now," said Vova importantly. "And you'll bring me the compass tomorrow: Olya's the witness."

"I'm the witness," said Olya.

The deal was made. Vova took the puppy home, Olya ran home to her mama, while Kolka went home to say good-bye to his compass. He watched how the arrow spun and quivered where it pointed.

It pointed north.

11

A man without a house or home is a man with nothing. Fyodor Ipatovich had no respect for this kind and Yakov Prokopych feared them. If he hasn't a house, what has he? - that's the question. Nothing but fantasies.

But Nona Yurievna hadn't even any fantasies. She had nothing - nothing except books, records and a young woman's longing. And for this reason she envied everyone just a little bit - even Haritina Polushkin: she had Kolka slurping cabbage soup at her table and Olya sucking her milk. With trimmings like this even a loser of a husband could be tolerated. If he existed, that husband.

Nona acknowledged this envy of hers - as clear as the first snow - to no one. Not even to herself, because this envy dwelled inside her as something independent of her being. It lived on its own, fed itself, made her feel hot all over, tormented her at night. And if anyone were to say all this to Nona's face, she probably would have keeled over on the spot. Such a revelation would have brought on a stroke. Well, her landlady sharp-nosed, sharp-eyed and sharp-eared - knew about all this, of course, and, of course, had been wagging her tongue about it right and left for some time already.

"She's gnawing at her pillow, gals - saw it myself through a crack, by God I did. Her blood's a-boilin'."

And her friends nodded in agreement.

"It's high time: she'll get stale, she will. How old were we when we had our firstborn? Tsk, tsk, she oughta be rocking her third in a cradle by now."

Nona Yurievna was so tired of all the talk and whispered conversations that she could scream. She had never had the resolve to fight for anything for herself before, and had never even tried, but now she was suddenly driven to all the authorities around. And goodness knows where she found the patience and persistence, but she didn't give in. She followed all the necessary procedures until she got what she was after.

"We'll give you a separate room. Only, unfortunately, it's in run-down condition."

"I don't care what condition it's in!"

A chilled soul doesn't think about roofs: it needs walls. It needs to hide from icy eyes, and if water happens to drip from above - let it drip. As long as there are walls. As long as there is somewhere to cry.

Nona Yurievna cried with tremendous satisfaction and great relief: she even began to smile. And no sooner had the tears dried than the flood came from above: the rain began and entered her room completely unhindered. It filled all her pots and basins and inspired in Nona's almost serene mind ideas of an altogether practical tenor.

This tenor, however, as it became clear, led to a dead-end: "All the funds for repairs have been exhausted."

"But the ceiling leaks. It's like a shower."

They smiled patronizingly.

"That's not the ceiling that's leaking, it's the roof. A ceiling can't leak - it's designed for other things. A roof, now, of course, it can. That's right. We'll put you on the waiting list next year."

"But listen, please. It's impossible to live there. The water comes down from the ceiling like rivers and -"

"We warned you about the run-down condition; we've got a little paper here to prove it. So it's your own fault."

And so the girl stopped smiling: how could she think about smiles when in her room - her very own room suffered for dreamed about, wept over! - mushrooms were sprouting? Just marinate them and haul them off in barrels to the lovely city of Leningrad. To Mama.

But she got lucky. True, Nona secretly considered herself a lucky person and was therefore not even surprised at her luck. She just happened to encounter one very friendly fellow there at the dead-end that was lacking funds. Bald and kind-hearted like a Roman.

"That's some leak ya got there, all right. We'll fix it."

And fix it he did. Fixed it with a barrage of curses that would have made the saints turn over in their graves. But Nona had somehow managed to grow tolerant even of this manner of communication. She had even learned not to blush.

"I've got a team - works for two, eats for three, and drinks as much as it can get. So have a bottle ready to settle this contract. "

The fumes rose in a spiral from the Roman - the mosquitoes fell dead around him. This was only natural, of course: mankind develops along spirals, but this particular spiral was such a pungent one that Nona decided to ask, just in case, "What bottle did you say?"

"The all-natural kind, dag-nab it all to heck!"

While Nona ran for the all-natural bottle, Mr. Roman sprinted back to the vacant lot.

"We're in the money, fellas, danged if we ain't. The good Lord brought us some little fool: her shed leaks. We'll fix it up, the ol' homestead, with half-liters. Like a dug-out at the front. So it won't drip no more, the bum, on a good person!"

The day was a failure as far as enlightenment of the soul was concerned, and the men were mean. While Crock was off rounding up work, they were shoveling dirt at the vacant lot for some vague purpose and bickering.

"Pat down that wall. Pat it, I said!"

"Why the dickens should I pat it? It ain't no broad."

"Cause it's crumbling, that's why!"

"So, to hell with it -let it crumble. Rather than giving orders about patting this here ditch, why don't you run home and pat your lawful spouse for a ruble or two. And Mother Nature'd smile down on us for it too."

Yegor said nothing. He went on patting his wall glumly, scooping the dirt up from the ground. And although he patted as he knew how and scooped carefully, he no longer experienced that ease, the enthusiasm that had once driven him past smoking breaks and chit-chat breaks, that rapturous thrill at the labor of his hands. He hadn't experienced it for a long time, and now he did exactly enough to get marked off for the day, even if it wasn't without curses and reprimands.

He kept silent now because after that incident when he had lied about the unknown man who had vanished from these parts with the rubles supposedly lent him, after Haritina's tears and Kolka's look he had vowed never to take another kopeck from home. He had given himself his word and even crossed himself in secret, though he didn't really believe in God. And so far he'd held on. Held on to his word and to that covert sign of the cross, as if they were his last life buoy.

Well, and then Crock came running up and surprised them with the joyous news about the roof that had so conveniently started leaking on some dumb broad.

"That'll do, fellas!"

They knocked off at once. Spirits high now, they pitched their shovels in the ditch and started for the river: to wash up. And once they'd washed up, they set out to settle the labor contract, feeling in advance a tantalizing emptiness in their bellies.

Yegor picked out the house from far away: half slated, half grown-over with grass - the half that now concerned them. He glanced over the framework: it wasn't rotting yet, and with a skilled axe and good eye it wouldn't take much work to get that little house back in shape. Re-slate the roof and re-board the floors - that's all there was to it.

That's what he thought, sizing up the work with a carpenter's eye. He thought and kept his mouth shut, because this was not work, but slipshod work, and there was no place for talk about the true size of the job. The accepted procedure here was to blow any object of neglect up to the scale of a catastrophe, to frighten and reap from that fear that fabulous slapdash dough. That latent masculine income, unchecked by state, accounts department, financial inspector or even spouse.

He also thought that the porch ought to be fixed and the doorjambs replaced. And the awning over the porch ought to be redone properly and ... At this moment that crooked door opened, and Crock said cheerfully, "Here's the team! Good day, little lady, tell us what's troubling you, dag-nab it..."

"Good day," said the little lady warmly. "Come in, please." And they did, except Yegor, who lingered on the porch in complete horror: Nona Yurievna. She was the one Kolka had run to that day - not to his own mother. He had listened to records: a voice, he had said, like an elephant's ...

Yegor dawdled on the porch - he could neither go inside nor get up the nerve to run. He was ashamed to be barging into her house in such company, and on such business, and he thought vaguely what a good thing it was that he at least still understood a thing or two about carpentry work.

"Yegor Savelich, why don't you come in?"

So, she had recognized him. Yegor sighed, pulled his cap off his head and stepped into the dilapidated inner porch.

They were putting away that all-natural bottle. With some kind of small fry in tomato sauce, which currently bore some fancy name. Phil held up one finger.

"How many of them are there, earthly inconveniences or, say, dissatisfactions: who can count them? We can, working folks. 'Cause every inconvenience or dissatisfaction in life passes through our hands. Well, and that which the hands have felt the head doesn't forget: isn't that right, little lady? Heh, heh. So let's drink to our working hands, friends, citizens and comrades. To those who give us what to drink and in part what to eat."

Crock drank in silence. He downed his glass, let out a deafening grunt and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He was pleased. He was very pleased: a rare job had come along. A fool to beat all fools, as you see.

But Yegor didn't drink.

"Many thanks for the hospitality." And pushed his cup away.

"Why do you so categorically refuse to drink, Yegor Savelich?"

"It's early," he said.

And he stared fixedly at Phil, who was already preparing to hold up his finger a second time. And he added, "Drink to our working hands - that we can do. That we can do with complete respect. Only where are they, those hands? Maybe they're my hands? No, not mine. Yours, maybe, or Crock's? No, not yours or his. We're scroungers, not workers. Scroungers. And rather than making merry we oughta be shedding a bitter tear. Out of shame and disgrace."

Nona Yurievna's eyes grew just about as wide as the rims of her glasses. Phil knit his brows, thinking. And Crock... Well Crock was Crock: he poured a second glass into his bottomless pit and chased it with his sleeve.

"Passing judgement, are ya?" asked Phil at last and burst into laughter, though in dissent rather than in merriment. "So you see, comrade teacher, representative of our vanguard intelligentsia, what a healthy sense of self-criticism we have. And it works like poison. Until the first glass. But after that there glass we forget our self-criticism, and one solid criticism begins. What do you say, former working man, Yegor Polushkin?"

Nona Yurievna grew suddenly afraid. Afraid of what, Yegor couldn't figure out, but he saw that she was afraid. She smiled hurriedly, blinked and began to fuss, lowering herself a bit even.

"Eat up, friends, eat up. Pour yourselves some more, please. Yegor Savelich, I beg of you, have a small glass. Please."

Yegor looked at her. And there was so much sorrow in his eyes, so much pain and bitterness that a sort of gurgle came from Nona's throat. Like from Crock's after a glass.

"It just so happens, Nona Yurievna, dear teacher, that I want a drink real badly. And I drink now whenever I get the chance. And if I were to suddenly find a thousand rubles - I'd probably spend it all at once on drink. I'd drink and drink until I died, and I'd treat others too. Drink, I'd say, dear guests, until your consciences drown in wine."

"Well, so find it," said Crock all of a sudden. "Find it, dig it up, that thousand, dag-nab it!"

Yegor glanced at Nona Yurievna, caught her frightened eye, her shaking hands and understood everything. Understood and, taking up the cup he had pushed away, said, "Allow me to drink to your health, Nona Yurievna. And to your happiness too, of course."

And he drank. And chased it with that small fry, which by some absurdity was swimming in tomato sauce rather than a creek somewhere.

And put down the cup, like a period at the end of a sentence.

Then they gave the little house a looking-over. The object, so to speak, of their efforts, the source of future income.

The roles here were pre-assigned. It was Crock's job to frighten, Phil's to distract by lots of empty talk, and Yegor's to take up the business at hand. Estimate how much it would all cost and multiply by two. And after this multiplication Crock would sum it all up: how much the given work was going to run their customer.

Such was the case here too: Phil prepared his obscure speeches, and Crock grew sombre ahead of time, while still at the table.

"Well, little lady, thanks for the hospitality. Now tell us all your life's discomforts."

They walked around, discussed, estimated, frightened.

Yegor said nothing. Everything seemed to be going according to plan, just as it was supposed to, so what Yegor was thinking about as he surveyed these discomforts no one could have guessed. Not Crock, not Phil, not Nona Yurievna.

He was thinking about what all of this would cost the girl.

And he was also thinking that her furnishings amounted to one folding cot on which his offended son had once slept. And therefore, when he had added up all the work that needed to be done and estimated the cost of the necessary materials, rather than doubling it he halved it.

"Fifty rubles."

"What?" In his astonishment Crock even forgot to dag-nab it.

"Drunk, you see," said Phil and added with a giggle, "This is an impossible figure."

"Fifty rubles for all the materials and all our labor," Yegor reiterated sternly. "We just can't do it for less - very sorry, of course ... "

"Don't apologize, Yegor Savelich ... "

"Ah dag-nab it all to -"

"Shut up!" snapped Yegor. "How dare you use that kind of language here in this house!"

"What the devil do I need for fifty, with the materials to boot?"

"Me too," said Phil. "We refuse on the basis of senselessness."

"But dear friends," Nona Yurievna said nervously. "What then -"

"Then it'll all cost thirty," said Yegor sullenly. "And I'll make you some bookshelves too, Nona Yurievna. So your books aren't lying around on the floor."

And he left, so as not to hear Crock's curses. He walked away without looking back. He returned to that vacant lot and took up his shovel once more. To smooth the ditch over.

They gave him a beating there in that empty lot. First inside the ditch, then they hauled him out and went on beating him.

Yegor didn't even particularly fight back: the guys needed to get out their anger and frustration on someone. So what made him, Yegor Polushkin, former carpenter, hands of gold, any better than all the rest?

12

Fyodor Ipatovich paid off all his debts, put everything in order, got hold of all the required papers. He bought a folder with ties at the stationary store, arranged all his papers in it and started out for the regional center. To give an account to the new forest warden.

It had cost him a pretty penny, too, that house. And though he hadn't taken the money out of the mouths of his own children, it was maddening and aggravating nonetheless. Oh, how aggravating it was! Downright cruel.

For this reason Fyodor Ipatovich kept his mouth shut all the way. He turned his leaden thoughts over and over and composed various offensive words. Not curses - hordes upon hordes had composed them before him - but particularly offensive ones. So that they'd seem ordinary on the outside, but inside poison. So that that forest warden, smite him, would tear his hair out for two weeks straight, but have nothing against him. Nothing.

This was a difficult problem. So Fyodor Ipatovich didn't spread himself thin on his fellow travelers. He didn't divert his attention on senseless talk.

He was thinking about his meeting with the new forest warden Yuri Petrovich Chivalov. He thought and feared this meeting, since he knew nothing about him, about the new warden.

Yuri Petrovich's life had shaped up independently, though not very happily. His father had outlived Victory Day by exactly one year, and in forty-six had gone to where silent battalions were awaiting their commander. His mother had died shortly after, exhausted by the siege of Leningrad and the thousand days of waiting for letters from the front. She had died quietly, just as she had lived. She had died feeding him before bedtime, while he, not even comprehending that she was no more, had gone on sucking her chilled breast.

The neighbor woman had told him this many years later. But at the time ... At the time she had simply carried him from the lifeless room to her own - be it empty, be it a widow's, but at least it was living - and for sixteen whole years he had known no mother but her. However, when the long-awaited day arrived for him to go to the police station for his very first passport, a day he had prepared all his papers for well in advance, and he asked his mother for his birth certificate, she grew suddenly and peculiarly silent, zealously rubbing her thin, bloodless lips with her rough, bony fingers.

"What is it, Mom?"

"Son ... " She sighed, taking from a squeaky chest an old notebook with a soldier's yellowed letters, "killed in battle" notices, electric bills and birth certificates all mixed together. She found the right paper, but didn't give it to him. "Sit down, son."

He sat down obediently, unable to grasp what was wrong with her, but sensing that something was wrong. And again he asked, smiling tenderly and uncertainly, "What is it, Mom?"

But still she remained silent, staring at him without a smile. Then she said, "You've always been my son, Yuri, and you always will be, for as long as I live. For as long as I live, Yuri. Only, here on this paper, on this birth certificate, other people's names are written down. Another mama and another papa. You get your passport in their name, all right, son? It's a right fine name, and they were right fine people. Right fine. So you won't be Semenov anymore, but Chivalov. Yuri Chivalov, my son ... "

And so at sixteen Yuri had become Chivalov, but he had gone on calling that quiet, semi-literate soldier's widow Mama, and continued to think of her as such. Out of habit and a bit carelessly at first,

and later with great love and respect. After graduating from the institute he moved around a lot, worked in Kirghizia and the Altai mountains, in Siberia and the Volga region, but no matter where he was or what he was doing, he wrote her a letter every Sunday:

"My dear Mama," -

He wrote unhurriedly, painstakingly and in a very large script. So she could read it herself.

And she would answer him at once, dutifully informing him of her health (in her letters to him she was never ill) and everything from her limited resources of news. And only recently she had begun cautiously, so as - God forbid! - not to offend or upset him, hinting at the joylessness of her life and the loneliness of her old age:

"Maria Grigorievna has two grandkids already, and her life's a-bustle now ... "

But Yuri Petrovich just made jokes in reply. For the time being he dismissed the subject with jokes and turned his attention ever more to her health. Take care of yourself, Mama, and we'll see yet whose life begins bustling more. Time will tell, as they say. Lots of love.

Fyodor Ipatovich knew nothing of all this, of course. He sat across from this city smart Alec, glaring from beneath his brows, as if out of two pillboxes, and waited. Waited to hear what he would say once he had looked through the folder with the papers.

And furtively - just a bit - he glanced around to see how this man lived. Since this time the new forest warden was receiving him in his hotel room rather than his office. And Fyodor Ipatovich kept wondering what this hominess could mean. Perhaps he was awaiting something from him, from Fyodor Ipatovich? In the privacy of his own room.

Oh, but he couldn't afford to slip up now, not now! And for this reason Fyodor Ipatovich sat particularly tense as he awaited the first question. How would it sound, to what tune? He might give a drum beat, or he might melt the heart with a violin - it was all in the first question. And Fyodor Ipatovich braced himself, his muscles grew taut in anticipation. He was all ears.

"All right, but where's the permission for felling in a protected zone?"

So that was it. A policeman's whistle. Got it. Fyodor Ipatovich, concealing his dismay, leaned across the desk, holding his breath for politeness' sake - boiling water, alas, they'd thrown him into boiling water, honest to God - and pointed:

"Here it is."

"That's the receipt for payment. A receipt. I'm talking about permission for felling."

"Well, the old forester's gone already."

"Well you were supposed to get permission a year ago, when you were building, not yesterday. Isn't that right?"

Fyodor Ipatovich began breathing heavily. He felt sick, exhausted.

"We, uh, the old forester and me, were on friendly terms. No formalities, so to speak. He would just tell me yes or no. We didn't bother with papers."

"Convenient."

"Why don't you believe me, Yuri Petrovich? All the papers you asked for, I -"

"All right, we'll have a look at your papers. You may go home now."

"What about my folder?"

"I'll hang on to your folder, Mr. Buryanov. Good day."

"You mean you're going to keep it?"

"Don't worry, nothing will happen to your papers. Pleasant journey."

It was with this that Fyodor Ipatovich departed, with a pleasant Journey. He kept dumb as a fish the whole way home too, though no longer because he was thinking up offensive words, but out of fear. This fear of his made him sweat and shiver and only as he was approaching town did he mobilize all his strength and with tremendous difficulty assumed the appropriate attitude. Self-assured and pensive.

But beneath this pensive self-assurance, one thought thrashed about convulsively: where was the forest warden planning to take that folder with all his papers? To the police? He'd be done for then. He'd go up in blue flames before the eyes of friends and acquaintances, and no one would lift a finger to try to yank him out of those flames. He knew for a fact that no one would. Knew because he wouldn't do it himself.

But Fyodor Ipatovich's anguish was for nothing, because the new forest warden had no intentions of sending that folder anywhere. It was just that he found something unpleasant about that morose fear, that antedated payment and that person too. And he was simply unable to deny himself the pleasure of leaving Fyodor Ipatovich alone with his fear. So far without conclusions.

As for himself, he made but one resolution: to have a look at everything with his own eyes. It was high time he took a peek at that corner of his proprietorship, but he decided to show up unexpectedly, and therefore said nothing to Fyodor Ipatovich. He put the folder aside, wrote his mother in very large script a letter out of turn - who knew when he'd be back - and began packing for his journey. And when he opened his suitcase, which, it so happened, had gone virtually untouched since his departure from Leningrad, he discovered a small package at the very bottom. And he recalled with shame that someone in Leningrad had conveyed it to him through a third party with the request that it be passed on to some schoolteacher in a remote town. The very same one he was just setting out to visit.

Yuri Petrovich stood holding the package, thinking that he was irresponsible and self-centered, then put it in his backpack. On the very top this time, in order to deliver it upon arrival, before setting out for Black Lake. Then he went to the reading room and buried his nose in some old books there for a long time.

But Nona Yurievna had no dreams that night. That's how life is sometimes. Without signs or miracles.

13

Yegor was on a hot streak again. He did everything on the run, everything he was told, just like in the days of Yakov Prokopych. And when he had finished that hasty work, without rests or smoking breaks, he would wash up, comb his hair, straighten his shirt and head for Nona Yurievna's dilapidated little house. He would take long strides not mince, he would hurry, but maintain his dignity. He walked as a master. It was a special gait, not to be confused with any other.

True, this mastery had come back to him just recently. At first, before the bruises left by Phil and Crock had faded, Yegor had felt depressed and run-down. He lay sleepless one night - not from the pain, oh no! He had made a deal with pain to sleep together on one trestle-bed long ago - he didn't sleep, sighed and tossed and turned, having realized that he had deceived timid Nona Yurievna. It didn't work out to thirty rubles, no matter how Yegor figured and estimated. He hadn't taken into account that Nona Yurievna hadn't a single board or log in her yard and all the timber would have to be come by on the side. And no way was this to the tune of thirty rubles.

However, he didn't trouble Nona Yurievna with his insomnia: his mistake - his headache. He ran about, poked around, got to talking with the watchman at the timber warehouse about rheumatism, had a smoke with him ...

Now if he were after that timber for himself, this conversation would never have gone past the rheumatism. Yegor's throat would have been incapable of uttering any other words, physically incapable, it would have constricted and put an end to the conversation. He would sooner have covered

his house with his own skin to keep the cursed thing from leaking than breathe a word about timber; he would sooner have stood as a pillar in a sagging corner, but he couldn't stand in place of a pillar in Nona Yurievna's dilapidated chambers, and therefore Yegor, his tongue stiffening, blurted out during that smoking break, "I need to get a hold of some boards. Hm?"

That "hm" sounded with such terror that it bowed down once it had escaped from Yegor's throat. But the watchman took no notice, since his thinking was straightforward.

"How many?"

Yegor had never thought so quickly in his life. If he said too many, he'd scare the guy off and get nothing. Too few and he'd still be in a fix. So what could he say now, inexperienced as he was?

"A dozen ... " he glanced up to see how the guy's brows would move, and added hastily, "Plus five more."

"Seventeen, in other words," said the watchman. "We'll round it off to twenty and halve it. Works out to two half-liters."

Exhausted after having performed this mathematical operation, he sat down on a log. Yegor, in the meantime, pondered.

"Uh-huh. Got it. In what form?"

"One natural, the other money. For reserves."

"Uh-huh!" said Yegor. "And how'll I get the boards outa here?"

"Count the fourth post from the corner. Got it? Now back toward the corner three planks. It's hanging by one nail. No, don't practice: the boss's roaming around. Tonight. Leave the car two blocks away."

"Uh-huh!" said Yegor: for some reason, mention of a car made the deal seem more final. "I'll make it three."

"Then bring on the half-liter. And money for a second."

"Right away. Got it. I'll be back in a jiffy."

And ran out of the warehouse yard exuberantly. But when he had run one block, when he had run out of breath, his exuberance waned. He slowed to a stop.

His pockets hadn't seen anything but a song and a prayer for a year now. And tobacco, of course. That was it: he always carried his money in his fist. Either his pay that he was taking home, or his share in the trinity agreement, away from home. And now he needed eight whole rubles. Eight rubles, just like for a pood of bark.

Yegor grew very glum. To ask Nona Yurievna for it would be to go over the thirty rubles. Borrow it from a friend? No one would give it to him. It'd never turn up on the ground either. Yegor sighed, grieved a bit and with sudden decisiveness, marched off in the direction of his own home.

This was all taking place on a Saturday, and Haritina therefore was busy with the housework. A wall of steam hung in the house: laundry. And there she stood over the tub - sweaty, red, frazzled - singing. She was humming something to herself, but not her "Woe-woe-woe", and therefore Yegor blurted out right in the doorway, "Give me eight rubles, Tina. I bartered some boards for Nana Yurievna."

He knew what would happen next, knew exactly. In an instant her eyes would dry up, she would straighten, shake the foam from her hands, fill up her chest and - and let'er rip for four blocks in any direction. And he prepared himself for these shrieks, intended to take it but not give in, and in the interims, when she began inhaling for the next portion, to explain to her who Nona Yurievna was and why they had to help her no matter what. And so prepared was he for all of this, so fixed and geared toward this one thing, that he didn't even understand anything at first. He couldn't figure.

"Are they good, the boards?"

"What?"

"So long's they don't stick you with rotten ones: tricksters all over."

"What?"

She wiped her hands off on her hem - big, heavy hands, covered with blue veins - and took a candy box out from behind the Mother-of-God icon (her mother's blessing).

"Is eight enough?"

"That's what we agreed on."

"You'll have to hire a car or some kind of wagon."

And she threw in another three. And sighed. And returned to her tub. Yegor looked at the money, feeling all at once that emptiness - agonizing, familiar - in the pit of his stomach. He looked at it, gulped, and took exactly eight rubles.

"I'll get it there myself."

And off he went. She didn't even turn around: just started up with some new song. Only a bit louder now it seemed. For this reason Yegor knit his sun-bleached brows as he handed the watchman the bottle and four rubles in cash, and he asked as sternly as he knew how, "You won't double-cross now, will ya?"

"Who?" the watchman asked very lazily. "The bookkeeper's gone, the director's gone, the inspector's gone too. So who would I double-cross? Myself? Pointless. You? Pointless again: then you won't come again."

"All right. Tonight it is: third plank. Just don't go shootin' in your sleep."

"It's not loaded."

Yegor couldn't sit still for two minutes all evening long: he kept jumping up and dashing off somewhere, though the time to be dashing off had not yet come. He was monstrously proud of his initiative and his business deal, but somewhere alongside that pride a big black leech was stirring. It raised its dull head, aiming its sucker at the most vulnerable spot, and then Yegor would jump up suddenly and run around, and the less time there remained till the thieving hour, the more frequently that leech raised its head and the more quickly and frantically Yegor dashed about.

He ought to have been paying not a half-liter for those boards, but however much they really cost. Better to sell his last pair of boots and pay fair and square than put up with the leech that was hovering somewhere right near his heart. But it was impossible to order those boards from the office and pay the state price for them, not only because no one would buy Yegor's precious boots from him, but for the simple reason that this office was allowed to sell to private individuals only "leftovers" - goods mysterious in content as well as form, which, with the greatest ingenuity, could be used to build a rather compact outhouse at best. Therefore all of Yegor's speculations in hindsight - and this was one of his stronger areas - all these speculations were of an abstract theoretical nature, so to speak. For there was but one practical solution here: through the third plank back toward the corner.

However, in spite of the anguish of abstract theory, or perhaps thanks to it, Yegor didn't take Kolka with him on that nocturnal brigandage, didn't breathe a single word about it and ordered Haritina to keep quiet. But she didn't need him to tell her this, and made it clear in plenty of time, "I won't let Kolka go."

"That's right, Tina, absolutely right. The pure-eyed guy ... " Yegor got suddenly choked up, and ended in a near-whisper: "Well thank God!"

Though you could hardly call Yegor a daredevil, there was nothing he was particularly afraid of either. He had stalked bears and nearly drowned and rescued others when they were drowning and separated quarreling drunks and pacified dogs. The word "must" had always been it was surprising not that it had

been, but that it still was - the most important word, and whenever it sounded - either from within or from somewhere else then fear and weakness and all his feebleness faded into the background. And he would go and do what he must. Without fear and without ceremony.

There was a "must" here too; it sounded in full force, but the fear, for some reason, would not subside. And the closer the hands of the clock crept toward the appointed hour, the stronger that strange, undirected, disarming fear thumped inside him. And in order to abate it, to force himself over the threshold into the dark of the night, Yegor, waiting until Haritina had left the room, crossed himself three times before the icon. Awkwardly, hastily. And whispered senselessly, "Lord, I'm not really stealing, just taking on permanent loan. Honest to God, I'll do it just this once and never again. I swear, cross my heart. Give me permission, heavenly queen, don't be upset... I'm doing it for a good person."

Here Haritina came bursting in, and the prayer had to be stopped. And therefore Yegor set out on his banditry with a troubled soul.

The time he chose for the deed was twelve o'clock midnight, the perfect thieving hour. The settlement stood in silence; only an occasional dog barked. Not a soul stirred - as if everyone had died off.

He walked past that plank six times. And six times his heart stopped suddenly: no, not from fear, not because he was afraid of getting caught, but because he was transgressing. Overstepping the limit, and the dismay his soul was experiencing then was a hundred times more bitter than any possible punishment.

How he had managed to lug those boards from the yard eight blocks to Nona Yurievna's he couldn't exactly recall later. He tried to remember but couldn't. Nor could he understand how he had succeeded alone in hauling twenty inch-thick boards six meters long all that way without overexerting himself in the process. Nor could he remember how many trips he had made. A lot, no doubt: you couldn't carry more than three at a time. He tried.

The only thing he remembered was that there hadn't been a soul at the yard and he could easily have taken not twenty but two hundred boards through that third plank. But he took exactly twenty, just as they had agreed. Took them, dumped them in Nona Yurievna's backyard - he had picked out the spot in advance - and went home. Tired as a dog.

The next morning - sweet Sunday morning it was! Yegor donned a clean shirt, took his own axe and started out for Nona Yurievna's along with Kolka. And he felt so happy, so triumphant, that he stopped every passer-by to chat for a spell. And although no one could have given a hoof about the affairs of Yegor Polushkin, Yegor himself steered every conversation in the direction of his work.

"Ah, settin' out for mushrooms, I see! Aren't you lucky. Well, have yourself a nice time. As for me, I've got work to do. A serious matter, you see."

Kolka said nothing, only sighed. In fact, he hadn't been saying much at all lately. Ever since he'd exchanged his compass for a dog's life. But Yegor couldn't possibly appreciate Kolka's silence, since he was completely absorbed in the work at hand. Not hack work, but carpentry. For the soul. That was why he took Kolka along with him now, while he had never taken him along on hack jobs. What could he have taught him there? How to make a lot of money? But this was real work awaiting them now, and the teaching, too, should be real.

"Always try to work without fussing, son. And do what your soul dictates: your soul knows the right measure."

"Why are you always talking about your soul, Pa? In school they teach us that there is no such thing as a soul, just reflexes."

"Just what?"

"Reflexes. You know - when you want something, your mouth starts watering."

"They're teaching you right," said Yegor after thinking for a moment. "But now, when you don't want something, then what happens? You start to cry, son, stringing tears, when you don't want to do anything anymore, but they order you to. And those tears, they're not on your cheeks, but inside. And they burn. They burn because it's your soul that's crying. So there is a soul after all, but each person's got his own, you see. That's why everyone has to be able to listen to it. Listen to what it's saying."

They spoke unhurriedly, thinking over their words and their deeds, since their talks took place while they worked. Kolka lent a hand wherever necessary, sawed whatever needed to be sawed, and got good at pounding a nail in right to the head in two hits. The first hit - carefully, just to get the right direction: the second - a full swing, to make the head flush. They worked efficiently: covered the roof, straightened the porch, redid the floor. And from the remnants Yegor began building shelves so that the books wouldn't be lying around on the floor. Especially when he discovered the one about the Indians.

Kolka stuck around at his father's side. He helped wherever he could, learned to do things himself and tried very hard. But once a day without fail he would disappear for about two hours and always come back glum. Yegor scrutinized him, noticing this gloominess, but he didn't ask any questions: Kolka was an independent lad and decided for himself what to tell and what to keep quiet about. Therefore Yegor tried to focus the conversation on other subjects.

"The most important thing, son, is that you always find pleasure in your work. You should want to sing when you finish up. That's because there's this clever little thing: the amount of joy sung is the amount that comes back. And then everyone who sees your work will want to sing too."

"If that was so, everyone'd have their mouth open all the time."

Kolka had returned from his disappearance that morning angry. And he spoke angrily.

"No, son, that's not right. Even meatless soup's a pleasure to eat with a happy spoon."

"But if the soup had meat in it I wouldn't cry even if I didn't have any spoon at all."

"There's joy for the stomach, Kolka, and there's joy for the soul."

"There you go about the soul again!" Kolka suddenly exploded. "How can you have a serious conversation when you keep talking about some kind of spirit, about religion!"

Nona Yurievna - they were planing boards in her room for bookshelves - did not enter into their conversations. But she listened attentively, and Yegor valued that attention more than talk. For this reason he glanced at her when he heard these words, and, putting the plane aside, reached for his tobacco. Nona Yurievna, on her part, having caught his perplexed look, said unexpectedly, "Not about religion, perhaps, Kolka, but about faith?"

"What faith?"

"Absolutely right, Nona Yurievna," said Yegor. "A person's got to have faith that his labor is performed to make folks happy. But if he does it just for the pay, if today it's dig, say, and tomorrow fill it up again, then it won't be any fun for you or bring any happiness to other folks. And rather than looking to see how to do the job best, the most conscientiously, you're looking at the ol' sun. Where it's hanging and if it plans to be gain' down soon. When the end will come to this torment and this deathly shame. And that's when you'll remember about your soul. You're sure to remember if you're not a shameless hack-worker, if there's a true working person still alive in you. If the respected master's still alive. The master!"

Yegor was suddenly choked up, his voice quaked, and he fixed his eyes on his tobacco. He went to roll a cigarette but his fingers didn't obey him right away: the tobacco tumbled out of the paper, and that paper didn't want to roll for anything.

"You go ahead and smoke here, Yegor Savelich," said Nona Yurievna. "Smoke here, please."

Yegor gave her a smile. His lips quivered.

"I reckon that's the way it is, Nona Yurievna. I reckon that's the way it is, all right."

But Kolka said nothing all this time. Said nothing, looked angrily, and then asked suddenly, "How many times a day are you supposed to feed puppies, Nona Yurievna?"

"Puppies?" the question threw her off. "What puppies?"

"Dog puppies," Kolka clarified.

"I - I don't know," she confessed. "I guess -"

At that moment there was a knock at the door. Not with the fist, but with the knuckles, in city fashion. And this knock threw Nona Yurievna off even further.

"Oh, uh. who's there? Come in!"

And in walked Yuri Petrovich Chivalov. The new forest warden.

Author's note

Perhaps I should have stopped here: the reader could compose the rest. He would certainly compose a happy ending and put this book away for good. Perhaps he would even yawn. But he would probably forgive me: happy endings are endearing, and endearment is but a hair's breadth away from forgiveness.

Only Yegor wouldn't forgive me. He looks on in silence with his eyes as bright as the sky, and they harbor neither condemnation, nor reproach, nor anger: there is dissent.

And therefore I go on. The song which I have begun must be sung to the end.

14

Never in his life had Kolka had his own dog. He knew all the dogs in the settlement, but he'd never had his own, raised from a pup. He'd never had one to teach, much less train. It was a shame, of course.

But Vova, now, he was never without a dog. No sooner had Fyodor Ipatovich shot one, than another would come along. The very same day, or perhaps even earlier.

Fyodor Ipatovich exterminated his own dogs not out of cruelty or in drunken fits, but with quite a sober mind. A dog, after all, is not a toy; a dog requires expenditures and must earn its keep. So if it gets old, loses its sense of smell or expends its viciousness, then don't judge too harshly, but why keep a dog and bark yourself? There is no point, of course. And so the dog wouldn't starve to death right there in the yard Fyodor Ipatovich would personally shoot it in his own garden. For humanitarian reasons, so to speak. He would shoot it, turn the hide in to the dog-catchers (sixty kopecks they paid!), and bury the carcass under one of the apple trees. And those were productive apple trees, there could be no denying.

These days they kept a huge beast of a dog on a chain in their yard. It had a black mouth, red eyes, a blood-curdling roar, and fangs like two knives. Even Vova was a bit afraid of the frenzied Palma, though they had grown up side by side. He didn't exactly fear her, but he was wary. Caution is the parent of safety - Vova had learned this saying while still in the cradle: he had heard it often.

So while Palma dashed about on a chain in the front yard, in the backyard behind the bathhouse in an old iron barrel lived Tsutsik. The very Tsutsik whose life was measured not with a timepiece but with a compass: as long as Vova liked the compass, Tsutsik lived. He could wag his tail and find pleasure in a bone.

True, he had far more occasion to wag his tail than take pleasure in a bone. And not because Vova was some kind of a sadist: he would simply forget that dogs liked to eat every day too. He would forget, and those canine eyes were incapable of reminding him, because one had to be able to read those eyes.

Literacy alone was not enough to read a dog's sorrow in its eyes. There was something else required here, but neither Vova, nor Fyodor Ipatovich much less, ever took any interest in that "something" and were therefore untroubled by it.

Well, and Olya Kuzina, whose braids had once touched Kolka's heart and stuck there - this Olya could speak only in Vova's voice. And her words were Vova's, and so were her thoughts. How this had come to be Kolka could not for the life of him figure out: why, Vova chased after the girl, tugged on her braids, grabbed her wherever he could, even hit her once, but she ran after him anyway and had no desire to look at any other. They were all monsters in her eyes.

Then Vova said once, "Maybe I'll drown him anyway, that Tsutsik. I'll get tired of your compass and drown him. He's not good for nothin' anyway."

Kolka was just feeding the puppy, and he felt its "tongue on his hand. But he said nothing.

"If he's valuable then name a price."

"What price?" Kolka didn't understand.

"A real one." Vova sighed self-importantly.

"But I don't have any money." Kolka thought for a moment. "I could swipe a book from the library for you."

"What do I need a book for? Give me a thing."

Kolka didn't have any things, and this conversation was left at that. But Kolka thought about it every day, passed every day shrouded in fear for Tsutsik's life, but he couldn't come up with anything. He just grew glummer. And to top it all off, there was Olya Kuzina ...

This was why he didn't hear the most important part that day. He was thinking about the puppy, about Vova, about the valuable thing he didn't have, and about Olya Kuzina, who had eyes, laughter and braids. He heard nothing, though he sat at the table with Nona Yurievna across from the new forest warden.

And the conversation at the table developed like this:

"A man flits about mighty easy these days," his Pa, Yegor Polushkin, was saying. "All at once he races off somewhere, arrives out of breath, does something and races back. And he sees everything around as chance ... But you can't make a whole pie out of pieces that're already cut, Yuri Petrovich."

"People are just looking for interesting work. That's natural. "

"You mean to say if it's natural then it's all right? I don't agree with you. Any place is still ours, common that is. What do we find if we look at it for life? We find that in all our rushing around we forget about all this. So here I came to this settlement say. Fine and dandy. But here there's a forest and river, fields and clouds. Whose are they? Old folks say they're God's. And I figure that if there is no God, then they're mine. And if they're mine, well - take care of what's yours. Don't allow destruction: it's your land. Respect it. That's what."

"I agree with you completely, Yegor Savelich."

They listened to Yegor here - that was the amazing thing about it! They listened, addressed him with respect, weighed their own answers. It wasn't that Yegor liked this - he wasn't striving to be liked, after all - rather, it stirred him up. He didn't even drink his tea, just twirled his spoon in his glass and said what seemed to him necessary and important.

"Man rests, animals rest, the land rests. Everyone needs to rest, and not for the pleasure of it, but to store up energy. In order to go back to work, right? Well the forest - it needs to doze off now and then too. Forget about people, recover from axes, let the sap heal its wounds. But Instead we go strippin' the

bark from it. Is that order? It's disorder. It's a disturbance and total death for the lindens. And all for what?"

"I'm completely to blame for the lindens," said Yuri Petrovich. "Permission to strip the bark didn't apply to the protected forests."

"The point's not whose fault it is, but whose misfortune ... "

Nona Yurievna quietly tended to her guests: poured tea, sliced bread. She listened to both Yegor and the forest warden, but said nothing herself. Like Kolka.

"Were there many linden groves destroyed?"

"That there were." Yegor sighed, recalling his unsuccessful trek. "They were promising money, so ... There's no stopping the axe at a ruble and a half a kilo."

"Yeah," Chivalov sighed. "It's a shame. It says in the old books that there was once an abundance of wild bees in our woods."

"We, uh ... " Yegor cast a sidelong glance at Kolka, who sat in obstinate silence, and sighed once again.

"We set out for the bark too. Yep. But when we saw the forest white from the trunks, we went back. We were sorry and ashamed."

How fine and at ease he felt that day! The conversation flowed at a leisurely pace, the new forest warden seemed friendly, and Yegor Polushkin himself, clever and quite independent even. True, Kolka scowled and sulked, but Yegor didn't want to pay any attention to his son's irritated snorts: he cherished the impressions of his meeting with the forest warden and carried them home carefully and unhurriedly, as if afraid of spilling them.

"A respectable man, that new forest warden," he said to Haritina when they lay down to sleep. "A simple soul, see, and responsive to the heart."

"He oughta take you on to work for him - that'd be responsive."

"Now why do ya have to say that, Tina, why?"

Yegor was afraid to even think of working for Yuri Petrovich. That is, he thought about it of course, since that sacred dream had already taken root in him, but he didn't want to say it aloud. He had no more faith in his own luck and was afraid of scaring away or hexing even the most unrealizable dreams. So he chided diplomatically, "He came here for tourism not work."

"Well if it's for tourism, then you keep your distance. Or we'll be lamentin' another three hundred after that tourism of theirs."

Much as Yegor would have liked to defend a good person, he just sighed and turned over. Trying to argue with his wife just left his head muddled. She'd have the last word anyway.

In the meantime, the new forest warden, Yuri Petrovich Chivalov, having sat at Nona Yurievna's till dusk, did not, of course, start out anywhere that day. And not only because it was already late, but for other reasons yet unclear even to himself.

It all began when she escorted him to the principal's house.

Since the forest warden had looked in on the settlement unexpectedly and was avoiding disclosure, he went to spend the night not at his subordinate Fyodor Ipatovich Buryanov's house, but at the school principal's on the recommendation of Nona Yurievna. And it was to this principal's house that Nona Yurievna escorted him that evening.

Nona Yurievna was on friendly terms with the principal. With the principal, yes, but with her colleagues at school, with teachers' collective, so to speak, she was on no terms at all. That is, of course, something had developed, but neither what nor how Nona Yurievna would have liked.

In all fairness, it must be said that the young teacher from Leningrad was met in a friendly, family-like way. Everyone was eager to help and did help - both practically and with advice. And everything was just hunky-dory right up till the party on the eve of March 8. This holiday was celebrated with particular enthusiasm, since the principal was the only man on the staff, and International Women's Day was a truly feminine affair. Each was busy long in advance and in deep secret sewing herself a new outfit for this party.

But Nona Yurievna arrived in a pants suit. No, not to make a statement, but because she truly considered this outfit to be the pinnacle of her personal wardrobe, had worn it but once before at graduation from the institute, where all the other girls had envied her. But the response here was one of embarrassment and contemptuous looks.

"We're not here to do yard work, honey, but to celebrate a holiday. Our women's holiday. An international one, by the way."

"But I think this looks nice," Nona muttered. "And contemporary."

"Well, of course, you'd know better about that. Only, if you go showing up at parties in that contemporarity, well sorry. I guess we just aren't ready for it yet."

Nona Yurievna started for the door, followed by the principal. He caught up with her at the third corner.

"You're wrong, Nona Yurievna."

"How am I wrong?" asked Nona with a sob.

"Wrong to react this way."

"And they're right?"

The principal fell quiet. He walked in stride with the young woman's angry step, thinking about what he ought to say. He could say something about the example a pedagogue is obliged to make of himself, about bourgeois trends, fashions alien to us, etc. He ought to have said all this, but he said it to himself, while aloud he said something quite different.

"They're just envious of you, Nona Yurievna! You know how women are. You're young, you've got a, uh - excuse me, of course - a figure. They've got cares, families, husbands, housework, while you - you're tomorrow's morning. So be great-hearted and take pity on them."

Nona peered through her tears and smiled.

"Aren't you sly!"

"Terribly," said the principal.

Nona didn't go back to the party, but she did become friends with the principal. She even dropped in for tea now and then. And for this reason she was taking the forest warden to him now unannounced.

The evening proved a warm and diffident one. Music played somewhere far off; near the club; clouds turned pink in the sky. There was no breeze, and Nona Yurievna's heels clacked along the wooden sidewalks with particular clarity.

"It's quiet here," said Chivalov.

"Yes," Nona Yurievna agreed.

Their conversation didn't get off the ground. Perhaps because the forest warden was tired from his journey, or because Nona Yurievna had grown unaccustomed to conversation, or for whatever other reason, but they walked along in silence, suffering from their own muteness, though neither tried to fight it. They squeezed words out of themselves like toothpaste from a tube: just barely enough to cover the bristles.

"It's probably pretty dull here?"

"Oh, no. There's lots of work."

"But it's vacation now."

"I'm working with the slow kids: you know, they don't write very well, make mistakes."

"Any plans to visit Leningrad?"

"Maybe I'll still make the trip. Visit my mom."

And again - fifty paces in silence. As if they were bearing lit candles before them in some sombre procession.

"Did you choose these boondocks yourself?"

"Uh-uh. I was assigned."

"But they probably could have given you an assignment somewhere else?"

"Kids - everywhere kids."

"Out of curiosity, what did you want to become? Did you really want to be a schoolteacher?"

"My mother's a schoolteacher."

"A family profession, then?"

The conversation was becoming turgid, and Nona chose not to reply. Yuri Petrovich sensed this, thought what a clod he was, but he didn't feel like remaining silent either. True, he wasn't so good at making small talk with young women he hardly knew, but it would have been rather silly to go on in silence too.

"You teach literature?"

"Um-hm. And I've got the lower grades as well: there aren't enough teachers."

"Do your charges read anything?"

"Not all of them. But Kolka, for one, reads a lot."

"Kolka's a serious lad."

"They have a hard time of it."

"Big family?"

"No, average. His father's a little strange. He can't seem to fit in anywhere, blames himself, suffers. He's a good carpenter and a good person, but he has no success with jobs."

"Why's that?"

"When a person's hard to understand, the easiest thing to do is declare him a crank. They call Yegor Savelich a loser right to his face, and, well, it's real hard on Kolka. Excuse me."

Nona stopped. Leaning on a fence, she stood for some time shaking the sand out of her shoes. In truth, there wasn't much sand in them at all, but the idea that had entered her head required courage, and Nona needed to muster it up in herself. She composed phrases, looking for the smoothest way of presenting this idea of hers.

"Do you plan to go out to Black Lake alone?" She said it and was aghast: he would think she was imposing. She put in hurriedly, "It's scary alone. And dull. And ... "

And she fell quiet, because her explanations were leading in altogether the wrong direction. In her despair she blurted out tactlessly, "Take Polushkin along to help. They'll let him go: he's just an odd-job man around here."

"You know, I was thinking the same thing myself."

"Really?" Nona smiled with apparent relief.

"Honest." Yuri Petrovich smiled too. And also with a sense of relief for some reason.

While in fact, until she had begun awkwardly hinting, no thoughts of Yegor Polushkin had so much as entered the forest warden's mind. He had often wandered forests alone and at length, valued solitude and was in no need whatever of helpers. But all at once he felt like doing something nice for this shy and awkward mama's girl, submissively and honestly carrying out her duty in this remote town. And, seeing her face light up, he added, "And we'll take the boy along too, if he wants."

"Thank you," said Nona. "You know, sometimes I think Kolka will be a poet. Or an artist."

At this point they finally reached the principal's iron-roofed house, and their conversation came to a halt on its own. It had sprung up spontaneously and developed painfully, but it had lodged in Yuri Petrovich's memory. Perhaps precisely because it had required so much effort.

Having put the new forest warden in the principal's hands, Nona ran home at once, because there was something she really wanted to think about though she couldn't figure out exactly what that something was. The principal, meanwhile, warmed up the samovar and entertained Chualov with talk half the night, placing special emphasis on the fact that without the help of the forestry department the school and the teachers would run into real difficulties with firewood. Yuri Petrovich agreed as he put away cup after cup of tea and all the while saw before him the slender young woman in big important glasses. And he would smile inappropriately, recalling her strange words: "Do you plan to go out to Black Lake alone?"

The next morning he stopped in at the office and made arrangements for Polushkin to be assigned to him, forest warden Chualov, for one week as an auxiliary worker for the purpose of gaining familiarity with the forest tract around the water reserve.

There in the office they smiled at the new forest warden. This was no surprise: these were northern parts, with stormy winters.

"We know him well, Polushkin. With all his quirks!"

"He's a feisty one, comrade forest warden. Wouldn't advise it: he's real feisty."

"Sunk a motor, can you imagine?"

"They say he was drunk."

"They say it or they saw it?" Chualov asked in passing, signing for the voluntary acquisition of feisty Yegor Polushkin with all his quirks.

"Rumors always precede the person ... "

"Just like the bark precedes the dog. And especially if that dog is barking behind your back."

He said what he wanted to say calmly. But so calmly that in their own office the employees spoke in a whisper till dusk.

As for Yuri Petrovich, he left the office and headed for Nona's. She had just gotten up, greeted him in her bathrobe, too embarrassed for words.

"Excuse me, I, uh ... "

"Come with us to Black Lake," he said instead of good morning. "As a teacher you ought to know the local sights."

She didn't have time to produce an answer nor did he wait for one. He dumped his backpack on the porch and asked in a business-like tone, "Where does Polushkin live? All right, you get ready while I run for him. And the kid!"

And off he ran. On the double, even though he was the new forest warden.

How Yuri Petrovich had intended to manage with everything on the hike by himself neither Yegor nor Kolka could figure. From the very start, just as soon as they delved deep into the forest, they found themselves up to their ears in work.

Kolka, for instance, was to record all wildlife encountered along the way in a notebook, in "The Fauna Observation Journal". When he saw a wagtail, say, he was to write down where he saw it, at what time, who it was with and what it was doing. Kolka blundered at first, of course, shouting across the whole forest, "Yuri Petrovich, there's something grey there on that branch!"

The grey thing, needless to say, flew away without waiting to be recorded in the journal, and at first Yegor was afraid that the forest warden would send Kolka back for this excessive energy. But Yuri Petrovich would patiently explain each time what the scientific name for that grey thing was and what needed to be written about it, and by the end of the day Kolka was catching on. He didn't cry out, but, holding his breath and sticking out his tongue, he wrote in the notebook:

"1700 hours, 37 minutes. Small bird, tree pipit. Sat in a birch."

Kolka would show his father the notebook after each recording so that he would check for mistakes. Yegor was no authority when it came to spelling, but he hastened to remind Kolka each time, "Don't lose the watch, son."

Yuri Petrovich had given Kolka the watch. Temporarily, of course, for the accuracy of his observations.

"1700 hours, 58 minutes. Mouse. Ran somewhere, but I didn't see where from."

"Accuracy is the most important thing to the researcher," said Yuri Petrovich. "It's a writer that can make things up but we can't. You and I, Kolka, are martyrs of science."

"Why martyrs?"

"Because if you don't make sacrifices you won't make any discoveries in science. Anything that was discovered easily was lying wide open for a long time, and whatever's still unearthed requires selfless labor. So there you have it, Mr. Polushkin."

Yuri Petrovich spoke cheerfully and always louder than necessary. Kolka couldn't understand at first why he was making such an effort, but then it dawned on him: so that Nona Yurievna would hear. It was for her sake that Yuri Petrovich was straining his voice, just like Kolka himself did for Olya Kuzina.

Nona Yurievna, on the contrary, passed that entire day as if half-asleep. Everything seemed strange, almost unreal to her: Yuri Petrovich's smiles; Yegor's earnest expression; Kolka's mouth, agape in his diligence, the weight of the brand-new backpack; the smell of pine needles; the rustle of leaves; and the crackle of twigs and branches underfoot. She saw everything, heard everything and felt everything more keenly than ever, but as if from a distance, as if it were not she striding through this resonant forest reserve smothered in a wild-strawberry potion, but some other girl, a stranger even, whom Nona watched in distrustful amazement. For if someone had told her just yesterday that she would go to Black Lake with a stranger and Yegor Polushkin, she probably would have burst out laughing. But today she had gone. Gone without the slightest resistance. The forest warden had come running back from the Polushkins and asked, frowning, "Why aren't you ready? What the devil is that suitcase for? Don't you have a backpack? You don't? Where's the store? Around the corner? All right, you fix breakfast, I'll be right back."

Nona had scarcely blinked before Yuri Petrovich was back with the purchase. Then they ate, and he persuaded her to eat heartily. Then the Polushkins arrived: Yegor and Kolka. Then ... Then Yuri Petrovich swung on his massive backpack and said with a smile, "I'll be the commander of this parade."

Before she knew it, Nona found herself in the forest. And in the very pants that had lain at the bottom of her suitcase since that memorable school party. In a year's time they had grown a wee bit tight, a factor

which embarrassed Nona to no end. She was still feeling shy, still trying to keep to herself or, at worst, somewhere alongside Kolka. She still kept quiet, but now she was listening.

Nona had grown up in a home never visited by men. Therefore life had flowed with feminine measuredness, void of abrupt variations and upsets, so characteristic of masculine natures. Poetry had replaced human contacts, while symphonies had satisfied in full Nona's foggy perceptions of human passions. She had hurried home every evening, felt uncomfortable among her noisy girlfriends and carefully smothered her vague emotional languishings with the abundant revelations of great humanitarians.

Thus the days had raced by, untroubled, though, granted, with nothing to set them apart. Everything had been very correct and very sensible, but the evenings seemed to grow somehow ever longer, while a sense of anxiety - a strange, groundless and undirected anxiety - was forever growing, and it was with ever greater frequency that Nona, laying her book aside, would listen to that inexplicable, but not at all frightening, kind anxiety mounting within her. And then the pages would go unturned for some time, unseeing eyes would stare off into space, while her hand would autonomously draw thoughtful doodles on the empty pages of yet another report on old Russian literature.

Their department had had few young men, and those it did had already been snatched up by Nona's more far-sighted girlfriends. Nona hadn't attended dances, feared chance acquaintances, but had had no other way of filling up her circle of friends. So that endlessly long Leningrad evenings dragged on, spent - alas! - with Mama.

"Take care, daughter."

"Take care, Mama."

Who knows how much hope and how much fear had been imparted in those final words they had exchanged when the train was already in motion. The train started off and Mama had sidestepped along beside it, moving faster and faster, while Nona had smiled, mobilizing all her strength for that smile. Mama had smiled, too, though, and her smile was as like her daughter's as two teardrops.

"Take care, daughter."

"Take care, Mama."

Three hundred kilometers and two transfers later, Nona had finally reached the place of her assignment, was given a class, lessons, two truck loads of firewood and a room at the expense of public education. She had written Mama a very long letter, as cheerful as she could possibly make it, answered a good hundred questions on the part of her landlady, sobbed noiselessly into her pillow half the night, and in the morning appeared before her class and became Nona Yurievna. And gradually everything that had remained behind lectures and Mama's pies, concerts and Leningrad's bridges, the drama theater and tea parties at distant relatives' - all this dimmed and faded, became shrouded in the past and almost entirely unreal. The present was real: noisy recesses, children's eyes, the dust of the settlement, creaky sidewalks, worries about her own housing and livelihood. And the future? There was no future, because that which Nona Yurievna dreamed of was no different from the past or the present: she dreamed of a visit with Mama and Leningrad, and that there might be enough textbooks to go around next year.

And besides that, she dreamt of what every girl dreams of. But these dreams were so secret that it is impossible to describe them in any more or less coherent way.

And now here she was tramping through a dense forest with an unaccustomed backpack on her shoulders, and her shoes - ordinary low-heeled city shoes at the sight of which Yuri Petrovich had chuckled suspiciously kept sinking into the moss or slipping off her feet altogether. And her fashionable pants (which to her tremendous horror had suddenly grown so indecently tight) were soon soaked from the dew and covered with sap. And her nylon jacket, which she wore to school, kept catching on

branches and brambles. And Nona herself proved so unfit for such a trek that she was now hot, now cold all over. But she trudged on defiantly nonetheless, through the fallen trees and brush, though she felt unwanted and miserable.

By noon she had run out of strength altogether, but fortunately Yuri Petrovich called for a break just in time. Throwing off her backpack with relief, Nona immediately took to preparing lunch, in order to justify her participation in the hike to at least some small degree. True, Nona had rather abstract ideas about cooking in the field, but she undertook the task with such enthusiasm that in half an hour the oatmeal was already rising out of the pot, though it wasn't yet ready. Nona frantically shoved it back in, uttering some female incantations in a whisper, but the oatmeal kept stubbornly overflowing into the fire.

"We can feed an army," said Yuri Petrovich with a smile.

"That's quite an appetite you've got, Nona Yurievna!"

"We'll take care of it," said Yegor.

And they did. Only after they'd scraped their bowls clean did they feel really stuffed. Nona ran to the stream to wash the dishes. Yegor sent Kolka along to help, and the two men remained behind by the dying fire.

"So, you got a family, or are you a single man?" Yegor inquired politely.

Yuri Petrovich gave him a strange look and remained even more strangely silent. Yegor sensed the awkwardness and began to fuss.

"I apologize for my curiosity, o'course. It's just that you're a young fellow with a position and all, and I, uh, well ... you know."

"Yegor Savelich, I don't know myself for sure whether I'm a family man or a bachelor."

"How's that?"

"Just is, that's all."

Yuri Petrovich fell quiet. He took out his cigarettes, gave Yegor one. They lit up from one coal. Yegor, kicking himself a hundred times for being so nosey, tried to make small talk, even laughed uneasily four times or so but Yuri Petrovich was as sullen and thoughtful as before, and he answered irrelevantly.

Nona washed the dishes in the stream, also sullen and absorbed in her own thoughts, while Kolka babbled on incessantly at her side. As long as he was babbling about beasts and birds, Nona didn't listen, but Kolka suddenly stopped short, leaving his talk of hedgehogs unfinished. He thought for a moment, sighed and asked angrily, "So, you're gonna go away with him, with Yuri Petrovich, aren't you?"

"Go where?" Nona felt something burst inside her, a cold wave rush to her feet. "Why, Kolka?"

"Why, you'll get married and move to the city," Kolka explained rather aggressively. "They all do."

"Get married? Get married?" Nona took to laughing with all her might, splashing Kolka and dropping a spoon in the water. "Hear that, Yuri Petrovich? Hear that?"

She was deliberately shouting so that everyone would hear.

And everyone did hear: Yegor and the forest warden. Only they kept silent for some reason, in no hurry to share in Nona's mirth. And all at once Nona choked on her own artificially created laughter, blushed and began feeling for the spoon in the water.

"Why don't you answer?" asked her tormentor Kolka. "Means you really will leave us since you don't want to answer."

"That's silly, Kolka, silly. Stop it right now and don't ever bring it up again."

Why shouldn't he talk about it, when that's what everyone all around did? His last teacher had gotten married and - so long.

Kolka sighed. And Nona, catching that distrustful sigh, suddenly began to shout. Out of the blue, but through tears, so it seemed. "I'll never get married! Never ever, do you hear me?"

She shouted so loudly that Kolka believed her. There was no doubt: she really wouldn't get married. That was for sure.

16

Though the new forest warden had included Yegor in his excursion, thereby fulfilling Yegor's secret dream, his former vivacity, his former optimism - resonant and excited - now manifested itself nowhere and in nothing. Perhaps all Yegor's ordeals had run him down, or maybe he no longer believed in anything good, or else his new occupation felt too unfamiliar and not, say, manly enough - but for whatever reason he was experiencing no particular joy.

How many wishes to do good is a person allotted in life? How many times can he, downtrodden and ridiculed rise again, smile at his work once more, tackle it with enthusiasm? How many? Who knows? Maybe but once, maybe a hundred times? Perhaps Yegor had already exhausted his entire supply of resistance, scraped the bottom of all barrels, ground all the grain into flour, leaving nothing but chaff in him now? Where were they, these reserves, who measured and tested them and wasn't it time to throw in the towel, hit Yuri Petrovich up for three rubles and go racing back to Phil and Crock?

Who knows, maybe Yegor would have done just that - give up on his luck. Give up on it because he was afraid to trust it afraid to trust himself and afraid to trust the new forest warden. He would have hightailed it out of there, away from any new attempts to rise to his feet, peer inside himself, earn people's respect and confidence that he, Yegor Polushkin, wasn't an utterly hopeless soul. He would have done it, but there was Kolka striding along beside him. Kolka delighted in the forest and the animals, the little fool, happily trusting that this was indeed a most wonderful life. And, taking a look at this joy, Yegor understood that he could not betray it. And more than anything, more than the cruelest death, he feared that someone might betray this joy. Betray those eyes which looked up at you untainted and trusting. They even blinked now and again out of purity and trust.

"Pa, did I spell chickadee right?"

"Don't lose that watch, son."

"I know, I know!"

What was the use of counting all the birds and insects - who needed them. Only if for kicks, but Kolka believed in the necessity of it all. His eyes sparkled, his heart was set on it, he believed in all your little tricks. If you plan to deal with Kolka and me as they had with those ants, well, hold on just one minute. Me - I don't mind, but not the little guy.

"Did you give Kolka that notebook there for a reason or, you know, just for kicks?"

"Why for kicks?"

"To have a laugh around the campfire, I mean?"

Yuri Petrovich's reply did not follow at once. He thought for a moment, looked at Yegor. And all at once he stopped smiling.

"It's not the birds I need, Yegor Savelich, not the list of animals. It's Kolka himself need, understand? I need him to enter the forest like its master not its guest: to know where things are, who lives where and what they're called. And as for the campfire ... At the campfire, Yegor Savelich, we'll all sit together and

we'll all laugh together. Only not at our work: work, whatever it might be, is a man's labor. And you don't laugh at man's labor."

It wouldn't be right to say that these words immediately put Yegor's thoughts on a different track: thoughts are no steam engine. But he was reassured as far as Kolka was concerned, and his spirits rose a bit. For now it looked like no one had any intentions of laughing at his son, and he worried little about himself.

But they had no occasion to laugh at all that evening, because Nona disappeared. Vanished on the spot, right after dinner, leaving the dirty dishes behind her, and a harried search instead of a relaxed smoke followed.

This search was prompted by Nona's need to be alone. Seizing a moment when ever-present Kolka was distracted, Nona ducked into the bushes and ran as hard as she could away from the fire, away from two men she hardly knew and - most important! - away from Kolka. She kept running as long as she could hear voices, and since at that moment Kolka decided to sing, she had to run for a long time. And as she ran she didn't think about how she was going to get back; she only hoped that no one would notice.

Later, when that need of hers to be alone had subsided, the forest proved to be so much the same for all three hundred sixty degrees that when she started back, Nona decided to rely on her intuition alone and marched gallantly onward.

Fortunately, they noticed her absence soon. Kolka was performing his song especially for her and needed her appraisal. However, the listener was nowhere to be found, and after a brief look around, he reported this to his father.

"She'll be right back," Yegor concluded and went to wash the dishes in Nona's stead.

He washed all the spoons and dishes thoroughly, and still there was no sign of the teacher. Yegor hollered twice, got no answer and reported the disappearance.

"It's probably necessary," said Yuri Petrovich.

"Any necessity should have been finished half an hour ago," said Yegor. "And she's not answering my calls."

"Nona Yurievna!" shouted the forest warden heartily. "Where are you?"

They listened. Only the sounds of the forest could be heard.

They were the sounds of evening, deep and mysterious.

"What the devil?!" Yuri Petrovich frowned. "Nona! .. Hey! Where are you?"

"Mm-hm," said Yegor, cocking his ear. "A graveyard."

"What?" asked Yuri Petrovich, perplexed.

"Maybe she went home?" Kolka suggested quietly. "Got mad and went home."

"It's a long way home," said Yegor doubtfully.

Yuri Petrovich ran around the area, shouted, whistled. He came back worried.

"We'll have to hunt for her. Kolka, don't take a step away from the fire! You won't get scared by yourself?"

"Naw," Kolka sighed. "If I gotta."

"Ya gotta, son," Yegor confirmed and started off at a trot towards the forest. "Hey, Nona Yurievna!"

They hollered till they were hoarse. At first Yuri Petrovich was sorry he hadn't taken his gun along, then, that he *had* taken the girl along. What the devil had gotten into him?! But he didn't have to lament for long, for suddenly in the obscure forest twilight something altogether un-forest like, something absurd,

pitiful and sobbing appeared. Appeared, and before Yuri Petrovich had a chance to figure out what this apparition was, Nona had thrown her arms around his neck.

"Yuri Petrovich! Darling!"

She still cried like a child: loudly and not prettily. She sniffled, wiped her tears with the palms of her hands and gasped for breath.

"You damned fool!" Yuri Petrovich said with pleasure.

"This isn't the Kirov Recreation Park."

Nona nodded meekly, sniveling now from inertia. Yuri Petrovich was glad that it was dark in the forest and Nona couldn't see his laughing eyes or his smile, which he was trying so hard to conceal.

"The class leader got lost three steps away from camp. If I tell your students about this -"

"Don't tell them."

"Well, I'll spare you, I suppose. But what about Kolka?"

Nona Yurievna said nothing. They were making their way through the dark forest: Yuri Petrovich walked ahead clearing the way so Nona wouldn't trip up. The crack of the dry branches resounded in all directions.

"Marching through revolver bark and blast,⁵" said Yuri Petrovich and grew suddenly embarrassed, realizing that this flaunting of erudition was both untimely and out of place.

"Am I an idiot?" Nona asked confidentially.

"A bit."

Nona wanted to explain how it had all happened, but at that moment there was a great noise and Yegor Polushkin stumbled upon them.

"You found her! Thank God ... There aren't any bears in these parts, but it's not hard to get lost. Too bad Kolka lost his compass, or we'd give it to you."

Contrary to Nona Yurievna's secret apprehensions, Kolka met her very happily and didn't ask any questions. He merely grumbled, "Now don't you leave my side."

"Had enough fun for the evening?" Yuri Petrovich smiled.

"All right, let's get some sleep. Damsels and pages into the tent, knights under the shaggy fir."

Kolka's head didn't even reach the pillow: he lay down and was out like a light. But Nona lay awake for some time, though Yegor had done his best, making up a bed for her of the very softest fir twigs.

So, she really had kissed him. In her fear and tears she had been unconscious of her actions and would have thrown her arms around Phil or Crock without a moment's hesitation had either of them chanced to find her. But it was Yuri Petrovich who had found her, and Nona Yurievna could still feel his rough, weather-beaten, unshaven cheek on her lips, furtively put her fingers to those culpable lips and smiled.

The men fell asleep at once. Yegor snored, his head thrown back, while Yuri Petrovich sighed in his sleep and frowned. Perhaps because he was having a bad dream, or because he was displeased with his proximity to sonorous Yegor.

He awoke early: Yegor, climbing out from under the groundsheet that covered the both of them, tugged on the wrong edge.

"Where are you going? It's still early."

⁵ From Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem "To Comrade Nette-Steamer and Man".- Ed.

"I, uh ... " Yegor was oddly embarrassed. "I'll have a look around. You go back to sleep."

Yuri Petrovich glanced at his watch - it was around five rolled over, wondered vaguely how Nona was sleeping, and fell sound asleep. Yegor took the kettle and started for the river.

A light mist was still hanging here and there over the water, still clinging to the damp willow bushes, and the calm water clearly reflected everything that peered into it that morning. Yegor dipped the kettle into the water, sending ripples across its surface; his reflection wavered, faded for an instant and reappeared: just as incredibly crisp and deep as before. Yegor stared at it, cautiously, as if afraid of startling it, drew out the full kettle, quietly placed it on the ground and sat down beside it.

A strange sensation of complete, almost triumphant tranquility suddenly overcame him. He heard that quiet and understood that that was what quiet really was, that it was not at all the absence of sounds but merely nature's rest, its dream, its pre-dawn sighs. He felt the freshness of the mist with his entire body, discerned its smell, steeped on the bitterish willow bushes. He saw in the water's depths the birches' white trunks and an alder's black crown: they intertwined with the water-lilies floating up toward the sun, converging almost imperceptibly at the very bottom. And he was suddenly saddened by the realization that in an instant it would all be gone, gone forever, for when it came back it would be different, not how he, Yegor Polushkin, odd-job man of communal services at the local Soviet, had seen and felt it. And all at once he knew what he wanted: to scoop up in his hands that untainted beauty and, carefully, so as not to cloud or spill it, present it to people. But it was impossible to scoop it up, and Yegor could not draw, nor had he seen a single real painting in his life. Thus he simply sat over the water, afraid to stir, forgetting the kettle and forgetting to smoke, forgetting Kolka and Yuri Petrovich and all the woes of his absurd life.

Something rustled nearby. Yegor looked up: something white flickered behind a bush, someone sighed, cautiously, a half-sigh. He craned his neck and caught sight of Nona Yurievna through the foliage: she had just removed her robe and was gingerly, like a heron, testing the water with her white foot. Yegor thought that he ought to take the kettle and leave, but he didn't, because that half-sigh and those smooth feminine movements had come from here also, from the same picture over which he had suddenly frozen, oblivious to everything on earth.

Nona, in the meantime, took off everything that was left on her and entered the water. She moved slowly, feeling around the bottom, graceful and awkward at once. Now Yegor stared at the young woman with the same sense of tranquility he had felt as he peered into the river, at her long thighs and thin, sloping shoulders, at her small, girlish breasts and at the heavy, important glasses which she could not quite bring herself to leave on the bank. And as he watched her splash in the shallow water, he understood that he was not peeping, that there was nothing shameful in what he did, that here was the same thing he had found in the river, the birch trees, the fog: beauty.

Having rinsed herself, Nona returned to the bank, and as she rose out of the water, her body seemed to become filled with frightened embarrassment; she hadn't hands enough to cover everything she would have liked, and she bent over, craning her neck as far as she could and surveying the bushes apprehensively with her big glasses, which dripped silver droplets like tears. Yegor was about to leave, when on the bank she calmly began tending to her hair, diligently wringing it out and drying it, and again she bent over, though no longer shyly, but freely, uninhibited, and Yegor nearly gasped in the inexplicable excitement that suddenly overcame him. Once again he was sorry that he was unable - that it was impossible and unfathomable - to preserve for people this instant too, to deliver it to them in his calloused palms.

But then he came to and, snatching up the kettle, ducked into the bushes and returned to the campfire before Nona and from the opposite direction. Then they had breakfast, took down the tents, packed up

the goods, and all the while Yegor saw the quiet river and the graceful white figure reflected in the clear water. And this made him sigh.

At lunchtime they came out onto the shore of Black Lake. It really was black indeed: lonely, secret, with shaggy fir trees hanging over its still waters.

"Here we are," said Yuri Petrovich, throwing off his backpack with pleasure. "You get set up; Kolka and I'll go round up some fish."

He took out a collapsible fishing rod and a box of spoon bait and started toward the water. Kolka ran alongside, staring wide-eyed at the strange metal fishing rod with a reel.

"Gonna use a worm, Uncle Yuri?"

"Spoon bait. For pike or perch."

"Hm ... " Kolka said doubtfully. "That's just a waste of time, I'll bet."

"Maybe so. Step aside, Mr. Polushkin."

On the fifth cast the line grew taut and a two-kilo pike came to the surface like a candle.

"We got a bite!" cried Kolka. "Pa! Nona Yurievna! We caught a pike!"

"Don't go shouting yet, we haven't pulled 'er in yet."

The shore was low, marshy, overgrown with sedge, and Yuri Petrovich had no trouble bringing in the pike grey-green with a gaping black mouth. Its white belly slid along the sedge, Yuri Petrovich pinned the pike with the tip of his boot, disgorged the hook and tossed the fish away from shore.

"There's lunch."

"What about me -" Kolka was so excited he choked on his saliva. "Can I try?"

"Here. Practice," said Yuri Petrovich.

He showed the boy how to cast, and, screwing the pike on a stick went back to the campfire. Kolka stayed on the shore. He hadn't yet got the hand of casting, the spoon bait flew wherever it wanted, but Kolka kept trying.

"Costs money, no doubt," said Yegor anxiously. "He could break it."

"Then we'd fix it," Yuri Petrovich smiled, and Nona responded with a smile of her own.

Kolka cast his line into Black Lake till dusk. He came back disappointed, but with a discovery:

"Someone's campfire there on the other side of the Spit. Lots of empty cans. And bottles."

Everyone went to have a look. The high bank was tramped and partially scorched, and fresh tree stumps dotted it like pockmarks.

"Tourists," said Yuri Petrovich with a sigh. "There's a protected forest for you. Nice work, Buryanov!"

"Maybe he didn't know about it," said Yegor softly.

The tourists had even gone so far as to tear up the boundary marker and burn it: a hole in the ground and a charred log were all that remained.

"Really lived it up!" said Yuri Petrovich angrily. "We'll have to put up a new marker, Yegor Savelich. You take care of that while we circle the lake: maybe we'll find more signs of merry-making."

"Will do," said Yegor. "You go on and don't worry about a thing."

They sat around the campfire till late. Kolka, worn out by the fishing rod, slept soundly in the tent. The mosquitoes devoured Nona rapturously, but she put up with it despite the fact that no interesting topic of conversation ever did arise. They stared at the fire, exchanging occasional words, but all three felt good and at peace.

"Black Lake," sighed Nona. "It's too dismal a name for such beauty."

"Now it's Black," said Yuri Petrovich. "Now it's Black, but in old times - I like looking through old books - in old times do you know what it was called? Swan."

"Swan?"

"There were once a lot of swans around here. Some special kind of swans: they were sent to Moscow, for the tsar's table."

"You mean they eat them?" Yegor asked incredulously,

"Why, that's a sin."

"They did at one time."

"They had different tastes back then," said Nona.

"There were lots of swans," Yuri Petrovich smiled. "But now, you see, it's Black. And it's a miracle it was saved at all."

Kolka shunned the proposal to circle the lake: he had been casting since early that morning, determined that he had a long way to go before achieving perfection, and firmly resolved to keep practicing. Yuri Petrovich reacted calmly to his refusal but it made Nona very anxious, and in her anxiety she became frantic.

"No, no, Kolka, don't be silly! You absolutely must come with us, do you hear? From an educational point of view and -"

"I want to catch a pike," said Kolka.

"You'll catch one later, afterwards. We'll come back and -"

"Yeah, come back! I need to practice. Yuri Petrovich can cast fifty meters."

"Kolka, please. Please come with us."

Yuri Petrovich, holding back a smile, observed the cowardly Nona. Then he took pity on her.

"We'll take the fishing rod with us, Kolka. You've already scared all the pike off around here."

This argument worked, and Kolka ran to get his things. Yuri Petrovich said, "So, it turns out you're a chicken, Nona Yurievna."

Nona grew red enough to light a cigarette. But she said nothing.

Left alone, Yegor unhurriedly took up the business at hand. He deepened the hole with the digging kit of provident Yuri Petrovich. He spotted an aspen for the new marker, had a smoke, then took his axe and tramped around the fated tree, trying to determine the best direction in which to fell it. Into the young aspen grove? - that wouldn't do. Into the fir grove? it was downright sinful to crush it. Into the cutting? - then he'd have some three hours' work clearing it away. How about in the fourth direction?

There was nothing of any interest on the fourth side: only what remained of a linden, broken long ago. It was clear that this linden had seen its share of grief from its seedling days: it was all bent and twisted, having fought for its life. The branches started almost right at the base and grew oddly, twisting in all different directions too. Yegor took a casual look at it, then another, in order to aim the aspen's fall on it. Then he spit on his hands, raised the axe, held it up, took another look and ... And lowered the axe. And, not yet thinking of anything, not yet understanding anything, he walked up to that broken linden.

He had seen something in it. Seen it suddenly, all at once, as if by a flash of lightning, but now he had forgotten and could only stare in confusion at the intricate, tangled, twisted branches. And he could not for the life of him understand what it was he had seen.

He had another smoke, sat down at a distance and continued to stare at that gnarled mass, trying to figure out what it was about it that had struck him in mid-swing. He surveyed it from the right and the left, stepped back, leaned forward, then with sudden clarity he mentally removed half the branches and

recovered his vision. He jumped up, bustled about, ran around the gnarled mass in an inexplicable state of joyous excitement.

"All right, okay," he muttered, peering at the jumbled branches to the point of physical exhaustion. "The body is white like a girl's. She's thrown back her head and she's drying her hair ..."

He swallowed the lump that had rolled up in his throat, raised his axe, but immediately lowered it again, and, urging himself not to rush, stepped back from the linden and sat down again, not taking his eyes off it. He had already forgotten about the boundary marker, about the new forest warden, about Nona Yurievna and even about Kolka: he forgot about everything on earth and felt now only an unrestrained, mounting excitement that made his fingers shake, his heart pound and his forehead break out in a sweat. Then he rose and, knitting his bleached brows sternly, marched decisively up to the linden and swung his axe.

He knew now where to cut. He had seen what needed to go. The forest warden returned with the teacher and Kolka the next day. Dishevelled, Yegor sat by a fire long since died out and looked up at them sheepishly.

"Pa, I caught a perch!" Kolka cried out as they approached. "With the reel, Pa!"

Yegor didn't even stir and seemed not to have heard anything. Yuri Petrovich poked at the ash and smirked.

"I guess we'll have to fry it up. For four."

"I'll make some oatmeal," said Nona hastily, glancing at queer Yegor with fear and sympathy. "It won't take long."

"Oatmeal it is," said Yuri Petrovich with annoyance. "What's with you, Polushkin? Are you sick?"

Yegor said nothing.

"Did you put up the marker at least?"

Yegor gave a fateful sigh, shook his head and stood up.

"Come on. It's all the same."

He walked toward the clearing without looking back. Yuri Petrovich looked at Nona, Nona looked at Yuri Petrovich, and both started after Yegor.

"There it is," said Yegor. "That's the marker."

A slender, graceful woman, wringing her hands, bent over as if to fix her hair. Her white body shone dully in the forest's green twilight.

"There," Yegor repeated quietly. "That's just what came out."

No one said a word. Yegor, too, fell sadly quiet and bowed his head. He knew what should follow that silence, was ready for the scolding and sorry that he had gotten carried away once again, cursing himself for all he was worth.

"Humpf, some woman," smirked Kolka, who had now arrived on the scene.

"Why, it's ... miraculous," said Nona softly. "You just don't understand anything yet, Kolka."

And she put her arms around his shoulders. Yuri Petrovich took out his cigarettes and held them out to Yegor. When they had lit up he asked, "How'd you haul it over here by yourself Polushkin?"

"I guess I had the strength," Yegor replied quietly, and he broke down and cried.

The morning that Yegor was counting the rings on the water and inadvertently admiring Nona Yurievna, Fyodor Ipatovich and Yakov Prokopych ran into one another at the food store. Yakov Prokopych always peeked into the store on his way to the boat rental, right at opening time: perhaps they'd gotten something of interest? As for Fyodor Ipatovich, he got tips from above: the store manager personally kept him abreast of the news. And today he had set out here for herring: there'd been a delivery of canned herring. A delicacy. And for this herring Fyodor Ipatovich had nestled in at the head of the line.

"Howdy, Fyodor Ipatovich," said Yakov Prokopych, taking a place nineteenth in line: Fyodor Ipatovich was not the only one on friendly terms with the store manager and the salesgirls.

"My compliments," Fyodor Ipatovich replied and opened up his newspaper - to convey that he had no intention of engaging in conversation.

Any other day Yakov Prokopych might have made note of this disrespect, and would, perhaps, have taken offense even. But he took no offense now because he bore scalding news and was dying to get it off his chest.

"What's the latest word on the inspection? Has it been effective?"

"What inspection's that?"

"The forest inspection, Fyodor Ipatovich. The forest reserve, that is."

"I don't know anything about any inspection," said Fyodor Ipatovich, but the lines in the paper suddenly ran together, the letters hopped up and down.

"Ah, so it's a secret inspection," concluded Yakov Prokopych. "And no word from your brother-in-law?"

"Which brother-in-law's that?"

"Your brother-in-law. Yegor Polushkin."

Everything became a blur before Fyodor Ipatovich's eyes: what inspection? What did Yegor have to do with it? He wanted to ask, on the one hand, but, on the other, he couldn't bear to lose face. He folded up his paper, stuck it in his pocket, frowned.

"So, everyone knows about it."

What they knew he wouldn't mind finding out himself. But how?

"Sure do," Yakov Prokopych confirmed. "Only they don't know the conclusions."

"What conclusions?" Fyodor Ipatovich was put on his guard. "There won't be any conclusions."

"So, I see you're not completely in the know, Fyodor Ipatovich," said the meticulous Yakov Prokopych.

"There're gonna be some tough conclusions. For the future. That's why they've included the schoolteacher in the committee - for those conclusions."

What committee? What schoolteacher? What conclusions? Tortured by these allusions, Fyodor Ipatovich was all ready to come right out and ask Yakov Prokopych about everything, but at that moment the store opened. Everyone filed in, lined up at the counters, and their conversation was cut off.

It was resumed only afterwards, when they had stocked up: Fyodor Ipatovich waited outside expressly for this reason.

"Yakov Prokopych, I don't quite understand here. Where did you say Polushkin's passing his time?"

"In the forest he's passing his time: leading the committee. Into those protected woodland quarters of yours."

Fyodor Ipatovich came home in a foul mood. He barked at Maritsa so fiercely that she nearly dropped the glass she was carrying. Sat down to breakfast - couldn't get a single bite down. Oh, you, Yegor

Polushkin! Dirty rat! No wonder he had been doing that schoolteacher favors: he was undermining his position. Right at the root.

He passed the day in silence, dwelling on his leaden thoughts. A committee was no holiday, an inspection no gift. But that was not so bad, that he could tolerate; now, the fact that it was his own brother-in-law, his friend, that damned loser who had taken a crowbar to the foundation of his life - that was unforgivable. It burnt like a flame to the point of unbearable pain. Fyodor Ipatovich could not forgive this. He would not have forgiven anyone this, much less Yegor.

For two days he was not himself and hardly ate. He growled at Maritsa, frowned at Vova. Then he seemed to snap out of it, even began to smile. Only those who knew Fyodor well could really appreciate that smile, frozen there forever.

Well now, Yegor Polushkin didn't know about this smile, nor did he suspect it. Even if he had known he wouldn't have paid it any mind. He had no thoughts for other people's smiles - he was smiling from ear to ear himself. And Kolka smiled, unable to believe his own good fortune: Yuri Petrovich had given him the fishing rod.

"And the amazing thing is that I didn't see it right off!" Yegor told them for the hundredth time with undying elation. "First, you know, it sort of struck me, then I forgot what it was. I stared and stared, you know, and then I saw it again!"

"You need to study, Yegor Savelich," Nona went on harping persistently.

"Well, you know more about that of course, but I was struck! Struck, believe it or not, my dear, kind friends!"

Thus joyously recalling his sudden awakening, he came striding back to the settlement. And on the edge he came to a sudden halt.

"What's up, Yegor?"

"Well," said Yegor seriously and sighed. "You won't turn me down, will ya? I'm so happy I just can't bring myself to part with you. Maybe you'll come by my place? We haven't got much, of course, but maybe you'd do me the honor?"

"Maybe later, Yegor Savelich?" Nona said hesitantly. "I should change my clothes ... "

"You look fine as you are," said Yuri Petrovich. "Thanks Yegor, we'd love to."

"Don't thank me, for goodness sake! Thank you!"

It was a weekday, a fact which Yegor had sort of forgotten during his "vacation". Haritina was working, Olya was at the nursery, and at home they were met by the cat's discontent alone. Yegor scoured all the cupboards, but the cupboards were quite bare, and he immediately started bustling about.

"Let's see now, let's see. Son, you fix up some potatoes, uh? Nona Yurievna, you give some thought to what needs doing. And you, Yuri Petrovich, you just take it easy for now."

"Maybe we ought to wait for the lady of the house?"

"She'll be along just in time, so you just take it easy. Have a smoke, wash up. Kolka'll show you where everything is."

While hastily muttering these hospitable words, Yegor managed to reach behind the icon several times, feel the empty candy box there and realize that there wasn't a coin in the house. This circumstance puzzled him greatly, adding to his usual nervous fidgeting, because as he muttered he tried desperately to think of where he could come up with ten rubles. However, besides the angry face of Haritina, nothing useful came to mind.

"So, yes, you just take it easy. And I'll, uh ... be back in a jiffy, yep."

"How about if I join you?" Yuri Petrovich offered quietly when Nona had left the room with Kolka. "After all, this is a man's business."

Yegor frowned. He even held up a threatening finger. "Now don't offend me. You're a guest, Yuri Petrovich. That's only proper. So you just sit back and relax. Have a smoke. I'll take care of everything."

"What about as a friend?"

"I won't hear of it," Yegor sighed. "Now don't go spoiling a fine day."

And off he ran.

His one hope lay with Haritina. Perhaps she carried something with her, perhaps she could borrow from someone, or maybe she could suggest something worthwhile. So, with an empty bag, at the bottom of which an orphaned empty bottle rolled about, Yegor raced straight away to his faithful wife.

"Did you ask me before you invited them? Now you can make do on your own."

"Tina, honey, that's impossible what you're saying."

"Impossible? Well, there in my impossible wallet I've got all of a ruble and a half till next pay day. For bread and milk for Olya."

She stood before Yegor red, sweaty, frazzled. And she held her hands, big and steaming, on her stomach. Protectively, like precious breadwinners.

"Maybe someone would lend us some?"

"We haven't got any lenders. You invited 'em, now you tend to 'em."

"Tina!"

She left. And Yegor sighed, paced about the steamy corridor that led to the kitchen, and suddenly raced out. To his last resort and his last hope: Fyodor Ipatovich Buryanov.

"I see," said Fyodor Ipatovich when he'd heard the whole story. "You say the forest warden was completely satisfied?"

"Completely, Fyodor Ipatovich," Yegor confirmed. "He smiled."

"Did you go out to Black Lake?"

"Mm-hm. There'd been, uh ... some tourists there. They burned up the forest a bit, made a mess."

"And did he smile at that, the forest warden?"

Yegor sighed, bowed his head, shuffled his feet. He knew he should lie, but he couldn't. "Nope, he didn't smile at that. He mentioned your name."

"And when else did he mention my name?"

"When we came across the old cutting on the way back. In the big pine-grove."

"So, what are the conclusions?"

"No one told me anything about conclusions."

"And who led them to the cutting? A compass?"

"They came upon it on their own. On the way back."

"On their own, eh? My, my, what smart feet they've got." Fyodor Ipatovich was sitting on the porch in an old open shirt without a belt or buttons. He was pounding the axe heads into the shafts: some ten axes lay at his feet. Yegor stood opposite him, shifting from one foot to the other: his empty half-liter bottle clanking in his bag. He avoided Fyodor Ipatovich's eyes: the one asking the favor is always at fault from the very start.

"All by themselves, you say. They found the tourists by themselves and the old clearings: clever. Smart folks, I guess?"

"Smart folks, Fyodor Ipatovich," Yegor ,sighed.

"My, my. And look what I'm doing. I'm repairing equipment: it'll have to be passed on according to an inventory list. So, what do you say, Yegor, am I fixing it for nothing?"

"Fixin's not breaking - it's always useful."

"Useful, you say? Then listen to my conclusion. Get off my yard this instant before I sick Palma on you! I don't ever want to see you or hear you again. What're you just standing there for, you damned loser? Vova, let Palma loose! Bite him, Palma, get him! Get him!"

Here Palma lit in all right, and Yegor left. No, not because of Palma: dogs had never bothered him. He left on his own, having realized that no one here was going to lend him any money. And this made him very sad.

He left the yard, stopped and glanced at the cock that had been made with his axe. He smiled up at it as he would at a friend, and his sadness instantly vanished. So, he hadn't found money to treat his guests, so, was this any reason to grieve when the cock was crowing from the rooftop and the white maiden was combing out her hair in the forest? No, Fyodor Ipatovich, you can't hurt me now, because a calm has settled inside me. The kind of calm that will never visit you, will never smile at you. And the fact that there's no money and I can't receive folks, well that's nothing. If they understood my maiden, they'll understand this too.

And once he had thought about things this way he trotted off toward home with a light heart and an empty bag. And the empty bottle bounced gayly in time.

"Hey, Polushkin! Polushkin!"

He turned around: Yakov Prokopych. Coming from the boat rental, it seemed: he was carrying keys in his hand.

"Howdy, Polushkin. Where're you rushing of to?"

Yegor told him where he was rushing off to.

"Important guest," Yakov Prokopych noted. "And your bag's empty. Awkward."

"We'll have tea."

"Awkward," Yakov Prokopych repeated sternly. "However, neighbor to neighbor, we can discuss this. I have an unopened can of herring and I'll duck into the store with your empty bag. You have an important guest. Good enough?"

"Is what good enough?" Yegor didn't get it.

Yakov Prokopych gave him a look of disgust. He even sighed, reproaching him for his slowness.

"An introduction."

"Ah!" said Yegor. "To you, you mean?"

"I come from the store with all the goods. You're happy to see me and introduce me. As your former boss who was always fair."

"Uh-huh," said Yegor with relief, having grasped at last all the intricacies of the exchange. "Good enough."

"You're a good guy, Polushkin," Yakov Prokopych noted emphatically, taking Yegor's empty bag. "The forest warden is an important bird. That is, if he's not migratory, of course."

With this they parted. Yegor went on home, where the potatoes were already boiling up a storm. And half an hour later Yakov Prokopych himself showed up, bag in hand, and the bag no longer gave a clank but a gurgle. He wore a brand spanking new suit and a straw hat with holes.

The whole trick here was that Yakov Prokopych was very fond of meeting people who occupied posts. And the higher the post the more fond of it he was. He even boasted, "I'm acquainted with the secretary. And two chairmen."

And it didn't matter to him what they were chairmen or secretaries of. He had his own ranking system.

And he found the precise placement for the new forest warden: a tad higher than the director of the state farm and a tad below the instructor of the regional party committee. Yakov Prokopych wasn't interested in the personal qualities of Yuri Petrovich Chuvalov. Granted, by the same token, he did not count on getting any favors from him. His desire to get acquainted was a strictly disinterested one.

"We don't observe many restrictions," he was saying at the table. "Lot of distractions in our people these days. Take my life, for instance: what's the most important part of it? The most important part of it is what's ordered. But I'm alone, and I'm not happy. There's something, dear, respected friend, that makes me unhappy. Perhaps there's something I haven't achieved, maybe something I haven't quite understood, I don't know. I know that I'm approaching old age, to put it scientifically, without total respect for myself. An unclarity."

Yuri Petrovich had a hard time maintaining this lofty talk, while Yegor had stopped listening altogether. He was delighted to have good, cheery people sitting in his home and delighted that Haritina, having returned from work, was thrusting out her bosom for quite another reason now.

"Well, greetings to you all, dear guests of ours! Nona, you beauty, you're lookin' so rosey from our sunshine, honey! You've ripened right up like an apple, dearie!"

She kissed Nona, and addressed Yegor with respect, and dug some candies and cookies out of hiding. Then she led Nona out to the kitchen. Yegor didn't know what they talked about in here, but he had no fear, because he believed in everything good, hastily and joyously. He didn't know that his stern, loud and strong wife had suddenly burst into tears, softly and piteously.

"I haven't got any strength left, Nona, honey. He's worn me out, that husband of mine, tormented and deprived me of my sleep. Better he'd be drinkin' every day, better if he beat me or looked around at other gals' skirts. The years are passing by, the kids are growing up, and we haven't got any stability in life. No stability, my girl. None today and won't be none tomorrow. How do you foster kids without family stability and ordinary human respect? The mother feeds the body, the father the soul - that's how the world's made up. But if there's discord in the family, if a dark and ignorant woman like myself has to put food on the table and build the soul for both the mother and the father, well that's woe, Nona honey, bitter grief! We womenfolk can't build our son's souls. Why, we're loud-mouthed and forgiving, tearful and unresourceful. We pass the day washing and cooking, and you can't raise a man in the kitchen."

So she cried, but for Yegor everything was wonderful, everything was right, and after the third shot he broke down.

"Give us a song, eh, Tina? Do our dear guests the honor."

As soon as the words were out he regretted them: she'd start in with her "Woe-woe-woe" again. But Haritina thrust out her chest, threw back her head, strained and let out a wail that made the glass rattle:

Why, girls, do you love the handsome ...

And Yuri Petrovich, frowning his brow, took up the harmony. He was followed by Nona: quiet, embarrassed. And then Yegor and Kolka. Haritina led the song, and they sang along. With deference and solicitude.

Only Yakov Prokopych didn't sing: he sat frowning. He was sorry to have wasted his goods for nothing: what kind of official would be singing the harmony in songs? No, he wouldn't last long, that was for sure. Not long at all.

The whole town heard what songs were sung at Polushkin's house. How the whole company escorted Nona Yurievna home, how she laughed and how Yegor personally sang her his favorite song:

*Oh kind folks, don't you know,
I'd rather die than see you go!*

Yuri Petrovich went back to Yegor's to spend the night.

Kolka was put to bed in the house, while the two men went to sleep in the shed. And now no one heard what they talked about, because the conversation was a serious one.

"Yegor, what if I put you in charge of the forest?"

"What about my brother-in-law? Fyodor Ipatovich?"

"He's a dog, that Fyodor Ipatovich of yours. A dog and a scoundrel: you saw for yourself. What does your conscience say? If I made you the forester, could I count on order?"

Yegor said nothing for a moment, thinking things over. A week ago he would have grown hoarse reassuring him that there would be order and work and everything would be shipshape. But now - how strange! - now he didn't even get very excited. No, he did get excited, of course, but he didn't express his excitement; rather, he calmly thought it all over, weighed it and said, like an important man, "You could count on complete order."

"Thanks, Yegor. We'll decide everything tomorrow. Good night."

Yuri Petrovich rolled over and began breathing evenly, but Yegor lay sleepless for a long time. Lay there thinking good thoughts, enjoying a sense of utter calm, and imagining what good and useful things he would do in the forest. And these thoughts merged unnoticeably with his dreams, and he fell soundly to sleep, like a boy. Without worries or cares.

But Fyodor Ipatovich, now, he slept badly: snored, tossed and turned, awoke suddenly and listened to the dog. Palma rattled her chain, tugged at the leash, barked for the whole neighbourhood to hear, and Fyodor Ipatovich thought what a pity it was that she wasn't an old dog. He grew angry, tossed and turned, and then decided that, pity or no, he would shoot her come spring. And with this heartening decision he managed to make it till morning in troubled half-slumber.

He sat down to breakfast without any hint of an appetite. He poked at his eggs with his fork, frowned, grumbled at Maritsa. Then he glanced out the window and nearly dropped his fork.

In front of his house stood Yegor Polushkin and the new forest warden Yuri Petrovich Chualov. Yegor was pointing at the rock and laughing.

"Clear this all away, Maritsa," said Fyodor Ipatovich. "All what, Fyodor honey?"

"Clear the grub away!" he barked suddenly. "Everything, so the table's bare!"

Maritsa hadn't had a chance to wipe off the table before the door swung open and the two stepped in. They exchanged greetings but didn't shake hands. As for Yegor, well it wasn't proper for him to shake hands first anyway, but the fact that Chualov withheld his handshake from Buryanov - this put Fyodor Ipatovich on his guard.

"Nice little house you got here," said Yuri Petrovich. "Isn't it a bit cramped for three?"

"Cramped? For us? In our own home -" Maritsa started in.

"Hold on!" snapped the master of the house. "Get out of here. We've got our own business to discuss."

Maritsa joined her son in the next room. Vova gave her a sign and pressed his ear back to the key hole.

"And wood floors. Fancy."

"Everything's paid for. Everything's in accordance with the law."

"We'll ask the court about the law. In the meantime, let's get down to business: this is the new forester, Yegor Polushkin. I'd like you to turn all the equipment and papers over to him in my presence."

"I don't see any order."

"You'll have it soon enough."

"When I get it then I'll turn everything over."

"Don't complicate your situation, Buryanov. Turn it over now, you'll have the order tomorrow. Everything's clear. So let's get started. What do you say, Yegor?"

"Let's get started," said Yegor.

"Well, all right," said Fyodor Ipatovich as if he were dropping a ten-pound weight. "Let's get started."

For two days straight Yegor received equipment, and he examined every axe, every yoke. Then he escorted Yuri Petrovich back to town, harnessed the mare now at his disposal and started for the forest reserve along with Kolka. To put things in order.

"When will you be back?" asked Haritina.

"Not for some time," he said. "We won't be back till we've done everything that needs doing."

Kolka jerked the reins, clacked his tongue, and off they went. Meanwhile, Yuri Petrovich, having arrived in the city, sat down at once and wrote two orders: one concerning the dismissal of F. I. Buryanov, the other concerning the appointment of Y. S. Polushkin. Then he pulled out Fyodor Ipatovich's folder for the head of the Criminal Investigation Department, wrote up the report necessary for activating the case, and, once home, sat down to his letter. In large script he wrote:

"Dearest Mama ... "

Having completed the letter, he sat at length frowning his brow and staring off into space. Then he took the pen, wrote decisively, "Dear Marina," thought for a moment, crossed it out, wrote simply "Marina", crossed that out too and threw down the pen. The letter wouldn't come together, the arguments did not seem convincing, the motives unclear, and, when it came right down to it, he hadn't decided yet whether he wanted to write the letter at all. So he didn't.

In the meantime, Yegor was merrily tending to the forest, cleaning up the overgrown clearings, gathering the fallen trees and dead wood into heaps. He constructed a lean-to, where he and Kolka lived so as not to waste time traveling to and from home. And still he hadn't enough time, and he was overjoyed that he hadn't, and had the days been twice as long, he would have filled them from dawn to dusk anyway. He worked zealously, with exhausting, almost sensual pleasure, and, as he fell asleep he would always have time to think what a happy man he was. He slept with a smile, awoke with a smile and wore it all day long.

"Son, can you write poetry?"

Kolka snorted angrily and said nothing. Yegor was persistent; he asked again. Kolka snorted again, but replied, "That's none of anyone's business."

"But this is important," Yegor explained. "You see, son, the tourists are gonna find their way in here anyway, since you can't build a wall around the entire forest, and I can't keep a watch on everything myself. And that'll make a new headache for Yuri Petrovich. Well, of course, we could write signs for the tourists: you know, what's allowed and what's forbidden. Only that's dull, signs in the forest, don't you think? So I was thinking, why not poems? Good poems about order. It'll be pleasant for the tourists and we can relax."

"All right," Kolka said with a sigh. "I'll try."

After his ode to the death of Uncas, Kolka had written but one poem - about a girl with braids and love till the grave but nothing good had come of it. Olya Kuzina had shown the poem to Vova Buryanov, Vova had read it to the class amidst guffaws of laughter, and Kolka was called lover-boy for a long time afterwards. He was deeply shaken and had resolved to abandon creative writing for good.

"If only for business' sake. Otherwise it's all a lot of nonsense, Pa."

"Now, I wouldn't say so," Yegor said doubtfully. "What about songs then?"

"What about 'em? You're not gonna sing songs to the tourists, are ya?"

"No," Yegor conceded. "No time. We'll ... you know ... do 'em in poker work."

The next day Kolka didn't go into the forest with his father, and he set his fishing rod aside. He took out a notebook and a pencil and, frowning and working his lips angrily, began composing a poem. This proved a difficult task, and Kolka perspired and wore himself, but that evening he presented the first fruits.

"All right, Pa, listen." In search of inspiration Kolka glanced at the evening sky, cleared his throat and recited:

*"Campers, attention
we'd Just like to mention:
don't make lots of fires
in these forest lands.
You had better look around
for where firewood abounds,
for a campfire made
by the ranger."*

"Um-hm," said Yegor. "That's good about the campfire, or, heaven forbid, they'll burn down the forest. That'll do fine, son. Good job."

"I've got another one about ants," Kolka announced, clearly flattered by his father's recognition. "It goes like this:

*I am an ant.
Forest dweller am I,
and here is my home
beneath the tall pine.
Walk by it, I say
and be on your way
thaf s all that I'm askin'
of you folks today."*

"Now that's what I call a poem!" said Yegor with feeling. "You wrote that one up real good. And neat."

"I'll write some more tomorrow!" cried Kolka, inspired. "Maybe I'll write a whole book in rhyme!"

"They need to be short," Yegor pointed out. "Short and clear. Like the one about the ants."

"They'll be short," Kolka reassured him. "Short and snappy. "

Leaving Kolka to compose his snappy poems, Yegor set out for home the next day. He planed some boards, knocked them together, loaded everything on the cart, and by evening the ever-tolerant state-owned mare started back to the lean-to alongside Black Lake.

The old mare walked at a staid pace. Yegor assiduously swatted mosquitoes and thought about what else needed doing in the forest under his jurisdiction. Mark the old trees, perhaps, so that - God forbid! - no one would fell them for firewood or construction materials. Come up with something else for the tourists, who, having caught wind of this protected zone, wouldn't leave it alone now for anything. And perhaps indeed record all the forest fauna in a thick notebook and present it to Yuri Petrovich: boy, would he be surprised!

And so he rambled along in his cart down the even woodland road thinking his thoughts, until the prolonged crack of a falling tree caught his attention. The tree fell to the ground with a heavy sigh and instantly everything became quiet again. Yegor, drawing in the reins, jumped from the cart and started off at a run. As he ran, he heard with growing clarity the hurried whack-whack of thieving axes, and he ran toward that sound.

Two men busied themselves by the felled tree, chopping off its limbs. But Yegor didn't count them: if there were two, there were two; if five, five. He was conscious of his right, and this consciousness made him fearless. Therefore he simply ran up from the direction of the clearing to cut off their path to the road, burst out of the bushes and shouted, "Freeze! Names?!"

The two turned around: it was Phil and Crock. And Yegor stopped short, as if he'd run smack into a tree stump.

"Ah!" said Phil. "A helper."

But Crock glared with mean, red eyes. And said nothing. "What an interesting phenomenon," Phil went on, grinning even more amicably than before, back in friendlier days. "Historical talks, I'd call 'em. Summit talks at a round tree stump."

"Why'd you chop this tree down?" Yegor asked dumbly, nudging the felled tree with his foot. "Who ordered you to chop it down?"

"Debts," Phil said with a sigh, but he didn't hide his grin.

"Why, you ask? For the fund. Tomorrow we'll turn in three empty half-liters: let them use 'em to burn up the tanks of imperialism in gasoline flames."

"Who ordered it, I asked?" Yegor furrowed his brow as hard as he could in order to look if only just a little bit stern. "That hack work of yours again, is that right?"

"Think of it as three half-liters," said Phil, smacking his lips and screwing up his eyes. "And we'll give you a half-liter if you give us a hand."

Yegor glanced at Crock, who was breathing strangely, and said, "Give me the axes."

"We won't give you the axes," said Phil. "A half-liter or a punch in the face - take your pick."

"As the official forester of this here tract I officially demand -"

"For today my last name's Poopkin," said Crock all of a sudden, hollowly, as if from the bottom of a barrel. "You go ahead and write that down, you damned *Polizei*."

He fell silent, and all at once it grew ever so quiet, only the dragon-flies hummed. And Yegor heard that humming and that quiet. He sighed.

"What *Polizei*? Why do you say that?"

"You're a big boss now?" said Crock hoarsely. "You're a big boss so you're already pushing people around? Demanding names? Well, have you ever seen this? Have you, damn it all?"

With a dramatic gesture he tore open his rotted, threadbare shirt, and it fell apart from the collar to the belly button, fell apart suddenly, without a sound, like in a silent movie. Slipping out of the sleeves, Crock turned and bent over to display his sweaty back before Yegor.

"Have you?"

His dirty, hunched back was covered with jagged bluish scars. The scars ran from side to side, breaking on his bony spine.

"Artistically painted," said Phil with a smirk. "You can recognize the hand of a master."

"They all left their mark, all of them!" cried Crock without straightening up. "The *Polizeien*, the SS, the German guards. You want to too? Go ahead! Go ahead and leave your mark!"

"The *Polizeien* burned down his house with his wife and little kids," said Phil quietly and with unexpected frankness. "Put your shirt on now. Put it back on, pal. He's not the one to exhibit in front of."

Crock pulled his shirt on obediently, sniveled and sat down on the pine tree they had just felled. Despite the sweltering heat, he was shivering; he kept rubbing his unshaven face with his gnarly hands and saying over and over, "When am I gonna live, huh? When do I start living?"

And again Yegor heard the hum of the dragon-flies and the hum of silence. He stood there waiting for the leaden pity to fall from his heart, glanced at Crock trembling in a strange fever, and swallowed hard, because something had suddenly constricted his throat, his chin began to quiver. But he swallowed that lump and said softly, "I represent the law."

"But who's gonna know?" asked Phil. "What, is every tree in this forest of yours accounted for?"

"The state's got everything accounted for," said Yegor. "And that's why I'm demanding that you get out of the forest. I'll draw up a report on the cutting tomorrow. Now let's have the axes."

He reached for the axes, but Phil quickly snatched up the one closest to him. He held it up.

"So, you want the axe, do you? Don't you want a taste of it? There's not a soul around, Yegor, and we're shady folks ... "

"Give him the axe," said Crock suddenly. "I don't like the light. I like the dark."

And he started off through the bushes, his shirt still hanging open .. Torn and tattered, it billowed out behind him, catching on twigs.

"Well, Yegor, don't take offense when we meet in the dark!"

Phil said this in parting, throwing down the axe. Yegor marked the felled trees, took the axes and went back to the drowsy mare. He climbed into the cart, cracked the whip suddenly across the innocent mare's state-owned back and started off with a jolt toward the lake.

Kolka was waiting for him by the lake with poems about good conduct. And that was all Yegor wanted to think about just then.

19

Each day Nona felt with growing acuteness the need to take a trip to the district center. Maybe for books or maybe for binders. At first she hesitated, but then she went to the principal and nervously gave him a long-winded explanation of how it would be impossible to begin the school year without this trip. And she was willing to go that very day and bring back everything that was needed.

"What do we need?" asked the principal in surprise. "We don't need anything, thank goodness."

"A globe," said Nona Yurievna. "Our globe is worthless. There's a big hole where Antarctica is supposed to be."

"I don't have the funds for all these Antarcticas of yours," the principal grumbled. "They use those globes for footballs, then they wind up with holes. By the way, from a philosophical point of view a hole is something too. It's a space of sorts, surrounded by a material substance."

"I could buy a football too," Nona Yurievna nodded eagerly. "Equipment in general."

"All right," the principal conceded. "If you can keep it under thirty I'll let you go. But you'll have to pay your own way."

There was some kind of a district conference going on in town and all the hotels were full. However, this circumstance gladdened rather than grieved Nona. She immediately phoned Yuri Petrovich, told him she had been forced to come on business and, not without secret delight, informed him that all the hotels were full.

"You're a man with clout," she said, smiling, into the receiver. "Could you do a little soliciting on behalf of a pedagogue here on business from a sleepy hamlet?"

"Certainly," said Yuri Petrovich buoyantly. "You're probably hungry. Come on over, we'll think of something."

"No -" Nona squeaked suddenly. "I mean, thank you, that'd be nice."

It was precisely at this moment that Nona unexpectedly discovered two diametrically opposed beings dwelling peacefully side by side within her. One of them was the calm, self-confident woman who had contrived a bogus business trip for herself and spoke so blithely over the phone. The other was a cowardly girl who was deathly afraid of all men, Yuri Petrovich in particular. The girl who had squeaked "no" into the receiver.

As for Yuri Petrovich, rather than soliciting, he made a beeline for the snack bar. He bought a hefty supply of buns, milk and sweets, and asked the maid to make some tea. He had just finished tidying the room and setting the table when Nona herself knocked at the door.

"Excuse me, but were you able to help me out, Yuri Petrovich?"

"Hm? Oh yes, with the hotel. I called. They promised to do something later on this evening, but they gave no guarantees. We'll have some tea and I'll call again."

Yuri Petrovich lied with a certain aim, though he had no premeditated designs. It was just that he was quite fond of this bashful schoolteacher and didn't want her to leave. His room was a double, and he secretly hoped that Nona would have no choice but to stay there till morning. That was all; he put everything else out of his mind with sincere persistence. And therefore he was able to receive Nona with a clear conscience.

The famished traveler devoured sandwiches with an unladylike appetite. Yuri Petrovich personally constructed them for her while contenting himself with contemplation. And he asked her questions: he liked her childlike habit of answering with her mouth full.

"So you consider obedience a positive quality in modern man?"

"Absolutely."

"But don't you think a blind 'yes sir' might give rise to unquestioned submission? After all, a personality begins with consciousness of the self, Nona."

"Personality isn't an ideal in itself: Hitler was a personality too. The ideal is an intellectual personality."

Nona was an extremist, something else Yuri Petrovich liked. He kept smiling, though somewhere inside he suspected that this smile might look idiotic.

"By an intellectual personality do you mean a highly educated one?"

"No. Education is a quantitative evaluation of a person, while intellectuality is a qualitative one. Of course, quantity can develop into quality, but not with everyone and not always. To me, for example, Yegor Polushkin is far more intellectual than someone with three degrees."

"Your scale of evaluations is a tough one."

"But a correct one."

"What other qualities would you like to see in people?"

"Modesty," she said, suddenly at a loss.

Yuri Petrovich thought this answer was sooner a reaction to the situation than a point of view, but he decided not to expound on the subject. By this time Nona had eaten all the cakes and was obediently finishing her tea.

"You won't forget to call about the hotel, will you?"

"Oh yes!" Yuri Petrovich remembered. "Of course, of Course. "

He went to the phone and, while Nona was clearing the table, dialed a nonexistent number. The dial tone droned with a vengeance, and Yuri Petrovich was afraid she would hear it. And he spoke more loudly than necessary.

"Hello? Give me the head of the department. Hello, Pyotr Ivanovich, this is Chivalov. Mm-hm, I spoke with you earlier. What? That can't be, Ivan Petrovich! What's that? Listen, it's very important..."

In his inexperience Yuri Petrovich not only mixed up the boss's name, but also failed to leave pauses between his sentences, and had Nona been listening to what he was prattling, she would certainly have caught on at once. But Nona was lost in her own thoughts, affording Yuri Petrovich an opportunity to fib naively into the droning telephone receiver.

The secret truth of the matter was that Nona was the guest of a young man for the first time in her life that evening.

While engaged in the cold supper of pastries and milk the girl who dwelled in her being alongside the woman felt quite at home. But when tea was over and twilight thickened outside, the girl began fearfully retreating into the background. The woman, meanwhile, was emerging into the foreground with increasing distinction: it was she who was now evaluating Yuri Petrovich's behavior, she who sensed that he liked her, she who kept recalling that no one had noticed her come into his room.

And what's more, this woman was now telling Nona angrily, "Don't be a fool." Nona feared this voice, but it sounded in her with ever greater persistence: "Don't be a fool. It was for his sake that you arranged this trip, so don't be an idiot, Nona." And Nona feared this voice but didn't argue with it.

This was why she didn't catch on to Yuri Petrovich's game with the telephone receiver. She came to only when he said, "You know, Nona, there really aren't any vacancies. Not in one hotel."

The woman rejoiced, but the girl was terrified. And Nona herself could not decide whether she ought to be happy or scared.

"Oh, Lord, but I don't know anyone in town."

"What about me?" Yuri Petrovich asked angrily, because he was afraid Nona might be suspecting him of secret designs. "It's a deluxe room, there's plenty of space."

"No, no ... " said Nona, but these two "no's" sounded like one "yes", and Yuri Petrovich set about making up a bed for himself on the sofa.

Now that they had reached the silent agreement that Nona was staying, they suddenly stopped talking and in general tried not to look at one another. And while the girl in Nona was frozen with fear, the woman conducted herself with proud nonchalance.

"Do you mind if I take a shower?"

"Please, please, by all means." Yuri Petrovich suddenly began fussing, because it was the woman who had asked this, and he instantly felt like a little boy. "They just changed the towels this morning. So ... "

"Thank you."

And the woman strode proudly by, her prettiest bathrobe thrown over her arm. Before Yuri Petrovich had had a chance to recover from this unexpected tone, the cowardly girl popped her head out of the bathroom and said, "There's no latch on the door!"

"I know, don't worry," said Yuri Petrovich with a smile and a certain sense of relief.

Mention should be made of the fact that, unlike Nona, Yuri Petrovich had found himself in similar situations before, but all his women had always decided for themselves how to behave, leaving him with the singular job of not being an idiot. But the woman who had suddenly surfaced in Nona was sooner playing a game, and the forest warden could not figure out how far that game would go. Therefore things became easier and simpler when the familiar girl with eyes round from fear emerged in place of the enigmatic woman.

"Oh!" said that girl, drawing her robe tighter. "There aren't any doors."

The bedroom was separated from the sitting room by a drape, and Nona was now standing in the doorway, quite at a loss.

"Put a chair there," Yuri Petrovich suggested. "If I get confused in my sleep I'll bump into the chair. It'll make a lot of noise, and you'll have time to scream."

"Thank you," Nona retorted coldly in her womanly voice. "Good night."

Yuri Petrovich disappeared into the bathroom, intentionally took a long time washing up so that Nona would have a chance not only to get into bed, but to calm down as well. Then he turned out the light and tip-toed over to the sofa, every spring in which let out a groan as soon as he sat down.

"Damn!" he said loudly.

"You're not asleep yet?" Nona asked quietly.

"Not yet," Yuri Petrovich was just taking off his shirt, but quickly put it back on. "What can I do for you, Nona?"

Nona said nothing, and his heart beat lightly and quickly.

He jumped up and strode into the other room, knocking the chair over with a terrible racket.

"Damn!"

Nona laughed softly.

"I stubbed my toe and here you are laughing."

"Poor boy."

In the deep twilight he saw that she was sitting on the bed, still wrapped in her bathrobe. He stopped short.

"Do you plan to sit there like that all night?"

"Maybe."

"But that's silly."

"What if I'm a fool?"

She spoke with perfect calm, but it was a calm that demanded her every effort: he thought he could hear the furious beating of her heart. Yuri Petrovich took another step, knelt down uncertainly on the worn hotel rug and carefully took her hands in his. She surrendered them submissively, and her bathrobe fell open naively and defenselessly.

"Nona ... " He kissed her hands. "Nona dearest, I. ... "

"Turn on the light. Please."

"No. What for?"

"Then don't talk. At least don't talk."

They spoke so quietly that they didn't hear, but rather guessed each other's words. They heard only the violent beating of their hearts.

"Nona, I have to tell you that -"

"Don't talk. Please, please don't talk!"

What could he tell her just then? That he loved her? She sensed that. Or maybe he didn't love her? But God, how could he not love her when he was there beside her? When he was kneeling before her kissing her - her! - hands?

This is what Nona was thinking. Not even thinking - no, she was incapable of thinking about anything just then. It simply flashed through her mind, and the frightened girl kept trying to comprehend, to grasp it, while the woman thought relentlessly only that he had been kissing her hands too long.

She cautiously drew them toward herself, but he didn't let go, burying his head in her palms.

"Nona, I must tell you -"

"No, no, no! I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear anything!"

"Nona, I'm older, I must -"

"Kiss me."

Nona was horrified by her own voice, and the girl rebelled, kicked and squirmed. But Yuri Petrovich was still on his knees, was still far away, so inaccessibly far away from her. She repeated, "Kiss me, do you hear? No one, no one has ever kissed me. Ever."

If he had hesitated but another instant she would have thrown herself out the window, run wherever her feet would take her or eaten a whole box of matches just to spite them all: according to mama, some very unhappy girl had committed suicide that way. It was the last attempt of the desperate woman who still dwelled secretly inside her. The last attempt to conquer loneliness, nocturnal anguish, unprovoked tears and the important glasses of which she was so painfully self-conscious.

And then ... What happened then?

"Nona, I love you."

"Now talk. Talk, talk, talk, and I'll listen."

They lay side by side, and Nona kept pulling the sheet up.

But there was no discord in her now; now the gallant woman and the cowardly girl smiled at one another in complete rapport.

"I'll go get a cigarette, all right?"

"Go ahead."

She lay with her eyes closed and an animated smile on her lips. She was asked permission, she could choose to forbid or permit something, and this sudden power made her head spin slightly. She raised her lashes just far enough, to see a white form, once again bumping into the chair and swearing, float into the next room, heard a match strike and caught a whiff of smoke. And she said, "Smoke here. Beside me."

The white form stopped in the doorway.

"You should despise me. I've behaved shamelessly, I didn't tell you that..." Yuri Petrovich's courage evaporated with almost unscientific speed. "No, I'm not married ... That is, officially, I'm married, but. ... You see, I never even told my mother, but I'm obliged to tell you ... "

"Obliged? Do you think I'm out to get you married?" That was the voice of a stranger. Not the woman's nor the girl's, but some third party's. And Nona was pleased to have discovered it inside her.

"Don't worry: we're progressive people."

He was saying something, but she heard only his guilty, even slightly ingratiating voice, and there was already something proud and cruel rising up inside her. And, submitting to that cruel, exultant pride, Nona threw off the blanket and began dressing unhurriedly. And despite the fact that she was dressing in the presence of a man for the first time, she felt no shame: it was he who was ashamed, and Nona realized that.

"We're very progressive people, really," she said again, smiling as hard as she could. "Marriage, registration, weddings - what a lot of nonsense! When it comes right down to it, what a lot of nonsense it all is! Everything on earth! I came here by myself and I'll leave by myself. I'm a liberated woman."

He stood in flustered silence, not knowing what to say to her, how to explain and how to keep her from going. Nona dressed calmly, calmly combed out her hair.

"No, no, don't see me off. You're a family man, an official figure: imagine what the maids might think! The things they might think about you - heaven forbid!"

Nona took an inconvenient morning train home. She sat huddled in a corner, hugging the new globe, as round as a football, and for the first time in her life was sorry that she couldn't cry.

Yuri Petrovich, for his part, remained in a state of utter confusion. Having sat at work all day without moving and smoked a whole pack of cigarettes, that evening he sat down and wrote a letter to the mysterious Marina, but rather than sending it he carried it around in his pocket for three days. Then he read it over again and tore it to shreds. And once again he sat motionless at the desk which with each passing day became buried beneath a new layer of incoming and outgoing papers. And once again he spent half the night composing a letter which this time began, "My beloved, forgive me!" But Yuri Petrovich was no master at composing letters, and the same lot befell this one which had befallen its predecessors.

"I've got to go there," Yuri Petrovich said over and over again as he tossed and turned sleeplessly in the hotel bed. "Tomorrow, on the morning train."

But morning came, and his decisiveness left, and again Chuvalov kicked and cursed himself. No, not because of Nona.

Two years earlier a student from Moscow had come to the remote Altai forestry service for on-the-job training. By that time Yuri Petrovich had already grown unaccustomed to students' jabber, was not yet accustomed to mini skirts, and followed the student around like a puppy. The girl teased the bashful forest warden with sadistic pleasure, and now and then it seemed to Yuri Petrovich that he and not she was undergoing the training. A week later she announced that it was her birthday, demanded champagne, and the head of the forestry service traveled more than two hundred kilometers for it on a state owned motorcycle. When the champagne had been drunk, the student paced around the room and announced,

"Make the bed. Only, I sleep by the wall, mind you."

By morning Yuri Petrovich had lost his head for good.

"Get dressed," he said. "We're going to the village Soviet."

The student was lounging comfortably atop crumpled sheets.

"The village Soviet?"

"To register," he said, hurriedly pulling on his shirt.

"Just like that, right off the bat?" She burst into laughter. "How interesting!"

They pulled up to the village Soviet on a furiously roaring motorcycle, received their certificate and big fat stamps in their passports in ten minutes, while three days later the young wife pulled out and

headed back to Moscow. Yuri Petrovich was fighting forest pests in a distant region at the time and returned to find only a note:

"Thanks. "

The student had left no return address, so Yuri Petrovich had to write to the institute. The letter was a long time in reaching its destination; an answer arrived only two months later and was short, just as their married life had been:

"I lost my passport. Suggest you do the same."

Yuri Petrovich didn't venture to lose his passport, but he did try to forget the whole story and wrote no more letters. Then it came time to turn in some papers, and in Leningrad Chivalov learned some news from a school friend that made him undertake the search for the wife with the lost passport anew:

"You know, Marina had a baby."

And track her down he did. He sent a letter to her home address, and in answer to the question of whether the child was his or not, he received exactly two words:

"Everything's possible."

And now like never before he had to know the truth. To know who he was: a husband or not a husband, a father or not a father, free or not free. But the mocking cynicism of her answer threw him off balance, and he merely wrote letters, tore them up and wrote them anew.

And now he was afraid of losing Nona. Here was someone worth hanging on to, and for this reason Yuri Petrovich could not muster the courage to hop on the train and go to her. To go meant to decide yes or no, while as it was he could still fall back on the all-redeeming "maybe". It was precisely at this moment that an important official arrived from Moscow and Yuri Petrovich was glad for the excuse not to go anywhere. For three days he familiarized the official with the business at hand, then experienced a sudden sense of longing and much to his own surprise announced,

"There's not much of interest to you around here: for the most part the forests are secondary. But an interesting little tract has been preserved by Black Lake."

He said it and was horrified: what if he agreed to go?

"Feed the mosquitoes again?"

"There aren't any mosquitoes now, just midges." Yuri Petrovich was again surprised to find himself persuading the official. "The tract is interesting for its natural biocenosis: right up your alley."

"All right, you've talked me into it," said the boss, much to Yuri Petrovich's dismay.

Having reached the settlement, Chivalov introduced the official to the local authorities and ran to Nona's. He composed impassioned speeches on the go and didn't believe his eyes at first when he saw a large padlock on the familiar doors. He touched it, walked around the house and went to the school principal.

"Non a Yurievna's in Leningrad. Left three days ago."

"When's she coming back?"

"Supposedly the twentieth of August, but ... " The principal sighed. "We had a similar occurrence year before last."

"What do you mean?"

"Her predecessor also went to visit her mother, then she sent a letter of resignation."

"That's impossible!"

"Everything's possible," said the principal philosophically. "Of course, Nona Yurievna's a serious pedagogue, but after all, Leningrad's a serious city."

"Yeah, yeah," said Yuri Petrovich quietly. "Do you have her mother's address?"

He jotted down the address, absently promised the principal firewood for the school and, without the slightest enthusiasm now, led the important official to the forest preserve.

"Dragged me here on foot," the official grumbled, traipsing barefoot along the forest road not without pleasure. "And you'll probably make me sleep on fir-twigs too. You're a lone wolf, Chualov - it's no wonder you're still a bachelor."

"Drop it!" the reserved Yuri Petrovich suddenly snapped. "You're used to making chit-chat in offices!"

"Yep, you're a lone wolf all right," said the official after a moment's silence. "It's the perfect time for you to go to the ministry. By the way, as an inspector I can report on perfect order in the land under your jurisdiction. The forest is neat, there are no cuttings in sight. You know, Yuri, I like it. I really do."

Yuri Petrovich went on scowling and said nothing. But the official clammed up too, having come upon a good-sized sign, put together from planed boards. The following poem was seared into the wood:

*Camper, beware!
In the forest take care,
with fire do not play,
for we are here to stay.
The forest we must roam –
the forest is our home.*

Rabbits, hedgehogs, squirrels and a big elk that looked like weary Yakov Prokopych were seared on either side of the sign with a hot nail.

"Nice work," said the official. "Your initiative?"

"Not hardly!" said Yuri Petrovich. "I can't figure out myself when he got around to it."

"Who?"

"My forester. Yegor Polushkin."

"Interesting," said the official. "I'll take a shot." And he reached for his camera.

Chualov snorted. "You'll run out of film."

Toward evening they reached Yegor's lean-to. The official had copied down all of Kolka's compositions along the way and used up an entire roll of film.

"So you're the author?" he asked Kolka. "Good for you! Gonna be a poet?"

"Naw." Kolka was embarrassed. "A forest warden. Like Yuri Petrovich."

"Then good for you twice over, Kolka!"

Fatigued and made a bit uneasy by the attention of an important official, Yegor quietly moved away from the fire.

Chualov was glum, but Yegor paid that no heed. His thoughts were occupied by the official and whether or not he had botched something up somewhere.

"Ever been to Moscow, Yegor Savelich?"

"Moscow?" Yegor was incapable of switching gears so quickly. "What's there?"

And Yuri Petrovich right there on the spot told Yegor the whole sad tale of his married life. Yegor listened, was distressed, but he was continuously bothered by the offhanded mention of Moscow. So he asked again, "So, well gee, is she in Moscow?"

"Hey you conspirators, soup's on!" the official called cheerfully.

A week later an official invitation arrived from Moscow.

Forester Yegor Polushkin was invited to the All-Union Conference of Forestry Service Workers for his outstanding efforts apparently, since he was really a novice in the field.

"I'll take a look at the elephant, son," said Yegor.

"There's not much use out of looking at an elephant," Haritina grumbled. "You have a look at GUM⁶ instead: folks've collected money, made up a list of who needs what."

No one came to Yegor's send-off except Yakov Prokopych.

And he had a request of his own.

"You'll have to give a report - don't forget about the boat rental service, Polushkin. Make a polite invitation: you know conveniences, nice water, plenty of mushrooms in the forest. Maybe someone from the capital will visit our parts."

He was just about to leave for the train station when Maritsa came along. With a smile that shone through the door.

"Oh, Yegor Savelich, oh, Tina honey! So, it's Moscow you're going to, not the district center."

"Absolutely right," said Yakov Prokopych.

But it wasn't Yakov Prokopych Maritsa needed now. It was Yegor Polushkin, the pitiful loser, and she didn't take her unctuous eyes off him.

"Yegor Savelich, Lordy, I've come to you in secret. In secret from my husband and my son. Save us, please, for the love of God. Criminal Investigation's after Fyodor Ipatovich. They're threatening to do us in."

"The law demands respect," said Yakov Prokopych sternly. Yegor said nothing. Maritsa started to cry and buried her head in her sister's shoulder.

"We're done for!"

"Tell some official there, Yegor, huh?" Haritina sighed.

"They're our kin after all, not some strangers."

"Who's gonna ask me?" Yegor said with a frown. "A forester came to Moscow - big deal."

Cry and plead as Maritsa might, he said nothing more.

Took his suitcase - bought the biggest one especially for Moscow - said good-bye, sat for a spell before leaving, and started for the station. Maritsa ran home.

"Well, what came of it?" asked Fyodor Ipatovich.

"He refused, Fyodor honey. He's become mighty proud."

"Proud?" Every muscle in his jaw tensed. "Well, that's just fine if he's proud. Just fine."

Yegor in the meantime sat by the window in the train, and the wheels clacked: Moscow! Moscow! Moscow!..

True, he wasn't on his way to Moscow yet, but to the district center to change trains. And it was just at this same time that another train was pulling out of that same center: with Yuri Petrovich sitting at the window. And the wheels here clacked to a different rhythm: Leningrad! Leningrad! Leningrad!..

⁶ GUM – Moscow's largest department store. – Tr.

When he failed to find Yuri Petrovich in the district center, Yegor immediately lost all his self-importance and boarded the train for Moscow in rather low spirits. True, Yuri Petrovich had picked up the train ticket ahead of time and left it at the hotel, where it was handed over to Yegor with the information that Chivalov himself had set out in an unknown direction.

Yegor was traveling in a sleeping compartment for the first time in his life, and in his frugality did not take bed linen. His traveling companions were an important-looking lot, chattering on about something or another, but Yegor did not enter into the conversation. He hadn't received any final instructions from Yuri Petrovich and wasn't feeling up to conversation. Nor did he get much sleep that night, trying to get comfortable on the bare mattress, unable to toss and turn for fear of waking someone. By morning he was completely dragged out and reached the capital stiff and dazed.

However, his worries were promptly allayed: Yegor was met at the station in Moscow and escorted to a hotel.

"You'll probably have to speak at the debates," said the man who had met him once they had reached the hotel room.

"At the what?"

"At the debates." The young man produced a sheet of paper and placed it on the table. "We've prepared a few propositions for you. Familiarize yourself with them."

"Uh-huh," said Yegor. "Is the zoo far from here?"

"The zoo?" the young man asked in surprise. "It's near Krasnopresnenskaya metro station, I believe. We'll be expecting you at the ministry at ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

"I'll be there early."

The young man left, and Yegor, grabbing a quick bite at the cafe, asked directions to Krasnopresnenskaya metro station. Stepping rather hesitantly onto the escalator, he descended into the Moscow underground.

Once at the zoo he hesitated at length before every cage, but when he got to the elephant enclosure he froze. People came along, had their looks and went on their way, while Yegor stayed on and on, unable to believe he was seeing a real live elephant. True, this elephant didn't roam the streets but rather stood inside a well-secured enclosure, though he behaved quite freely: he showered himself with sand, snorted and picked up the buns children had thrown him through the bars. Yegor followed the elephant's every move, because he wanted so badly to remember everything and show it to Kolka later on. He was so intent that one of the attendants inquired, "Hey fella, nice livestock, eh?"

"It's no livestock - it's an animal," Yegor corrected sternly.

"True." The attendant was an elderly man, and Yegor found him easy to talk to. "Not afraid?"

"O'what? You're not afraid, are you?"

"Well then, give me a hand. Then you can go boasting to everyone back in your village that you fed an elephant."

"I live in a settlement."

"Well, you can boast anyway."

The attendant led Yegor into the winter quarters, where there stood a second, smaller elephant. He was munching on beets and carrots and twice politely sniffed Yegor over with the black snout of his trunk.

"Smart animal!" said Yegor ecstatically.

Then the attendant showed Yegor around the zoo, and explained which animals were fed when and how. He took him to the monkey house too, but Yegor didn't like that much.

"They do so much screamin'."

They had lunch together in the employees' cafeteria and cemented their friendship. Yegor told him about the conference, about the settlement and especially about Black Lake.

"It used to be Swan, but now it's Black."

"Living beauty is dying out," the attendant sighed. "Pretty soon there'll be nothing but zoos left."

"A zoo's not the same."

"Sure isn't - no doubt about that."

Yegor was the last to leave the zoo, when all the department stores had long since closed.

He thought for a spell, recalled Yuri Petrovich's story, the address he had mentioned, and got directions from a policeman.

He had no clear cut goal in mind, but he simply could not forget the forlorn look on Chuvalov's face.

He climbed the stairs to the ninth floor, since he didn't know how to use the elevator. He caught his breath on the landing, found the right apartment and rang the bell. A young, long-haired woman opened the door.

"Hello," said Yegor, having removed his cap well in advance. "I'd be lookin' for Marina."

"I'm Marina."

The long-haired woman's look was not a friendly one, and Yegor had no choice but to start the conversation from the other side of the threshold.

"I'm a friend of Chuvalov's. Yuri Petrovich."

She was clearly deciding how to act, and it seemed to Yegor that this process was accompanied by fear.

"I see," she said at last and closed the door that led into the other room. "Well, come in. Into the kitchen."

There was nowhere to hang his cap, and Yegor walked into the kitchen holding it in his hand.

The mistress of the house followed right at his heels, as if herding him into the kitchen.

"Who is it, honey?" came a man's voice from the other room.

"It's for me," the long-haired one replied sharply, closing the kitchen door behind her. "So, what's the big idea?"

She didn't invite him to sit down, which came as an immediate comfort to Yegor.

While standing in the doorway he hadn't known what to say or how, but now it was clear to him.

"I guess that'd be your husband inhabiting that room, eh?"

"What's it to you?"

"It's nothing to me, but to him now, maybe it is."

"Did you come here to make threats?"

"What makes you think that? The point here is that you've made a life for yourself and you're keeping someone else from doing the same. Do you think that's fair?"

"How dare you?"

"I do dare," said Yegor quietly. "So you can quit your huffin' and puffin'. What'd he do to you?"

"Plenty," she replied with a snigger and lit up a cigarette. "There's no point in explaining: if he hasn't figured it out by now then I'm sure you never will."

"Explain," said Yegor and sat down on a small red stool. "That's what I came here for."

"I'll kick you out of here right now, that'll be all the explanation you'll get."

"No you won't," said Yegor. "You might have earlier, but now you'll be afraid to. You closed all the doors behind you, so that means you value your family."

"More threats? Look, I'm sick -"

"I could sure use a glass of water," Yegor said with a sigh. "I ate three helpings of herring at the cafeteria today and I'm burning up."

"The nerve!" She took a painted clay mug from the cupboard and asked over her shoulder, "I suppose you want ice in it, too?"

"What for?" Yegor asked with surprise. "Just give me regular. Well water."

"Well water ... " She slammed the mug down on the table, the water spilling up over the sides. "Drink it and leave. Tell Chualov to rest assured - the kid's not his."

Yegor drank the unpleasant-tasting Moscow water unhurriedly, saying nothing.

The woman stood at the window, puffing furiously on a cigarette and glaring at him over her shoulder.

"What else do you want from me?"

"Me?" Yegor looked at her: why was that broad so haughty? "But he's your husband."

"Husband!" she shrugged her shoulders contemptuously.

"He's nothing but a bump on a log, that Chualov of yours."

"Now cursin' ain't praisin': you won't get tired of it soon."

"Insult a woman and not even notice - now that's real noble!"

"Doesn't look much like insultin' to me," said Yegor doubtfully. "Yuri Petrovich is a respectable man."

"Respectable?!" Marina echoed snidely. "Tell me honestly: if a woman, say, in a moment of weakness, a passing fancy, an infatuation, if you will, sleet," she stopped short, "uh, spends the night with a man, would you have brains enough not to leave her money in the morning?"

"I'd have brains enough, all right. I wouldn't have money enough."

"Well, he didn't pay upfront either. He just decided to make me happy and dragged me off to put that stupid stamp in my passport, without even bothering to find out whether I loved him or not."

"He forced you to put that stamp there or something?"

"Why do you say that?" She smiled suddenly. "I was a fool, a light-minded fool - is that what you want to hear? At first I was even taken by the idea: how romantic! I thought. Then I came to my senses and ran."

"Ran," said Yegor derisively. "What about the stamp? How can you run from it?"

The long-haired woman stood in disconcerted silence, and Yegor felt suddenly sorry for her. It was as though their roles had been reversed in the course of the conversation: now he was the principal figure in that kitchen and both realized it.

"I lost my passport," she said guiltily. "Maybe he could just do the same, huh?"

"You've deceived and now you're asking him to do the same? How're things with the new guy?"

"Good."

"I mean, as far as the law goes ... "

"We're legally married."

"Oh, Lord! .. "

Yegor jumped up, paced about the kitchen. Marina followed his movements attentively, and in that attentiveness was an almost childlike trust.

"You live good, you say?"

"Um-hm."

"Call him in here."

"What?" She grew suddenly stiff and became cold and haughty once again. "Get out of here. Right now, before I call the -"

"Go ahead and call the police," Yegor said calmly and sat down again.

Marina turned to the window, shrugged her drooping shoulders helplessly. She cried softly, afraid of her husband and ashamed in the presence of a stranger.

Yegor sat there, sighed, then touched her shoulder. "You'll be found out and it'll only be worse: after all, the law's been broken."

"Get out of here!" she shouted almost noiselessly. "Why did you come here? Why? I hate blackmail!"

"What's it you hate?"

She said nothing. Yegor shuffled his feet, crumpled his cap in his hands and started for the door.

"Stop!"

Yegor didn't stop. He purposely slammed the kitchen door, heard her sobbing angrily and helplessly at the window, and, entering the corridor, swung open the door to the other room.

A young lad was at a desk laboring over a drawing board. He raised his placid eyes to meet Yegor's, blinked and smiled. Then he said unexpectedly, "I'm sketching away like a madman. I'm getting my degree in September."

A child was asleep in a crib in the other corner of the room. The lad stretched pleasurably and explained, "I'm going to night school. It's tough!"

Perhaps it was very quiet in the room, or Yegor had suddenly gone deaf in both ears at once, for he could hear only the sweltering drone of dragon-flies. He heard it and once again his heart was filled with a heavy pity, again that familiar lump rose in his throat, and again his chin began to quiver. And Yegor also heard Marina sobbing loudly in the kitchen.

"Well, keep at it," he said to the lad and quietly left the room.

Yegor returned to the hotel late. He ate a bun that Haritina had packed in his suitcase, drank a glass of water and lay down. The bed was softer than he was used to, but he couldn't get to sleep no matter how he tried; he just kept tossing and turning and sighing.

He got up later the next morning than he had intended. Having washed, he headed down to the cafe, but there was a line there and all the while he feared he might be late.

He hastily gulped down his breakfast and dashed off to the ministry without having so much as glanced at the forgotten list of propositions on the table.

And he recalled these propositions when he suddenly heard his own name.

"... those, for example, like Yegor Polushkin. Through his selfless labor Polushkin has proved once again that there is no such thing as mundane work, there can be only a mundane approach to work. I won't set out to tell you now, comrades, how Polushkin understands his duties: he'll tell you that himself. I only want to say ..."

But Yegor was no longer listening to what it was the minister wanted to say. He broke into a cold sweat: the papers were left on the table, and Yegor hadn't a clue as to what was written on them. He somehow

managed to sit through the rest of the speech, applauded along with everyone else and, when an intermission was announced, he began making his way hurriedly to the exit, hoping to run back to the hotel. He had made it nearly all the way to the doors when someone coughed into the microphone and said:

"Yegor Polushkin is requested to come to the podium at once. I repeat ... "

"That's me they're requestin'?" Yegor asked of his neighbor, who was pushing at the doors beside him to get out.

"Well, if you're that Polushkin ... "

"Uh-huh!" said Yegor and turned around to fight the flow of human traffic back to the auditorium.

The chairman had replaced the minister at the podium and some men were hovering around him. When Yegor asked what they'd called him up for, they immediately moved into action, snatching up their equipment.

"Just a few shots. Turn around please."

Yegor twirled this way and that as instructed, thinking sullenly that time was wasting. Then he answered a multitude of questions: who he was, from where, and what it was he'd thought up. And since he didn't believe he'd thought up anything special, he answered at greater length than they wanted, and the talk dragged on. Before he knew it, the bell sounded the end of intermission. Yegor slipped away, but he could no longer get out, so he sat down in his place, figuring he'd run back to the hotel during the next intermission.

The first speaker spoke glibly. Yegor liked him and clapped longer than everyone else, once again nearly missing his name.

"Yegor Polushkin, be prepared."

"What'd they say?"

"To be prepared."

"What d'ya mean?"

"Shh!" they were hushed from behind.

Yegor fell quiet, thinking frantically about how to prepare. He strained to come up with the necessary words, sweat a lot and missed half the speech. He did hear the second half, however, and he so vehemently disagreed that he was even calmed a bit.

"We need more laws," the orator was saying, growing fierce from his own words. "We need to toughen our demands. Punish ... "

Punish who? Yegor clapped unenthusiastically - for propriety's sake - and then heard them announce:

"And now we'll give the floor to Yegor 'Polushkin."

"Me?" Yegor stood up. "How 'bout later on, huh? I uh ... forgot the papers.""

"What papers?"

"You know, the speech. They wrote a speech for me and I left it on the table. Hold on, I'll run back to the hotel and get it."

The audience began teasing good-naturedly:

"Let's have it without the papers!"

"Who wrote it?"

"Come on, Polushkin!"

"Step up to the podium," said the chairman.

"What for?" But Yegor made his way to the aisle nonetheless, and started down it. "Like I said, I'll run back and get 'em. They uh ... that is ... they're on the table."

"Who's they?"

"Why, the papers. They wrote 'em for me and I forgot 'em."

The audience burst into laughter, drowning out his words. But Yegor's mind was far away from laughter. He stood before the stage, his head bowed guiltily, and sighed.

"Can't you talk without other people's papers?" the minister asked.

"Well, uh, I might not say the right thing."

"You'll say what's right. Step up to the podium. Don't be shy, Polushkin!"

Yegor reluctantly climbed up to the podium and glanced at the bubbles rising in the glass of water. The audience instantly fell quiet, everyone stared at him, smiling and waiting to hear what he would say.

"Kind folks!" said Yegor loudly, sending the audience in to peals of laughter once again. "Now quit your sniggering for a minute: I'm not cryin' wolf. I'm tellin' you that folks are kind!"

Everyone fell quiet now, and then suddenly broke into applause. A smile spread across Yegor's face.

"Hold on, I haven't had my say yet. This fella here was talking and I don't agree with him. He was calling for more laws, but we've got enough laws."

"Right!" said the minister. "We only need to be able to use them."

"Need'll force us to learn," said Yegor. "But I don't want there to be that need. That'd be simple: post some armed soldiers and go about your business. Only you won't find enough soldiers."

And again came the applause. Someone shouted:

"Way to go, pal!"

"Now, don't go lousin' me up - I'll do that fine on my own. You and I stand for a good cause, and a good cause calls for joy, not gloom. Evil breeds evil, that we know well, but the fact that good is born of good we seem to forget. And after all, that's the important thing!"

Yegor had never spoken in public before and therefore was not particularly nervous. He had been ordered to speak, so he spoke. And he spoke as easily as he would sing.

"They said: share your experience. What do they need to share for? So that everyone would have things the same way? What's the point of that? Even sheep've got different-colored fleece, and as for folks, well, the Lord himself ordered it. No, it's not for sameness we should be fighting, but for differentness, and then everyone'll be happy."

They listened to Yegor with smiles and laughter but not without interest: they hung on his every word. Yegor sensed this and spoke with pleasure.

"But there's not much joy around these days. I work out at Black Lake, see, and it used to be called Swan Lake. And how many Black Lakes do you suppose there are in this country? It's frightening to even think about it! So we oughta come up with a way to give those names a ring again: Swan or Goose, Crane or whatever, but just not Black, good friends of mine. Not Black - that's our job!"

Again the applause and the din. Yegor took a sidelong glance at the glass that had been put out for him and since the water in it had stopped bubbling, he took a sip. And grimaced: It was salty, that water.

"We all live in one house, but we're not all masters. Why's that? Because people mix things up. On the one hand we're taught that nature is our home. But on the other hand, what do we have? We have the subjugation of Mother Nature. But Mother Nature, she just puts right up with it. She dies silently, slowly. And no man is her king. It's harmful to go calling himself king. He's just her son, her eldest son. So be sensible - don't send mama to her grave."

Everyone applauded. Yegor left the podium with a wave of his hand, but came right back.

"Wait, I forgot about the instructions. If anyone's interested in outdoor recreation next summer, why, come out and see us. We've got mushrooms and berries and Yakov Prokopych with his boat rental station. We'll paint pictures on the boats - a goosey and a piggy - and have races!"

And he returned to his place accompanied by universal laughter and applause.

The conference lasted two days, and for two days Yegor's name was mentioned from the podium. Some recalled it in dissent. What good can you be talking about when the forests are dying? Others in agreement: we've done enough conquering. It's time to stop and look around. While the minister concluded by stressing the importance of making all the Black Lakes come alive again, and declared this the initiative of Yegor Polushkin. Then Yegor was awarded a Certificate of Merit, praised, paid his allowance and issued his return ticket.

Yegor went back to the hotel with the ticket. He was due to leave the next day, and ought to have spent that day running around to the department stores. Yegor looked at the list of items that had been requested, counted his money, admired his certificate and set out for the zoo.

He was long in getting the people there to understand. He had to go all the way to the top man, and even he was incredulous.

"What swans? This is not a commercial organization."

"I'd go catch 'em myself, just tell me where. I'm telling you, it's Black Lake we've got now, but it used to be Swan. The minister said it was my, Polushkin's, initiative. And since it's my initiative, I've got to start."

"But I'm trying to explain to you -"

"And I'm trying to explain to you: where else can I get 'em? You've got a whole pond full of 'em. At least lend 'em to me, or take money for 'em."

Yegor was amazed at himself: he'd never spoken to any authorities this way in his life. And now he was finding both the words and the courage - he felt freedom in his heart.

They argued all day long. They went to see someone higher up, drew up some papers. At last they reached an agreement and gave Yegor two pairs of swans; they beat and pecked Yegor till he bled while he was stuffing them into the cages. Then he rushed to the train station, where he encountered yet another headache. There too he pleaded, filled out papers, and there too he got his way. He would have to accompany them in the freight car.

He raced around and begged and pleaded for a day and a half, and he remembered about the department stores only as he stood, at the train. And even then it was in vain: he had no money left - it had all gone into the swans. Yegor bought whatever he could find right there at the station climbed into the freight car, ate a roll with salami, and the train pulled out at once. The swans cackled and hissed in their cages. Yegor lay down on the box, covered himself with his jacket and went to sleep.

And he dreamt of elephants ...

21

"Lord have mercy on you loser and good-for-nothing curse of my life bane of my existence ... "

Yegor stood before Haritina, his head bowed in shame. The swans hissed like snakes in large boxes.

"Folks got real bread-winners for men and their homes are rich and their wives like doves!"

"They told me to clip their wings," Yegor suddenly cut in. "So they don't flyaway south."

Haritina burst into tears. Out of shame, indignation, helplessness. Yegor ran off to get the scissors to clip the wings. Meanwhile, back in his house, Fyodor Ipatovich was roaring with laughter.

"What a confounded loser! What a blockhead! He's one of a kind!"

Everyone laughed at him: to think that instead of hitting the department stores he had dragged home some swans! Got himself into debt, let folks down, offended his wife. A loser, in a word.

Only Yakov Prokopych didn't laugh. He approved solemnly: "A tourist attraction."

And laughter was the last thing on Kolka's mind. While his Pa had been off in Moscow admiring the elephants, Uncle Fyodor had been called in by the investigator three times. For this reason Fyodor Ipatovich had purchased a code of laws, memorized it and said, "Looks like they're gonna take the house away. That's the way things are going."

Maritsa let out a wail, while Vova began to tremble and ran off to drown the puppy. Kolka barely managed to talk him out of it and only temporarily at that.

"If they kick us out I'll drown him just out of spite!"

He said it with conviction. And there could be no doubt: he would drown it all right. And then Olya Kuzina started putting on all sorts of airs for some reason, and stopped being friends with them. She stuck by the older girls, and started talking all kinds of nonsense about Kolka. As if he were chasing after her.

As for Yegor, he headed for the lake the very next day. He built some houses for the swans, then set them loose. They cried at first, flapped their cut wings, even fought, but then they calmed down, divvied up the houses and began their life as two families in happy neighborhood.

Having gotten the birds settled in, Yegor left them for a long time: he roamed the tract, gathering up deadwood for the school. And he cut some up for the principal personally, not only because he respected scholarly people, but for talk as well.

And the talk took place that evening by the samovar. His wife - the doctor who had treated Kolka with iodine so many times - had been called away to deliver a baby, and the principal took charge himself.

"You take it strong, Yegor Savelich?"

"Yeah." Yegor took a glass, stirred in the sugar for a long time, thinking. "What are we gonna do about Nona Yurievna?"

"It's a shame. She's a good teacher."

"She's a teacher to you, a person to me, and a sweetheart to Yuri Petrovich."

The fact that Nona Yurievna was Yuri Petrovich's sweetheart was news to the principal. But he didn't let on, just raised his brows.

"Think I oughta bring her back through official channels?"

"Official channels means making her do something she doesn't want to. It's all right for you, but it wouldn't be doing Yuri Petrovich any favor."

"Nope," the principal agreed and grew sad.

"I guess I'll have to go there," said Yegor without waiting for advice from him. "Once winter sets in I'll go. And you write a letter. Two."

"Why two?"

"One now, another later. Let her get used to the idea. She'll get used to it, then I'll arrive, and she'll have to decide."

The principal gave it some thought and took up the business of letter writing. Yegor had a leisurely smoke, revelling in the calm and the coziness and the principal's approval. And he looked around: a walnut sideboard, homemade shelves, a ton of books. And a picture hung above the books.

Yegor stood up even, looked at it closely. It blazed red, that picture. A red steed was trampling a blue-black creature, while astride that steed sat a young lad thrusting a lance into the creature.

The whole picture was alive with fury, the horse was uncommonly proud, and for its uncommon pride it had the right to be so furiously red. Yegor would have painted it red himself, had he ever been given occasion to paint such a horse, for this was not just any old horse - this was the horse of Victory itself. And he started toward that horse like one bewitched - even bumped into a chair.

"Like it?"

"What a horse!" said Yegor softly. "That's ... Why, that's a flame. And that lad - he's on that flame."

"It was a gift," said the principal, walking up to the painting. "And a fine symbol: the struggle between good and evil - very contemporary. That's St. George - the dragon-slayer and victor." Here the principal cast an apprehensive glance at Yegor, but Yegor continued to stare in stern respect at the painting. "An everlasting theme. Light and dark, good and evil, ice and fire."

"My namesake," said Yegor all of a sudden, for "Yegor" was but a variant of the name "George". "Here in the settlement they call me the loser. I reckon you've heard?"

"Yeah." The principal grew disconcerted. "But a nickname in these parts ... "

"You know what I thought? I thought they called me the loser because I bring bad luck. But that's not why at all, so it turns out. It's because I'm not one of a kind with my namesake, that's why."

And he said this with bitterness, and all the while that horse kept swimming before his eyes. The horse and the horseman astride that horse.

"I'm not one of a kind with you, George the Victor. Nope, I reckon I'm not, that's all!"

But the swans were as white as white can be. And the strange bitterness he experienced at having discovered his own disparity soon dissolved without a trace next to them.

"What beauty!" said Yuri Petrovich when he came to visit Yegor.

The birds were swimming near shore. Yegor could stare at them for hours, experiencing a rapture hitherto unknown to him.

He had already run through the forest, found a couple of old boughs, and now two more swans stood, necks arched, beside his lean-to.

"They're lonely," said Yegor with a sigh. "Whenever their kind fly by overhead they cry out. Breaks my heart."

"Don't worry, they'll get through the winter."

"I'll fix up the shed for them - the one the hog lived in. I'll move 'em just as soon as the lake starts freezing over."

Yuri Petrovich said nothing in reply. Nona had refused to come back, no matter how he had pleaded with her there in Leningrad, and Chuvalov had forgotten how to smile.

"Well, Yuri Petrovich, write an official request for them to rename it Swan Lake."

"All right," Chuvalov sighed.

As he had arrived downcast, so he left downcast. But Yegor stayed there: they were building a road not far from his land, and he was worried about the tree felling. But no one encroached on the forest reserve: Phil and Crock had gone off to build the road. Crock tore up the great big pines with particular glee: he loved to play with explosives. He had since the war, from his partisan days.

But soon even the faraway explosions faded, as did the roar of machinery: the road had veered off across the fields, and there was nothing left to blow up. But Yegor didn't want to leave the cozy lean-to he had made his home, on either side of which stood a wooden swan proudly arching its neck.

But autumn had arrived, dark and rainy, driving Yegor from the lake. He moved back home. At first he checked up on the swans every day, then started going less often. It was soon time to fix up the shed: the puddles lay frozen by morning.

That night was an exceptionally stormy one. The clouds hung low, clinging to the fir trees, and rain streamed out of them in a relentless shower, while the wind raged so that the pine trees moaned. Yegor had been feeling a bit under the weather the day before. He took a steam bath, sipped tea with raspberry jam, and should have lain down to sleep. But he kept worrying: how were the swans out there? He ought to move them - the shed was nearly ready - but instead he had fallen ill. He tossed and turned, burning Haritina with his side, then his back, and on toward midnight he got dressed and went out for a smoke.

It seemed to grow a bit calmer: the forest whispered gently, and the rain had subsided to just a drizzle. Yegor rolled a cigarette, got comfortable on the porch and settled down to smoke when suddenly he heard a loud crash beyond the distant forest. It was a low, heavy crash, and he thought at first that it must be thunder, though what thunder could there be in the midst of that dark autumn? And before he even realized what that crash had been, what rumble the damp wind had brought, he jumped up and ran to saddle the mare.

The gate was a squeaky one, and that squeak brought Haritina out in her nightgown alone, arms folded across her bosom.

"What in heaven's name are you doing, Yegor! Why, you've got a fever."

"I'm going out to the lake, Tina honey," said Yegor, leading the sleepy mare out of the barn. "I'm worried. Kolka said something yesterday about a tourist."

Kolka had seen the grey man at the store the day before.

The same one who had incinerated the ants.

"Hey, kid!"

"Hello," Kolka had said and run off.

Grey had been carrying bottles of vodka. A whole net bag full: the necks had stuck out through the holes in the mesh. Kolka had told his father about this.

Haritina was unable to dissuade him, and Yegor drove that state-owned mare through the autumn darkness. Had she known, she would have lain down across the road, but in her ignorance she only cursed him:

"Where the devil are you going, you good-for-nothing loser?"

Those were her last words. Unkind ones. Like life itself. Yegor heard the second crash when he was already halfway there. The shot rang out far and hollow through the damp air, and Yegor realized that the firing was coming from Black Lake. And he thought about the swans, who would come swimming at the sound of human voices, trustingly extending their curved necks.

Yegor drove the old mare on, digging his heels into her ribs, but she ran badly, and in his impatience he jumped off and ran ahead on foot. The mare ran along behind him, breathing heavily at his back. Then she fell behind: she hadn't Yegor's strength, even though she was a horse.

He caught sight of a campfire from afar: through the fir trees' damp boughs. Some forms could be seen by the fire, while a voice sounded from the shore: "Look under those bushes: looks like a pike."

"It's so dark!"

Yegor ran straight toward them, trampling the brush. The branches whipped across his face, his heart pounded in his throat and shook him.

"Halt!" he cried from the bushes, still in the dark. Everyone seemed to freeze by the fire. Yegor wanted to shout again, but he was too winded, so he ran up to the fire silently. He stopped, gasping for breath, and in some small fraction of a second he saw that water was boiling in a pot over the fire, and the two webbed feet of a swan stuck out of the pot. And he saw another three swans lying nearby. White, not yet plucked, but already beheaded. And amid the flames a fifth swan was burning up: a wooden one. It was black now, like the lake.

"Halt ... " he said in a whisper. "Hand over your documents."

Two men were standing by the fire, but Yegor did not see their faces. One immediately stepped into the darkness, saying, "The forester."

The wind howled, the water in the pot bubbled, and the wooden swan crackled as it was consumed in the flames. And no one said anything.

"Your documents," Yegor repeated, his throat dry. "I'm detaining you all. You'll come with me."

"Get outa here," said the one who remained by the fire in a low, lazy voice. "Get outa here while we're still in good humor. You didn't see us, we don't know you."

"I'm in my home," said Yegor, breathing heavily. "And I don't know who you are."

"Get outa here, I say."

A cheerful splash and voice sounded up from the lake once again: "Hey, it's a big one! A good pood and a half."

"You're poaching fish," said Yegor with a sigh. "You killed the swans. What kind of people are you!"

A silhouette arose in the darkness.

"I'm frozen, God bless it. How 'bout a little vodka there, pal.. "

He stopped short when he saw Yegor, and stepped back into the shadows. And someone else was rowing near shore. And a fourth was hiding somewhere, staying out of the illuminated circle.

"What's he want?" asked the one who had stepped back into the shadows.

"A sock in the face."

"We can manage that."

"Your documents," Yegor repeated stubbornly. "I'm not gonna leave. I'll follow you all the way to the station, until I can turn you over to the police."

"Don't try to scare us," came a voice from the darkness.

"It's not the light of day."

"He's not trying to scare us," said the first. "He's just pushing up his price. Right, fella? So, should we make a deal? Half a liter by the fire and twenty-five rubles - and get lost, bud."

"Your documents," Yegor sighed wearily. "I'm detaining all of you."

He was all aflame now, his head buzzed, and his knees felt horribly weak. He wanted so much to sit down, warm himself by the fire, but he knew he wouldn't sit down or leave till he had the documents.

Yet another one, whistling, was moving up from shore. Two whispered about something, and the fourth was not in sight: he was hiding.

"Fifty," said the first. "And we'll call it a deal."

"Your documents. I'm detaining all of you. For violations."

"Look here," said the first in a threatening voice. "You don't wanna make peace, have it your way."

He bent over the fire, jabbing a knife into the swan. The second started for the lake, toward the one who was whistling.

"Why the swans?" Yegor sighed. "Why? They decorate life."

"Hey, you're a poet, fella."

"Let's go. It's late and we've got a long way."

"Idiot! Teach him a lesson."

There came a whack from behind, and a heavy pole swiped his ear and came down on his shoulder with a crunch. Yegor swayed and fell to his knees.

"Don't you dare! You can't beat me: I represent the law! I demand your documents! Give me-"

"Ah, you want our documents?.."

The pole came down again and again, and then Yegor stopped counting the blows, but merely crawled on trembling, shaky hands and knees. He crawled, burying his face in the cold, wet moss with each blow, and cried, "Don't you dare! Don't you dare! Give me your documents!"

"He wants our documents!"

And now not one but two poles were scattering blows across Yegor's back, and someone's heavy boot beat his face relentlessly. And someone shouted, "Sick the dog on him! Get the dog!"

"Bite him! Bite him!"

But the dog didn't touch Yegor, just howled, terrified by the blood and human wickedness. And Yegor was no longer shouting but sputtering in a hoarse voice as he spat out blood, while they continued to beat him, growing more ruthless with every blow. Yegor could neither see nor hear nor feel anything now.

"Knock it off, Lyonya, we'll kill 'im."

"Ooh, the scum!"

"Knock it off, I said! It's time to clear out. Take your fish, pal, and hand over the money, just like we agreed."

Someone's boot came crashing into his temple with tremendous force, Yegor's head jerked on the moss wet with blood and rain - and they left him. They went back to the fire, talking excitedly. But Yegor rose, terrible, bloody, and, moving his battered lips, croaked, "The law's - Your documents -"

"All right, take our documents!"

They threw themselves on him and started beating him anew. They beat him until he stopped sputtering. Then they left him, only occasional twitches convulsing his frail, broken body. But even these were few.

They found him toward evening the next day, halfway home. He had managed to crawl all that way, and a wide bloody trail stretched from Black Lake itself. From a campfire, a wrecked lean-to, bird feathers and a charred wooden swan. The swan was not a Russian swan now; it was black.

The next day Yegor came to. He lay in a private room, answering questions in a barely audible voice. The investigator kept asking him to repeat his answers, because he could not make out the words: and Yegor had no teeth left and no strength left, and his battered lips did not want to move.

"Do you really mean you can't remember, Mr. Polushkin? Some minor detail, perhaps? We'll find them, we'll rouse the public, we'll."

Yegor said nothing, staring sternly and gravely into the investigator's young face, radiating health and ardor.

"Perhaps you'd seen them somewhere before that? Try to remember, please. Perhaps they were people you knew even?"

"If I didn't know I'd kill 'em," Yegor said quietly and clearly. "But I know, so I forgive 'em."

"What?" The investigator leaned forward, all tense in his effort to understand. "Mr. Polushkin, you recognized them? You recognized them? Who are they? Tell me, who?"

Yegor just wanted to be rid of the investigator as quickly as possible. After the shots the pain had subsided, and gentle, leisurely thoughts began swimming through his head, and Yegor found pleasure in greeting them, looking them over and escorting them off again. He recalled himself as a young man, back on the collective farm: a chairman was praising him for something and smiling, and young Yegor was smiling back. He recalled his move here, and he recalled the rooster and immediately conjured up the image of it. He recalled the gay duckies and piggies, Yakov Prokopych's wrath, the tourists, the sunken motor, but he harbored no ill feelings toward anyone; he just smiled to everyone he saw now, even the two scoundrels at the market. And, smiling thus, he thought simply and quietly that he had lived his life in goodness, that he had done no one harm and that it would be easy for him to die. Very easy - like falling asleep.

But he was not given the chance to think this thought through to the end, because the nurse stuck her head into the room and said that there was someone who wanted very much to see him and perhaps he would admit him: mighty persistent he was. Yegor blinked in reply: she disappeared from the crack, the door opened, and in walked Fyodor Ipatovich.

He came in awkwardly, sideways, as if he were carrying something and was afraid of spilling it. He stood shuffling his feet in the doorway, now raising, now hiding his eyes, and called out, "Yegor... Yegor. ..."

"Sit down." Yegor opened his lips with difficulty.

Fyodor Ipatovich sat down on the edge of the bed, shaking his head grievously. It was as if he were carrying a burden that he could not unload, and was suffering because of it. And Yegor knew that he was suffering, and knew why.

"Are you alive, Yegor?"

"Mm-hm."

Fyodor Ipatovich sighed again, moved the stool, then pulled out from under the hem of his gown a stout bottle.

He worked at the cork for some time with his gnarly, disobedient fingers, and those fingers were trembling.

"Don't be afraid, Fyodor Ipatovich."

"What?" Buryanov started, his eyes opening wide. "I said, don't be afraid. To live."

Fyodor Ipatovich swallowed hard. The sound of it filled the whole room. He took a glass from the night stand, filled it with some yellow, fragrant liquid from the bottle.

"Drink it, Yegor, eh? Take a sip."

"Uh-uh."

"Just one teeny sip, Yegor Savelich. Twenty-five rubles a bottle. The stuff wasn't brewed for us."

"Nope, not for us, Fyodor."

"Drink it, Yegor. Put my heart at ease, please!"

"I don't have no ill feelings, Fyodor. Just peace. Go on home."

"But Yegor, how -"

"I reckon that's just the way it is."

Fyodor Ipatovich sniffled, put the glass down quietly and stood up.

"Only, forgive me, Yegor."

"I've forgiven you. Go on."

Fyodor Ipatovich shook his big head, stood there for a moment, then started toward the door.

"Don't shoot Palma," said Yegor suddenly. "It wasn't her fault she didn't go after me. Dogs don't ever go after me - I knew the dog's tongue."

Fyodor Ipatovich walked slowly and heavily down the hospital corridor. In his right hand he carried the opened bottle, and expensive French cognac splashed on the floor with every step. Tears streamed down his black, unshaven face. One after another, one after another.

Yegor closed his eyes again, and again the world opened wide before him, and Yegor stepped beyond pain, and grief. And he saw a meadow wet with dew and a red steed on that meadow. And the steed recognized him and summoned him with a neigh, inviting him to climb aboard and gallop off to where there raged an eternal battle and where the black creature, writhing, was still spewing evil.

So be it. In the end Kolka Polushkin gave up the fishing rod for the mangy pup with the torn-off ear. Clearly he too had seen his father's red steed in his dreams.

Authors note

When I enter the forest I hear Yegor's life. It calls to me softly and shyly. I board the train and three transfers later I'm on my way to the remote settlement.

Kolka and Tsutsik and I walk through the streets, stop by the boat rental station, and Yakov Prokopych gives us the very best boat. And in the evening Haritina and I sit down to tea, gaze at the Certificate of Merit and remember Yegor.

Yakov Prokopych has begun to speak in an even more scholarly tone. Crock fell into the hands of the law, while Phil continues to do a little hack work and a lot of drinking. Every spring on the second day of Easter he goes to the cemetery and paints Yegor's tin grave marker anew.

"Wait, Yegor. Crock will come back and we'll fix you up with a real headstone. We'll do hack work for half a month, we'll tie up our own gullets, but we'll do it."

Fyodor Ipatovich Buryanov moved away with the whole family.

And they don't write. Their house was confiscated: there's a dormitory there now. The rooster is gone, and Fyodor Ipatovich did shoot Palma in the end.

Kolka doesn't like to go out to Black Lake. There's another forest warden there now, and Yegor's rabbits and squirrels are gradually being replaced by ordinary aspen posts. It's simpler that way. And clearer.

On the way back I always stop at the Chuvalovs. Yuri Petrovich got an apartment, but there's not much room anyway, because in the bigger room the white maiden Yegor had once carved from an old linden with just an axe is combing out her hair. And Nona Yurievna carries her swollen belly with care around the statue.

As for Black Lake, it remained Black. Now, I guess, it'll have to wait for Kolka ...